

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Integration of refugees in the EU'**(exploratory opinion)**

(2016/C 264/03)

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In a letter dated 16 December 2015, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment asked the European Economic and Social Committee, on behalf of the Dutch presidency of the Council and under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to draw up an exploratory opinion on:

Integration of refugees in the EU

(exploratory opinion).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 4 April 2016.

At its 516th plenary session, held on 27 and 28 April 2016 (meeting of 27 April 2016), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 232 votes to 3 with 3 abstentions.

1. Introduction

The Dutch presidency has put forward the reasons for its request as follows:

The EU and its Member States are facing the current massive arrival of refugees largely unprepared. However, the number of people arriving is a fraction of those on the move globally and not without precedent in recent European history. All governmental levels and many civil society organisations need to cooperate to receive refugees and to assure their integration once their protected status is granted. The approach, benefits and level of organisational response vary from Member State to Member State. Examples of existing good practice can be found in various databases, which can serve as a basis for deeper analysis.

The exploratory opinion aims to draft recommendations, drawing on current experiences and seeking inspiration from other geographic areas and times that witnessed the arrival of refugees and other migrants on a comparable or far larger scale, focusing on the role of civil society organisations. It should address such questions as: what are the best models of cooperation between national, regional and local authorities and civil society organisations? What innovative approaches exist already? How can they be transferred to other contexts?

2. Recommendations

2.1 The EESC is convinced that integration is a necessity for our societies if we want to preserve social cohesion.

2.2 For the EESC a common European asylum system as well as a deep reform of the Dublin Regulation and a European plan for migration must be immediately deployed, to be effective and restore confidence in the values of our societies.

2.3 The EESC points out that integration is a two-way process. Best-practices in integration policies do not only target refugees but include locals as well. Such an approach is critical for the acceptance of the integration measures. Media, local authorities, trade unions, employer organisations and NGOs play an important role in this process. In order to create a positive climate towards refugees in the receiving countries — especially in times of little projected economic growth and tight labour markets in some countries — integration measures and social investments should be provided to the local population and refugees alike, covering the specific needs of each target group.

2.4 Language training should be provided soon after registration, if a positive decision on the asylum status is to be expected. This training should also include basic information on values, cultures and processes as well as identification of skills and qualifications. Cedefop could assist in developing methods to identify skills acquired in the country of origin.

2.5 The EESC recommends that special attention is paid to minors, particularly the unaccompanied, who are often traumatised and need socio-pedagogical support. A rapid integration into the school system or guidance on the professional training opportunities shall be provided.

2.6 The EESC stresses that refugees must have access to information about rights and obligations in the host society in general and on the labour market in particular. Refugees must be treated equally with locals on the labour market, in order to prevent unfair competition as well as social and wage-dumping.

2.7 The EESC reaffirms the praise for solidarity shown by segments of civil society, trade unions, employers' organisations, private individuals and enterprises, in particular micro and craft SMEs, who have voluntarily assisted asylum seekers. The EESC stresses the importance of protecting and supporting such individual engagements, with appropriate incentives in particular during humanitarian emergencies, promoting solidarity in civil society.

2.8 The EESC stresses the need for the EU to base its immediate response to the situation on solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility and costs, as stated in Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

2.9 The Member States, EU competent authorities, including in the 'transit' countries, should cooperate with CSOs in monitoring, updating data information and coordination activities, to have a common, more effective EU asylum policy. Common, harmonised and up-to-date statistical systems should be developed in order to define EU and Member States policy options.

2.10 Further efforts in terms of investment to boost economic growth and employment are needed, inter alia, through the Juncker Plan, to achieve lasting success in integrating refugees. Additional investment in integration measures and social investments should be provided to the local population and refugees alike, covering the specific needs of each target group. The EESC has noted the potential positive effects of a financial transaction tax for public finances, by securing a fairer contribution from the financial sector. Due to the exceptional circumstances, and in line with the Stability and Growth Pact, the additional costs of hosting refugees should not be, after the thorough examination, recognised in the public deficits of the Member States. Investment in integration measures is costly in the short and middle term, but should be seen as an investment in people, which will pay off in the long term. If integration is successful it will lead to social cohesion, economic growth and job creation. The resources of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), as well as the European Social Fund (ESF), should therefore be increased as appropriate, particularly in those Member States that have exceeded their refugee quotas, in order to achieve better co-financing of measures to integrate refugees.

3. Background

3.1 The conflicts in the Middle East have caused an unprecedented influx of refugees into Europe. People from war-torn countries mixed with people who wanted to leave their countries for economic reasons. All European countries have signed the 'Geneva Convention' of 1951 relating to the status of refugees, which grants basic rights to refugees in order to protect this vulnerable group. In view of the high number of people and in order to comply with the Geneva Convention and general principles of human rights it is important to clearly distinguish between economic migrants and refugees, that is, people in need of protected status (particularly asylum or subsidiary protection).

3.2 While it is fully understandable from an individual point of view that individuals leave their country in order to find better economic circumstances abroad, the current situation and the societal climate in the majority of Member States requires this clear distinction. Economic migrants have to return to their countries of origin, if they claim protected status on unjustified grounds. The EU action plan on return as well as the return handbook should be followed by the Member States in those cases where the claim for international protection was refused.

3.3 This requires a common European asylum system with efficient external border protection, proper registration at the so-called hotspots, rapid processing of asylum claims and arrangements for the return to the country of origin, or to a third country with which a readmission agreement has been concluded, of asylum-seekers whose applications have been rejected and who have not been granted international protection. It could also be significant and effective to establish hotspots in the third countries bordering the EU and having agreements on migration policy for registration and asylum request.

3.4 The events that occurred during the second half of 2015 have shown that third country nationals often come to Europe with false expectations and rosy images of life in the EU that are usually provided by smugglers. Confronted with reality, the reaction of these third country nationals is disappointment and in some cases voluntary return. In the framework of a voluntary return programme participants could contribute to painting a more realistic picture of European life to citizens of their home countries, which might prevent others from embarking upon the dangerous journey to Europe.

3.5 Aside from the need to make the common European asylum system fully operational, to establish a sustainable and fair sharing of responsibility and costs and in order to reduce pressure on the current asylum system, it will be necessary to swiftly adopt a new European approach for migration, as well as a deep reform of the Dublin Regulation able to tackle short and long term challenges, as has been announced by President Juncker for the first quarter of 2016. The EESC will express its views in a separate opinion.

3.6 In its resolution on refugees, adopted in December 2015, the EESC has stressed that 'the current situation requires the EU to develop safe humanitarian corridors for refugees from countries affected by wars and threatened by terrorism and to do this together with the countries where these refugees are mostly concentrated'. The EESC reaffirms that the registration process should already take place outside the EU.

3.7 War, climate change and lack of prospects in third countries may create a continued and even increased influx of refugees and migrants. Limiting push factors for migration in general is a global challenge. The present opinion, however, is solely dedicated to the integration of individuals with granted protected status or people applying for such status.

4. Comparability with previous refugee movements?

4.1 The Dutch presidency asked for integration lessons to be drawn from previous crisis that generated large refugee movements. The EESC came to the conclusion that the current refugee crisis is not comparable with previous ones, first due to the number of people that are on the move, more than 900 000 migrants enter the EU borders through Greece during 2015, and second due to the rapidity of the evolution, leading to increased uncertainty among the local population. Looking for example to the Austrian case where about 90 000 refugees came at the beginning of the 90s, escaping from the war in former Yugoslavia, one can see the differences quite clearly: People from Bosnia often had relatives in Austria, or had already worked there. The qualifications achieved in the country of origin were of immediate value to the Austrian companies, and women were used to fully participate in the labour market. This increased the family income and made families more mobile, which prevented the creation of designated areas and favoured a better social intermix at schools and on the labour market.

4.2 The experiences from the situation in the 90s are not completely comparable to today's situation. People arriving now have more diverse backgrounds, with some having academic degrees that can be compared to European ones, others have education that might not be of immediate use in Europe, whereas others have very limited education and many women have never participated in the labour market. Moreover, people in receiving countries, still suffering from the aftermath of the economic crisis, tend to be rather reserved towards foreign people competing on the labour market.

5. What is integration?

5.1 According to the UNHCR there is no consensus on the definition of immigrant integration in the context of developed countries and there is no formal definition in international refugee law. Broad understanding of integration as processual, individual and two-way underpins many government and academic attempts to define what integration or an integrated society looks like.

5.2 'At the core of the UNHCR's definition is the concept of integration as a two-way process and this is premised on the "adaptation" of one party and "welcome" by the other. It does not however require the refugee to relinquish their cultural identity, and integration therefore differs from assimilation' ⁽¹⁾. This definition corresponds with the EESC's view ⁽²⁾.

5.3 The EESC has underlined the need to link integration with the values and principles set out in the Treaty, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Europe 2020 agenda, employment policy and the social agenda. The EESC considers this reference to be of vital importance, as it takes into account the existence of a crisis of values in certain social and political sectors in Europe. Integration and economic and social cohesion are two sides of the same coin ⁽³⁾. Ensuring decent living conditions and prospects for everybody will foster acceptance of integration measures.

5.4 The Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy (2004) and the vehicle for its implementation, the Common Agenda for Integration (2005) form the basis upon which migrant integration in the EU is formulated, and view integration as comprising the following:

- a two-way, dynamic process,
- implying respect for EU values,
- employment forms a key part of integration and is central to participation,

⁽¹⁾ A new beginning — Refugee integration in Europe (2013).

⁽²⁾ OJ C 181, 21.6.2012, p. 131. Also OJ C 347, 18.12.2010, p. 19.

⁽³⁾ Information Report on *The new challenges of integration* — Rapporteur: Luis Miguel PARIZA CASTAÑOS.

- knowledge of the receiving society's language, history, and institutions is integral to successful integration,
- education, which is critical for active participation,
- access to institutions, goods and services on the same basis as nationals is fundamental to integration,
- interaction between migrant/citizen,
- practice of diverse cultures and religions to be safeguarded,
- participation in the democratic process,
- mainstreaming integration policies,
- clear goals, indicators and evaluation mechanisms to adjust integration policy.

5.5 Although these principles do not differentiate between migrant and refugee integration, the EESC also regards these principles as a basis for the integration of refugees. However, due to the large number of people arriving in Europe, additional efforts are necessary in order to provide language training, housing and labour market integration.

5.6 In order to create a positive climate in receiving countries towards refugees — especially in times of little projected economic growth and tight labour markets in some countries — integration measures and social investments should be provided to the local population and refugees alike, covering the specific needs of each target group. The importance of connecting and mainstreaming social objectives in the context of integration has been stated by the EESC ⁽⁴⁾.

5.7 The EESC is convinced that integration of refugees is an absolute must for our societies if we want to preserve social cohesion. A lack of integration can lead to parallel societies which may destabilise receiving countries. It is therefore in our own interest to start integration measures from a very early stage. Media should be encouraged to acknowledge the importance of integration and the role they play in creating a positive political and societal climate.

5.8 The demographic developments in most European countries show a decline in working age population. In order to keep our social systems sustainable for the next generations the integration into the labour market of the entire labour force, regardless of, for example, gender, age, physical ability, religion, sexual orientation or (ethnic) origin must become a priority. Investment in integration measures is costly in the short and middle term, but should be seen as an investment in people, which will pay off in the long term. If integration is successful it will lead to social cohesion, economic growth and job creation.

5.9 The local level has a decisive role to play in integration, as it is the place where people live together and where a lack of integration first becomes visible. Communities should get advice and guidance on well-functioning integration measures, such as inviting refugees to participate in local voluntary associations (e.g. trade unions, NGOs, firefighters or sports clubs).

5.10 The European Commission's website on integration ⁽⁵⁾ contains a wealth of information on integration examples. By using search filters best practice examples can be found, according to, for example, country, field of integration, target group. This website should be further promoted to inspire Member States, local authorities, NGOs and social partners on integration activities

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 347, 18.12.2010, p. 19.

⁽⁵⁾ <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/home>

5.11 Based on a proposal from the EESC, a structured collaboration between civil society organisations, the EESC and the European Commission via the European Migration Forum, which deals with all questions related to migration, asylum and integration, is already in place. In addition it could be useful to extend the mandate of the advisory committee on free movement of persons to the integration of refugees, as this is the body via which governments discuss and exchange ideas with social partners. This committee could provide an additional space for sharing best practices.

6. Integration measures

6.1 Asylum seekers arriving in Europe after (in most cases) an exhausting and often traumatising journey need first and foremost a place to stay and rest. This time should be used by the authorities to properly register them and to roughly evaluate whether they have a chance of receiving the status of a refugee. In this case, integration measures should start from a very early stage. According to recent research by the World Health Organisation, there is a need for special medical treatment for refugees with developed post-traumatic stress disorder, as this frequently is one important barrier for integration.

6.2 Integration is not thinkable without having at least a basic knowledge of the language of the receiving country. Therefore, language training should start as early as possible during the asylum procedure. This requires the establishment of new structures as well as an improved interface management in order to cope with the large number of asylum seekers. Language courses should also be used to acquaint asylum seekers with the values (e.g. equal treatment of women and men, freedom of expression, prohibition of domestic violence) and culture of the receiving country. These courses can also be used to provide asylum seekers with basic guidelines on issues of organisations, institutions and information where to turn to, when problems arise. Asylum seekers often come from very different cultures. Actions resulting from a lack of awareness about the receiving countries' basic values, rights and obligations may harm integration.

6.3 Refugee children should attend schools with local children as quickly as possible and receive support in learning the national language. Special attention must be paid to minors, particularly the unaccompanied, who are often traumatised. If they are — due to their age — not allowed to attend school any more, adequate offers especially designed for this group should be provided in order to prevent frustration. Member States should be aware of the special needs of traumatised children and unaccompanied minors, and offer socio-pedagogical support (e.g. the City of Vienna tries to place unaccompanied children into foster families using existing frameworks).

6.4 The early identification and classification of certificates, skills and qualifications are essential in terms of guaranteeing rapid integration into the employment market. Already at the beginning of an asylum procedure the professional skills and qualifications of the asylum seeker should be mapped out, with the involvement of labour market experts. These aspects are indispensable for targeted language promotion, the initiation of a training course, the recognition of professional qualifications, the provision of necessary secondary qualifications and the effective procurement of suitable employment. However, the identification of skills can be a very difficult process. Many refugees do not even have their personal documents with them let alone their attestations or certificates providing evidence of their level of qualifications. Different methods in order to test skills and competences are being developed by different Member States (e.g. Germany, Austria). Cedefop could provide a platform for mutual learning and an exchange of best practices in this field.

6.5 Asylum procedures often take a very long time, leaving the asylum seeker in a position of uncertainty. Long periods during which the asylum seeker is not able to lead a self-determined life may cause psychosocial instability, loss of self-confidence and dependency syndrome, which may impede employment chances even after recognition as a refugee. Children are even more affected as they need a stable environment. The EESC therefore calls on Member States to decide on asylum procedures as quickly as possible. According to the OECD ⁽⁶⁾ on integration support for asylum seekers, the asylum procedures in Greece, Belgium and Denmark have the shortest duration, and include language training combined with adult education and job related training.

⁽⁶⁾ Making integration work, 28.1.2016, OECD.

6.6 With regard to projected economic growth and the labour market situation, countries may try measures to reduce waiting times for labour market access. While Germany and Hungary have already reduced waiting times for access to work, Finland, Belgium and Luxembourg have made some moves to reduce it. Fair, transparent and reasonable regulations to grant labour market access for asylum seekers prevent undeclared work and raise acceptance with locals. At the same time, people with protected status should have on the prospect of staying in the host country, if they are integrated in the labour market or the host society. Asylum seekers must be made aware that their labour market access is dependent on the country where they claimed asylum. Due to a lack of knowledge, some travel to other Member States hoping to find a job there. In reality they find themselves in a situation of irregularity, which could easily be avoided through proper information.

6.7 Housing is very important with regard to integration: reception centres satisfy the immediate need for a place to rest (and often for a much longer period than planned), but stays of a longer duration make integration more difficult. In Austria, the project 'Kosmopolis' for private housing has been established. In a newly-built area, a certain number of apartments are reserved for refugees, who are already in employment. In order to avoid misunderstandings between refugees and other people living there, an information centre has been established nearby. In Portugal, a protocol between the Lisbon Municipality and Portuguese NGOs has enabled the provision of housing for refugees and access to the municipality's services for training, education and integration into the labour market ⁽⁷⁾.

6.8 After a positive decision on asylum status the refugee has to find housing himself. This period is often very difficult as the support which was initially granted by the state ends and the refugee has to find employment in the same way as nationals of the receiving country.

6.9 The public employment service has a particular role to play in this context. First and foremost, it should actively fulfil its role as a facilitator of sustainable employment. But it also has to decide on additional qualifications the refugee may need to acquire if he/she is to succeed in the labour market. It must be noted and taken into consideration that, even after the 4th year of duration of stay, only 25 % of refugees are employed; even up to the 10th year, it is only around 50 % ⁽⁸⁾. An individual integration contract with each refugee could be concluded, containing the relevant actions which have to be undertaken (additional training, number of applications, etc.) in order to integrate fully into the labour market. The EESC stresses that refugees must be treated equally with locals on the labour market, in order to prevent unfair competition as well as social and wage-dumping. If there is no chance of finding a job for the refugee in reasonable time, volunteering for community service could be offered as a good alternative. It could support the acquisition of additional language skills and help the refugee to integrate into society.

6.10 A good example is that of Germany who has recently decided to introduce an ID card specifically for asylum seekers. After registering for the first time, the card becomes the central and obligatory means of identification, linked to a central database that contains information such as a person's educational background and professional experience.

6.11 Among the refugees, as well as among the local population, there are people with entrepreneurial interests and skills. They should receive information and guidance on how to start a business and become an employer.

6.12 Discussions are currently taking place in Germany and Slovakia on how refugees with high qualifications in professions with skills shortages could be admitted to the labour market via fast track procedures.

6.13 Refugees need information about the labour market in general, the professional training opportunities and the jobs available. As a high percentage of refugees are of a typical student age, between 16 and 25, basic information or preparatory courses in different professional fields need to be provided before training can commence. In Germany the Chambers of Commerce and Industry have started initiatives to assist with placements such as, for example, speed-dating-style interviews. The German CCIs support businesses to provide qualifications and training for refugees via the 'Commitment to training' project. They also try to attract voluntary sponsors to look after refugees and firms, giving advice to both sides. CCIs also provide support to refugees who want to start up their own business.

⁽⁷⁾ Approaches towards the labour market integration of refugees in the EU, 7.1.2016, EurWORK.

⁽⁸⁾ See footnote 6.

6.14 In Austria a project has started which aims to place young refugees in unfilled apprenticeship places with the support of the public employment service and coaches. A traineeship period may precede the signing of a formal apprenticeship agreement. Furthermore, the Austrian Federal Train Service (ÖBB) started the 'Diversity as chance' (*Diversität als Chance*) project and offered 50 unaccompanied refugees between 15 and 17 years old apprenticeships.

6.15 In order to facilitate the integration of highly-qualified migrants, the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber has developed the programme 'Mentoring for migrants', which has been extended to highly-qualified refugees. Mentors are people who are well-integrated in the Austrian labour market and who support the migrant during their job search by providing information or even access to their own professional network. This programme also helps to avoid cultural misunderstandings.

6.16 In a number of Member States, so-called 'Refugee buddies' take care of refugees. They engage voluntarily at a variety of organisations, and meet regularly with one refugee, in order to establish personal relations. This is all the more important as a large number of refugees are unaccompanied minors, who have left their families behind. Buddies could also act as advocates in order to improve the image of refugees in their country.

6.17 Social partner organisations in some Member States (e.g. Spain, France, Germany, Czech Republic, Austria) have called on their governments to work more effectively on the integration of refugees. In Spain, an additional measure was included in the Annual Employment Plan policies specifically aimed at labour integration of refugees.

6.18 Denmark uses the so-called 'staircase model' for the integration of refugees into the labour market: in the first step (four to eight weeks) the competencies of the individual refugee are identified and Danish lessons provided. In the second step (26-52 weeks) the trainee is placed in an enterprise (at no cost to the employer) and given additional Danish lessons. After this, the refugee is ready to take a job with a wage subsidy. Effective implementation of such models should foster the creation of additional employment opportunities and prevent crowding-out of locals (no 'revolving-door' effects).

6.19 In order to guarantee fair competition, working conditions including wages have to be fully respected regardless of the nationality or the status of a worker (*lex loci laboris*). Member States have to ensure efficient measures, mechanism and administrative capacities to enforce it. Trade unions support refugees or migrant workers who are without documentation in claiming their rights ('École des solidarités' — Belgium, 'UNDOK' — Austria).

7. Financing of integration of refugees

7.1 The EESC points out that any measures will have to be properly funded, to have a lasting positive impact on our society. Further efforts in terms of investment to boost economic growth and employment are needed, inter alia, through the Juncker Plan, to achieve lasting success in integrating refugees. Additional investment on integration measures and social investments should be provided to the local population and refugees alike, covering the specific needs of each target group. The EESC has noted the potential positive effects of a financial transaction tax for public finances, by securing a fairer contribution from the financial sector. Due to the exceptional circumstances and in line with the Stability and Growth Pact, the additional costs of hosting refugees should not be, after the thorough examination, recognised in the public deficits of the Member States⁽⁹⁾.

7.2 Member States of initial reception, such as Italy, Malta, Spain and Greece, should receive direct economic aid for each refugee or migrant so they can accurately and speedily process applications for asylum or arrange for return in the event that the requirements for granting asylum are not met. Member States taking on the responsibility of integrating more refugees into their societies than required by the principle of solidarity, should also be able to count on the financial support of the EU.

⁽⁹⁾ EESC declaration on refugees.

7.3 The financial resources of the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) should be increased in order to better engage with the Member States in financing the integration of refugees, in particular for programmes carried out by the local authorities and NGOs. The European Social Fund should also be increased as appropriate to provide extra resources to facilitate the social integration of refugees, the equality of women, support for businesses and the inclusion of refugees in the labour market which requires dialogue and collaboration with social partners. In addition, the Regional Development Fund should work with extra resources for urban areas which implement arrangements required for the reception and integration of refugees.

7.4 International cooperation concerning the funding of refugees' integration should be explored with the special cooperation of the UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration.

Brussels, 27 April 2016.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Georges DASSIS
