

## III

(Preparatory Acts)

## COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

77th PLENARY SESSION HELD ON 26 AND 27 NOVEMBER 2008

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Integration Policy and Intercultural Dialogue'**

(2009/C 76/01)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- believes that intercultural dialogue is a key instrument in promoting understanding of cultural diversity and strengthening and uniting people in a multilingual, multicultural Europe;
- is convinced that dialogue between different religions and world views is one of the prime instruments for sustainable intercultural dialogue;
- calls on the European Parliament, therefore, to promote a European Charter for intercultural dialogue and suggests that the European Commission and the Member States set up a permanent European Platform for intercultural dialogue, including local and regional authorities, with a view to developing a systematic dialogue starting out from our cities and regions;
- believes that local and regional authorities have important powers when it comes to promoting intercultural dialogue;
- feels that local authorities should establish an open dialogue with individual groups or sections within society, and then promote and support communication between these groups, organise meetings and educate people through lectures, festivals, exhibitions and other forms of activity.
- points out that in many of the Member States regional and local authorities are responsible for legislation relating to integration policy and its implementation and thus play a key role in the integration of immigrants;
- believes that intercultural dialogue is a prerequisite of successful integration. Being closest to the people, local and regional authorities are able to encourage mutual recognition and a more active involvement in intercultural dialogue.

**Rapporteur:** Milan BELICA (SK/EPP), President of the Nitra Self-governing Region

**Reference document**

Referral from the French Presidency on 'Integration Policy and Intercultural Dialogue: The Role of Local and Regional Authorities'

**I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

**The principle of multicultural dialogue**

1. believes that the basic principle underlying the process of European integration is respect for, and the promotion of, cultural diversity. In this sense, intercultural dialogue is a key instrument in promoting understanding of cultural diversity and strengthening and uniting people in a multilingual, multicultural Europe;

2. stresses that the concept of intercultural dialogue, allied with social and territorial cohesion, can help to instil the basic values of private, social and civic life, such as solidarity, responsibility, tolerance, respect, traditional values, striving for social progress and understanding of social and cultural diversity. It can also foster the ability to communicate between individuals and groups with a different cultural background and help them live together in solidarity;

3. highlights the fact that equality of access to culture and freedom of cultural expression are essential features of the European values base and preconditions for intercultural dialogue and integration;

4. stresses that in order to promote intercultural dialogue effectively, there is a need for cooperation at regional and local level that involves local and regional decision-makers, social partners, education and training establishments, NGOs, and youth, sports and cultural organisations, as well as bodies representing immigrants and other relevant partners at grassroots level. Religious and secular associations are also important partners in this dialogue to help create mutual understanding and tolerance, provided that this is indeed what they do;

5. is convinced that dialogue between different religions and world views is one of the prime instruments for sustainable intercultural dialogue. The different faith organisations are key players in our society. At local and regional level, public and religious authorities are in a position to develop working methods for promoting mutual understanding and hence strengthening intercultural dialogue. Supporting these methods and activities developed at local and regional level can also help to foster the principle of mutual understanding;

6. calls on the European Parliament, therefore, to promote a European Charter for intercultural dialogue and suggests that the European Commission and the Member States set up a permanent European Platform for intercultural dialogue, including local and regional authorities, with a view to devel-

oping a systematic dialogue starting out from our cities and regions.

**The role of local and regional authorities in intercultural dialogue**

7. believes that local and regional authorities have important powers when it comes to promoting intercultural dialogue. They bear a major responsibility for shaping and supporting our rich variety of cultures. They have a key role in disseminating and applying best practice and exchange of experience in intercultural dialogue, in particular through their coordination of multi-dimensional local and regional networks involving all the relevant players;

8. believes that local and regional authorities could use their position to raise awareness of the present complex situation and the co-existence of various cultural identities and belief systems. Accordingly, it is important for them to have a real understanding of individual groups and their activity and influence within society. It is therefore necessary to identify as wide a range of stakeholders in the multicultural dialogue as possible and to include them in structures for a direct and intensive exchange with the appropriate local or regional authorities;

9. observes that many intercultural initiatives are managed at the local and/or regional level. Local and regional authorities, through their proximity to the public, are strategically well placed to respond — in partnership with other local players — to the specific needs and demands of the different cultural groups within their territories, and to promote greater intercultural dialogue;

10. feels that local authorities should establish an open dialogue with individual groups or sections within society, and then promote and support communication between these groups, organise meetings and educate people through lectures, festivals, exhibitions and other forms of activity. Local and regional authorities should initiate an open dialogue in which they would have an impartial role and respect the freedom and rights of the individual and groups; subsequently, they would only act as intermediaries, possibly providing 'advisory services' (information, projects).

11. believes that immigrants should have the opportunity to vote in local, regional and European Parliament elections;

12. would therefore encourage the relevant authorities and political groups to promote their participation to help facilitate integration into society;

### **Intercultural dialogue as a key condition for integration policy**

13. believes that intercultural dialogue is a prerequisite of successful integration. Being closest to the people, local and regional authorities are able to encourage mutual recognition and a more active involvement in intercultural dialogue;

14. recommends that the European Union, acting within its remit, ensures clear frameworks and pre-conditions for successful integration, but also recognises that immigration and integration policy is a national competence and the principle of subsidiarity must be respected;

15. points out the need for the creation and support of management structures (one-stop shops) that can help immigrants with the practical issues they face (as well as the usual bureaucratic problems) and offer useful information, especially for newcomers;

16. points out that in many of the Member States regional and local authorities are responsible for legislation relating to integration policy and its implementation and thus play a key role in the integration of immigrants. Differences in national systems, as well as the geographical position of each Member State, existing customs and historical and cultural characteristics must be taken into account when elaborating common European frameworks, in accordance with Point 14. This also means that local and regional authorities should apply an integrationist model depending on their specific circumstances;

17. underlines the fact that local and regional authorities are often involved in determining the effectiveness and efficiency of a number of aspects of integration policy through the way in which they fulfil their responsibilities in these areas;

18. calls for adequate resources to be provided for integration measures at local and regional level while existing programmes are explored. Local and regional authorities should be assisted in managing the integration process — with information and funding as well as the development of best practices. Strands and measures should be included that enable the funding at local and regional level of projects and measures to integrate immigrants;

19. notes the huge scale of immigration to the European Union. In this case cooperation and dialogue need to be stepped up in the cultural sphere so as to ensure that cultural differences do not provoke disharmony but instead become a tool of development and an instrument for strengthening tolerance and uniting populations in a multicultural Europe based on mutual respect and solidarity;

20. calls for the intensification of efforts to draw up a common European Policy to manage irregular immigration. Many of the legal aspects of irregular immigration are beyond the competencies of local authorities, but the social conse-

quences of this phenomenon are first and foremost felt at local and regional level. Ways should be found and efforts should be made to consult the regions and the local level when developing common policies on the issue and address the specific problems of irregular migration in the context of intercultural dialogue;

21. believes that regional and local authorities play a special role when it comes to migration policy, because many of the services that are important for successful integration — such as housing, healthcare, education and learning programmes for skills and languages — are provided by local and regional authorities and therefore they are also the first concerned by problems in these areas;

22. points out that the process of integration is sometimes spread over several generations — particularly at local level. For this reason it considers it very important that local and regional authorities provide for effective structural, social, economic and cultural integration, while it is an absolute pre-condition to help to ensure that newcomers are not discriminated against and have rights and access to resources, employment and services so that they can fully take part in European society. Access to the normal labour market — an issue which Member States have responsibility for — is crucial;

23. recommends considering a possibility that a system of networks of local and regional authorities be set up in each Member State in order to increase cooperation to effectively deal with migratory flows and to integrate immigrants in an informed way by means of local projects promoted by these authorities;

24. would refer to the European Year of intercultural dialogue in 2008, which by promoting understanding of different cultures is providing a key impetus for the integration of people with a migration background. The Commission should consider whether an annual 'European Day for integration and intercultural tolerance' could raise awareness, and highlight the enrichment that can come from cultural diversity.

### **Support for housing policies as part of the integration process**

25. recommends creating conditions for the integration of immigrant families with local families and communities through integrated programmes set up, with the active participation of immigrants, to improve the built environment and urban planning, provide services, improve the quality of the environment and combat social exclusion. Points out the need to carry out further research that collates experience in all the Member States over recent years concerning the ability to provide housing, including for immigrants with special emphasis on experience in implementing programmes for improving neighbourhoods with high migrant populations;

26. encourages local and regional authorities to make use of existing EU funding possibilities for helping migrants, asylum seekers and refugees find employment and to gain access to social, health and housing services. Local and regional authorities should ensure the quality and quantity of public services as well as education and learning programmes and the quality of life in cities by providing effective urban planning and adequate housing policy to avoid the degradation of urban areas and setting up effective regeneration programmes for run-down urban areas.

### **Qualification and employment in regards to integration**

27. draws attention to the fact that, in the absence of reception and integration projects and stable employment, immigrants may fall victim to exploitation and crime or may themselves, voluntarily or involuntarily, become criminals, creating a possible source of problems in terms of security and social cohesion;

28. suggests that the Member States, in cooperation with local and regional authorities, all economic and social partners, should make efforts to improve the access of immigrants to work, in line with national competences in this area, and to fight discrimination in the labour market. Member States should inform them of the possibilities and encourage them to prepare for work through continuous, and if necessary, specific training programmes;

### **Multilingualism and foreign language teaching as a means of promoting intercultural dialogue**

29. believes that developing a sense of belonging starts at school, and that reception and integration programmes can be developed as an integral part of all preschool, school and university systems in the Member States;

30. feels that local and regional authorities should highlight the role and importance of education as an important means of raising awareness about diversity;

31. calls for greater attention to be paid to the cultural, linguistic and intellectual potential of immigrants, which are of great importance to the European Union in the globalising world;

32. stresses the need to support teaching which focuses on mutual understanding. In order to achieve this, the school curriculum should be adapted to reflect the EU's multicultural environment and the principle of actively supporting multicultural dialogue;

33. places a significant emphasis on foreign language teaching and on developing the basis of multilingualism at pre-school age. It stresses the importance of having a good knowledge of the language of the host country and the area where one lives. It suggests, therefore, that appropriate measures of support and learning opportunities be developed both at school

and, for different age groups of migrants, outside the school environment;

34. also agrees on the need to encourage dialogue between religious communities and associations and other cultural players. People within the EU need to have a better knowledge and understanding of both EU and non-EU countries, including their history and their culture. Immigrants as well as locals must receive a positive education on Europe: the discovery of shared values and a common history, interaction between cultures, and similar social and political rights and duties;

35. suggests that local and regional authorities commit themselves to fostering intercultural awareness among the staff of local and regional authorities and other public service providers and promote a fair representation of staff with migrant/ethnic minority backgrounds in these institutions;

36. believes that local and regional authorities can play a role in developing an environment for foreign students that enables them to establish links with the city where they study, however short the period involved.

### **Strengthening cooperation with the media**

37. calls for local and regional authorities to collaborate closely with local media, as well as organisations and associations of cultural interests, in conducting information campaigns at local and regional level, reaching in particular 'disadvantaged' groups and thereby ensuring maximum benefit of opportunities available;

38. considers that local media have an important role to play in informing people as objectively as possible about the situation and reality of Europe's multi-cultural societies and thus, on the one hand, to strengthen the adaptability of the host country population (raising of intercultural awareness and knowledge, acceptance of migration) while, on the other, encouraging migrants to integrate, and to respect the cultures, traditions, customs and languages of the host country and of other EU Member States;

39. suggests targeting local and regional stakeholders through decentralised events and encouraging appropriate coverage of such events in the regional media. Local and regional authorities should emphasise the clear role of the media in supporting equality and mutual understanding and continue to create the conditions for supporting cultural dialogue;

40. notes the necessity to promote the creation of new spaces (various digital environments, special cafés, activities in parks or squares) of intercultural dialogue and proposes that support be given to city debates, dialogues, language instruction, naturalisation courses, employment schemes, equal opportunity courses, anti-discrimination schemes, etc., and that the systematic exchange and monitoring of experience, new approaches, successes and failures be ensured at local level.

**II. APPENDIX****Ad 6**

The Intercultural Cities programme of the Council of Europe and the European Commission is a network of European cities for intercultural dialogue. The aim of the network is the exchange of experience and good practices amongst the members in issues relating to employment, language, education, culture, media, etc.

**Ad 23**

In those Member States which have tried such service networks, working through local commissions, the processing of asylum requests has been accelerated and the living conditions of asylum seekers have been improved. This has facilitated their integration into local host communities, with significant benefits for security and quality of life.

Arco Latino suggests promoting networks and associations at European level to boost the spirit of interregional cooperation and coordinate actions between Member States with the same immigration challenges. Only through this kind of cooperation will it be possible to foster coordinated co-development actions with the countries of origin.

**Ad 28**

REVES has begun involving immigrants in its work; and the results of this cooperation are very positive. Members of the European Network of Local and Regional Authorities for the Social Economy (REVES) are carrying out a number of initiatives for intercultural dialogue and participatory integration. Third-country nationals or other persons with a migration background are partially involved not only in the implementation, but also in the planning of these initiatives (which are still ongoing). Experiments are being made with new spaces of participation and intercultural dialogue. They include: a) a café as meeting place for elderly migrants, b) intercultural dialogue initiatives based around a

public park, which include work with different groups of youngsters that spend their leisure time in the park, c) work on migrants' capacities and skills (building upon the 'Extracompetenze' project, d) the organisation of activities in schools that would bring together parents of different nationalities, and e) the setting-up of social economy enterprises (e.g. cooperatives) by migrants and locals.

**Ad 30**

The 'Dvojčky' (Twins) project set up by Regina radio, whose journalists seek to identify parallels and compare Slovakia's historical figures and traditions with those of other EU Member States.

**Ad 32**

Pan-European cultural traditions such as 'Neighbours' Day' and 'European Music Day' are gradually becoming established in Slovakia.

The initiative launched by the European Commission's DG DEV and the sending of EU officials as ambassadors to schools on Schuman Day (9 May).

**Ad 33**

In young people and children the motivation to learn new languages must be kindled at an early age. Language learning should begin as early as possible because this makes it easier for them to learn the language faster and more comprehensively. Progress in language acquisition at primary and secondary school should be developed. The education process must provide more opportunities to speak a foreign language at primary school and to learn a third language at secondary school. University facilities for further improving linguistic skills should be expanded by broadening the scope of the Lifelong Learning programme, which aims at promoting the mobility of students and workers.

Brussels, 26 November 2008.

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions  
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

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