

EUROPEAN UNION



Committee of the Regions

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DRAFT OPINION

Action plan on the integration of third country nationals

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Deadline for tabling amendments:

3 p.m. (Brussels time) **on 22 November 2016**. Amendments must be submitted using the online tool for tabling amendments (available through the Members' Portal at <http://cor.europa.eu/members>).

Number of signatures required: 6

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals
COM(2016) 377 final

Draft opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Action plan on the integration of third country nationals

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General framework and basic principles

1. welcomes the European Commission's action plan on the integration of third country nationals¹ given the ever-increasing diversity of European society and the need to fully integrate newcomers into that society;
2. believes that integration should be viewed as a dynamic, interactive and temporary process that enables newcomers to integrate into both society and working life and to work towards becoming self-reliant and encourages them to interact with and participate in the host society;
3. stresses that integration is a competence of the Member States as laid down in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union², and calls for continued efforts to monitor the subsidiarity principle. The EU may therefore only take integration measures which encourage Member States and support them in promoting the integration of third-country nationals residing legally in their territories;
4. points out that the political level closest to citizens is where the real integration policy is carried out. This means that a multi-level governance approach is highly appropriate, clearly one with a special focus on local and regional authorities, since they are confronted most directly with the challenges and opportunities of integration;
5. points to the importance of using the correct terminology in the political debate to describe the different categories of newcomers. The action plan concerns only newcomers (migrants, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection) who are nationals of third countries and are residing in the EU legally. It does not therefore cover nationals of EU Member States who have a third-country migrant background through their parents or grandparents, or EU nationals who have exercised their right to free movement and their family members;
6. stresses that integration as a policy area cannot stand in isolation and, by definition, runs through the various traditional policy areas such as education, employment, welfare, public health, housing, etc. Ideally, therefore, integration policy should be implemented horizontally, with the challenges and opportunities of integration taken into account in each policy domain;
7. emphasises that integration is a two-way process that should form part of the framework of rights and obligations for the newcomer and the host society, both of which have to shoulder their responsibilities.

¹ COM(2016) 377 final

² TFEU Article 79(4)

8. stresses that, ideally, integration should be the cornerstone of an asylum and migration policy, and that the action plan must not therefore be viewed as separate from, *inter alia*, the European Commission's proposals on the Common European Asylum System³ and the new partnership framework with non-EU countries under the European Agenda on Migration⁴;
9. recognising that employment plays a key role in the social integration of newcomers, makes reference also to the "blue card" in the Commission's legal migration proposal, in connection with the revision of the directive on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of highly skilled employment⁵;

The challenges and opportunities of integration

10. supports the Commission's analysis that a failure to integrate newcomers would entail an enormous loss both for the newcomers and the host society; the social and economic costs of this failure may well exceed the investments needed in integration policy and the potential which results from this;
11. is convinced that a successful integration policy is one of the key conditions for dealing with the lower indicators for newcomers, compared with those of the local population, in terms of the labour market, education, income, housing, health, civic engagement and social cohesion⁶;
12. supports the Commission's call for a more made-to-measure approach and is convinced that integration policy should focus more on the considerable diversity that exists within the various newcomer groups and their different needs. A good integration policy is therefore based on tailor-made solutions, not a one-size-fits-all approach. Account must be taken, *inter alia*, of language skills, cultural background, level of education, expected duration of stay, reasons for migration, skills, work experience, possible traumas experienced, etc. Local and regional authorities are well placed to respond to the significant diversity that exists among newcomers and their specific needs, and can provide a platform for the exchange of knowledge and experience in this field. In this connection, the Committee of the Regions refers to good practices based on the perspective of the individual, involving integration and civic integration courses that match newcomers' needs;
13. welcomes the view of the Commission and the European Parliament⁷ that integration policy in general, and the labour market integration of refugees in particular, should not be conducted at the expense of policies designed to help other vulnerable groups in the host society;

³ COM(2016) 272 final; COM (2016) 270 final; and COM(2016) 271 final.

⁴ COM(2016) 385 final.

⁵ COM(2016) 378 final.

⁶ Indicators of immigrant integration 2015, *OECD* (2015).

⁷ Integration of refugees needed but not at expense of vulnerable groups, press release of the European Parliament ref.: 20160530STO29645 (2016).

Building cohesive societies

14. stresses that European society is based on fundamental norms and values such as democracy, the rule of law, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, equality between men and women, etc.; welcomes the fact that the links between integration and these norms and values were discussed during the rule of law dialogue at the General Affairs European Council meeting on 24 May 2016⁸;
15. is convinced that, if integration is to be successful, both newcomers and the host society must understand and accept these European norms and values. This ties in with the idea that integration policy should also cover civic integration and community-building, and that therefore appropriate tools for building mutual understanding need to be developed and supported at the different levels with appropriate support from the European level, including civic education both through classical courses and innovative teaching formats;
16. refers in this respect to good practices to help newcomers settle in, including civic integration courses. The aim is to adopt an interactive approach to familiarise newcomers with these European norms and values;
17. suggests identifying initiatives in various EU Member States where newcomers are asked to sign a commitment or participation declaration which includes *inter alia* fundamental norms and values and publicising them at EU level;
18. reiterates that integration is a two-way process in which the host country also has a part to play. In this connection, host societies must enable newcomers to become active participants by removing barriers and ensuring they have access to basic services. They must also organise the integration process in such a way that newcomers become familiar with the society in which they are living. Particularly in the case of the immigration of families, the host society has an important role to play in the integration process. We refer in this connection primarily to the Member States and local and regional authorities but non-governmental organisations, civil society, the private sector, religious communities and ethnic minority communities within the host society are also key partners in integration policy;
19. points out that all of these different stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure that the host society is prepared for the arrival of newcomers and to promote acceptance, and stresses in this connection the importance of providing correct information to the host community;

Policy priorities in support of integration

Pre-departure/pre-arrival measures

20. is convinced that the integration process should - if possible - begin without delay, even when the newcomer is still in their country of origin;

⁸

Presidency non-paper for the Council (General Affairs) on 24 May 2016 - Rule of law dialogue (13 May 2016).

21. points out that knowledge of the language of the host country is vital in order to be able to integrate successfully and that learning a new language often takes time. A number of EU Member States therefore already organise language lessons or tests prior to the arrival of the newcomers in the host country. This means that the period spent by newcomers in the host country without being able to express themselves in the local language is as short as possible, or even non-existent, thus facilitating interaction with the local host society. Of course, this cannot be a condition for granting protection to refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection;
22. stresses that admission interviews with newcomers are key tools for developing a tailor-made approach, providing a better overview of the expectations of newcomers and the host society. Some of these admission interviews should, insofar as possible, be conducted in the country of origin so that the newcomer can fully focus on the actual integration process once they have arrived in the host society;
23. stresses the importance of accompanying measures to inform the host society prior to the arrival of the newcomers, particularly in communities where refugees are resettled;

Education

24. welcomes the Commission's focus on education as one of the key elements of a successful integration policy and calls in this connection for continued efforts to monitor the subsidiarity principle;
25. stresses that learning the language of the host society should take priority so that newcomers and their children can begin to interact with the host society as quickly as possible, assume their rights and fulfil their obligations. Here too, it is important to have a tailor-made approach to education, based on the profile of the newcomer and their specific needs;
26. refers to the good practices employed in primary and secondary education concerning reception education for newcomers who are speakers of another language; schools are able to offer a tailor-made approach to newcomers by placing them in a separate class, providing them with additional support in conventional classes, or using a mixture of the two⁹;
27. highlights the good practices employed to overcome language barriers. These include the use of community translators and interpreters in education who help teachers and mentors ensure that newcomers not yet competent in the language of the host country can still actively interact with the educational establishments attended by their children;
28. welcomes the Commission's proposal to look further into the possibilities for civic education courses in secondary education, given the need to inform everybody about the law, culture, norms and values and standards of society;

⁹

<http://www.flanderstoday.eu/education/okan-schools-help-youngsters-feel-home-flanders>

29. calls for more attention to be paid to the target group of 16-18 year-old newcomers who are often at an age where education is no longer compulsory and in many cases still do not have the tools they need to enter higher education or succeed in the labour market;

Labour Market Integration and access to Vocational Training

30. welcomes the fact that labour market integration is one of the Commission's priorities for integrating newcomers into the host society, given the challenges posed by the generally lower employment rate of newcomers, particularly women, compared with that of people born in the host country¹⁰;
31. calls for systems to be set up, possibly based on internships, enabling newcomers to gain access to the labour market as quickly as possible. This will open up opportunities for them to practise their language skills through contact with colleagues and so create networks that can lead to a job and means of supporting themselves;
32. is convinced that targeted economic labour migration can help meet the challenges posed by an ageing workforce, the need for workers with specific skills and the pressure on our welfare systems, but stresses that the reception and associated integration of refugees, and the principle of family reunification, should primarily be seen as humanitarian and not be mistakenly depicted as the solution to our labour market problems;
33. recognises the need to be able to assess and validate the skills and qualifications of newcomers both quickly and accurately, as enabling newcomers to participate in the labour market or preparing them for this through vocational training is a priority. The Committee therefore looks forward to, among other things, the Commission's proposals in connection with its new skills agenda for Europe¹¹;
34. stresses, in connection with the revision of the blue card directive¹², that European economies must attract high-skilled workers to fill genuine vacancies;
35. welcomes the meeting of the Tripartite Social Summit held on 16 March 2016 to discuss the refugee crisis, but calls for input from the world of education too, given that it is an important partner capable of furthering the debate on (labour market) integration;

Access to basic services

36. reiterates that a clear distinction must be drawn between (economic) migrants and refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, especially in the political debate about access to basic services, as each group can have different needs, thus requiring a fundamentally different approach;

¹⁰ Eurostat: [Migrant integration in the EU labour market](#) (2016).

¹¹ COM(2016) 381 final.

¹² COM(2016) 378 final.

37. emphasises that it is for Member States to shape their own social security schemes and takes note of the political debate in several of them that highlights the principle of insurance and thereby leads to the decision to progressively open up certain social rights, including for newcomers, on the basis of the contributions paid;
38. calls, with regard to health care, for more attention to be paid to mental health, which can be particularly important in terms of the reception and integration of refugees – especially children and young people – who have lived through war or other trauma;
39. is aware that Member States have the right to require migrants who have no right to protection under international law to be able to support themselves when they arrive in their host societies and thus not to claim social security benefits;
40. states that sufficient attention should always be paid to social housing but that, ideally, this must only be a temporary solution for the beneficiaries, the objective being for these tenants – whether they are newcomers or not – to be able to eventually attain a degree of independence, enabling them to access the private market;
41. is pleased to note the Commission's position that no integration policy must be implemented at the expense of policies aimed at other vulnerable groups within the host society;

Active participation and social inclusion

42. welcomes the fact that in this section of its action plan, the Commission puts forward a notion of active citizenship where newcomers will not always be newcomers but will become part of their host societies as quickly as possible, and therefore calls not just for an integration policy, but also for a policy of civic integration, one that fosters community-building;
43. agrees with the Commission's view that integration does not only mean speaking the language of the host country and finding a job, but also involves playing an active role in the community and civil society. This is the main reason why it is important that the integration of newcomers is not suggested or requested by political figures alone, but that civil society is also involved;
44. considers that, in addition to formally being taught the language of the host country, contacts with civil society offer newcomers an informal environment, which they need in order to use and practise this new language, thus enabling them to become more familiar with it in a very practical way;
45. is convinced, as is the Commission, that newcomers' involvement in their host community's civil society enhances their dialogue with that community and mutual understanding, ensures greater acceptance by the community, and counteracts discrimination and racism;
46. supports the Commission's call on Member States to guarantee that rights to protection against discrimination and racism are respected and urges an active policy of equal opportunities and non-discrimination in order to promote a shared citizenship;

Political tools to support integration

Policy coordination

47. welcomes the efforts made by the Commission, which, in the context of transforming the current network of National Contact Points on Integration into a European Integration Network, wants to place more emphasis on sharing best practices, especially in terms of cooperation with civil society and local and regional authorities;
48. calls on the Commission to ensure that the European Integration Network becomes a platform that encourages and supports Member States' integration policy initiatives, taking account of the distribution of powers in this regard¹³;

Funding

49. regrets – without denying that it is a matter that falls within their own competence – that in the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework, Member States have allocated fewer resources to integration through their national programmes for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), even as need has increased, particularly in the light of the current migration and asylum crisis;
50. welcomes the fact that in the 2017 draft budget, the Commission aims to use the AMIF to increase the EU's financial support to Member States as regards integration policies;
51. is of the view that synergies must be found between the various European funds that could support integration policy. Of course, this remark applies primarily to the AMIF, but some integration projects should also be possible under the Internal Security Fund (ISF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)¹⁴;
52. urges the European Commission to consider introducing a specific thematic objective on integration under post-2020 cohesion policy, in order to ensure more efficient and targeted concentration of ESIF resources on integration projects. With regard to the 2014-2020 programming period, further guidelines - as clear and detailed as possible - on integration-related activities that are eligible for the ESIF should be given to the management authorities;
53. calls for it to be made as simple as possible for Member States, local and regional authorities and civil society to put forward proposals for national programmes under the various funds and therefore welcomes – among other things – the Commission's proposal to rely more heavily on the use of partnership arrangements;

¹³ Article 79(4) TFEU.

¹⁴ "Synergies between the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and other EU funding instruments in relation to reception and integration of asylum seekers and other migrants", European Commission (2015).

54. calls for greater and more targeted use of Interreg to support integration projects. This could include adjusting the rules and priorities of the relevant operational programmes. It underlines the central role that European territorial cooperation can play in enhancing integration policies, especially at local level, by facilitating synergies and exchange of best practice;
55. calls on the Commission to limit excessive administrative complexity and bureaucracy with regard to the monitoring mechanisms of the different European funds that are used for integration projects so that Member States and local and regional authorities can effectively focus all their energy on integration policy on the ground, but without sacrificing monitoring that is sufficiently strict to ensure that public funds are being used efficiently;
56. calls on the Commission to ensure that the tailored approach required by integration policy should also be extended to the monitoring mechanisms of the different European funds that are used to support integration projects, without undermining the rigorous checks that must be carried out to ensure that public money is being spent properly;

The role of local and regional authorities

57. points out once again that integration policy itself is mainly implemented at local and regional authority level and that it is local and regional authorities that are most immediately confronted with the challenges and opportunities arising from integration;
58. calls on the Commission to therefore take the specific needs of local and regional authorities into account, as well as to involve them more extensively than in the past in the integration policy drawn up, pursued or promoted at European level and to provide them with maximum support in this regard:
59. calls on the Commission to encourage the Member States and the regions and provide them with financial support in implementing integration initiatives, especially in educational and vocational training courses and entry into the labour and housing markets, and to facilitate exchange of best practice already put in place by regions which have implemented integration measures, such as the distributed reception approach;
60. asks the Commission, in this context, to view it as a privileged partner – being an EU advisory body made up of representatives of European local and regional authorities – but also to encourage other forms of cooperation with local and regional authorities, their associations, and other partnerships, networks and platforms, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly, the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership, joint consultative committees, working groups, the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, etc., with the aim of having local and regional authorities make the broadest possible contribution;
61. calls on the Commission to actively involve it in its efforts – aimed at local and regional authorities – to enhance and share best practices specifically related to integration policy that is implemented prior to departure or arrival, as well as in relation to education, the labour market

and vocational training, access to basic services, and active participation and social inclusion, and in this connection refers to the comparative study it conducted on integration policies¹⁵;

62. welcomes the Commission's explicit reference to the SHARE Network, with its "Share City Curriculum" project¹⁶, giving local and regional authorities access to a toolkit that will help them with regard to measures aimed at the host society when refugees are being resettled;
63. calls on the Commission to enable it to actively participate in the new European Integration Network, the European Migration Forum, the partnership for the integration of third-country nationals under the Urban Agenda for the EU¹⁷, as well as in the assessment and subsequent follow-up of the "integration indicators".

Brussels,

¹⁵ "Regulatory Framework on Employment and Funding for Migration and Integration Policies in the EU", European Union (2016).

¹⁶ <http://www.resettlement.eu/page/share-city-curriculum>.

¹⁷ <http://urbanagendaforthe.eu/partnerships/inclusion-of-migrants-and-refugees/>.

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Action plan on the integration of third country nationals
Reference	COM(2016) 377 final
Legal basis	Own-initiative opinion, Article 307(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b)(ii) of the CoR's Rules of Procedure
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	7 June 2016
Date of Bureau/President's decision	14 June 2016
Commission responsible	Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX)
Rapporteur	Karl Vanlouwe (BE/EA), Member of the Flemish Parliament
Analysis	6 July 2016
Discussion in commission	23 June 2016
Date of adoption by commission	22 September 2016
Result of the commission vote (majority, unanimity)	Majority
Date of adoption in plenary	Scheduled for 7-8 December 2016
Previous Committee opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CDR 212/2008, own-initiative opinion on <i>Local and regional authorities at the forefront of integration policies</i>, rapporteur: Dimitrios Kalogeropoulos (EL/EPP) – CDR 199/2011, opinion on <i>The new European Agenda for Integration</i>, rapporteur: Dimitrios Kalogeropoulos (EL/EPP)
Consultation of Subsidiarity Monitoring Network	N/A