

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Elements for the structure, organisation and functioning of a platform for the greater involvement of civil society in the EU-level promotion of policies for the integration of third-country nationals'

(2009/C 27/21)

In a letter dated 24 July 2007, Ms Margot Wallström and Mr Franco Frattini, Vice-Presidents of the European Commission, asked the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to draw up an exploratory opinion on the

Elements for the structure, organisation and functioning of a platform for the greater involvement of civil society in the EU-level promotion of policies for the integration of third-country nationals.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 10 June 2008. The rapporteur was Mr Pariza Castaños.

At its 446th plenary session, held on 9 and 10 July 2008 (meeting of 9 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 136 votes to four, with seven abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1 The European Commission, in the person of the Vice-Presidents Franco Frattini and Margot Wallström, asked the EESC to draw up an exploratory opinion on the '*elements for the structure, organisation and functioning of a platform for the greater involvement of civil society in the EU-level promotion of policies for the integration of third-country nationals*'.

1.2 The EESC has drawn up a number of opinions in recent years⁽¹⁾ emphasising that integration is a crucial aspect of European immigration and asylum policies and has worked very actively with the Commission, Parliament and Council to promote these policies.

1.3 The Committee has promoted the involvement of civil society organisations in drawing up these opinions because these organisations are key stakeholders in integration policies. As long ago as 2002, the EESC and the European Commission invited Member State social partners and civil society organisations to attend a major conference⁽²⁾, which gave an initial boost to a common approach to European integration policies: the conference's conclusions proposed drawing up a Community integration programme and establishing a fund to finance the aims agreed on.

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion of 21.3.2002 on 'Immigration, integration and the role of civil society organisations', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 125, 27.5.2002).

EESC opinion of 10/11.12.2003 on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on immigration, integration and employment', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 80, 30.3.2004).

EESC opinion of 13/14.9.2006 on 'Immigration in the EU and integration policies: cooperation between regional and local governments and civil society organisations', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 318, 23.12.2006).

⁽²⁾ Conference on 'Immigration: The role of civil society in integration', Brussels, 9 and 10 September 2002.

2. The European Framework for the integration of third-country nationals

2.1 In its opinion on 'Immigration, Integration and the Role of Civil Society' of 21 March 2002⁽³⁾, the EESC highlighted the need to develop clear and effective integration policies as part of an EU framework programme. Although the process of establishing a common framework for integrating immigrants has not been entirely free of problems, the European Union (EU) will, when the Lisbon Treaty is ratified, have better political and legal instruments necessary to implement this framework.

2.2 The Hague programme⁽⁴⁾, aimed at strengthening the EU's area of freedom, security and justice, stated that integrating third-country nationals is a key political strategy for consolidating freedom in the EU in the 2005-2009 period⁽⁵⁾.

2.3 The European Council stated the need to improve coordination between national integration policies and EU initiatives; this is being done by means of the Common Basic Principles (CBPs), which form a common framework for the integration of immigrants, adopted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 19 November 2004⁽⁶⁾. This need for coordination was also

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion of 21.3.2002 on 'Immigration, integration and the role of civil society organisations', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 125, 27.5.2002).

⁽⁴⁾ European Council, 'The Hague Programme: strengthening freedom, security and justice in the European Union' (OJ C 53, 3.3.2005, p. 1).

⁽⁵⁾ EESC opinion of 15.12.2005 on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: The Hague Programme: Ten priorities for the next five years — The Partnership for European renewal in the field of Freedom, Security and Justice', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 65, 17.3.2006).

⁽⁶⁾ Council of the European Union, Session No 2618 of the Justice and Home Affairs Council, Brussels, 19 November 2004, 14615/04.

confirmed by the European Commission in its communication entitled *'The Hague Programme: ten priorities for the next five years'* ⁽⁷⁾, which referred to the need to establish a European framework for integration based on the CBPs that guarantees respect for the EU's basic rights and values, and upholds the principle of non-discrimination.

2.4 The CBPs provide a coherent approach for the European concept of the integration of third-country nationals, based on the aim of 'civic integration', which, as the Committee proposed ⁽⁸⁾ consists of *'bringing immigrants' rights and duties, as well as access to goods, services and means of civic participation progressively into line with those of the rest of the population, under conditions of equal opportunities and treatment'*. The CBPs represent a two-way process, because integration involves adaptation and responsibility on the part of both immigrants and host communities.

2.5 In its communication of 1 September 2005 on 'A Common Agenda for Integration: Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union' ⁽⁹⁾, the European Commission put forward practical measures aimed at enforcing and strengthening the implementation of CBPs at both the national and EU level. The Commission also acknowledged the need to ensure that all parties concerned are involved in making integration a success and in adopting a global and coherent approach under the EU framework.

2.6 To this end, it proposed initiatives, in conjunction with the network of National Contact Points, including an Internet site, producing handbooks, the annual reports on migration and integration, and a **European Integration Forum**.

2.7 The conclusions of the June 2007 European Council state that: *'The European Council likewise welcomes the efforts that have been made in order to improve the continued and deepened cooperation at EU level and between Member States in the area of integration and intercultural dialogue. The European Council welcomes, in particular, the Council conclusions of 12 June on the strengthening of integration policies in the EU by promoting unity in diversity. It emphasises the importance of further initiatives to facilitate the exchange of experience on integration policies of the Member States'* ⁽¹⁰⁾.

2.8 The EESC shares the holistic approach put forward recently by the European Council, because integration and

intercultural dialogue must be key components of the EU's immigration policy.

2.9 The complementary and indissoluble link between integration and immigration was acknowledged in the conclusions of the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 12 and 13 June 2007 ⁽¹¹⁾. Adopting the recommendations made at the informal meeting of ministers responsible for integration in Potsdam on 10 and 11 May, which the EESC attended, the Council highlighted the need for a political review of the scope of new measures aimed at strengthening the European framework for integration and the Member States' integration policies.

2.10 Civil society organisations and the social partners have a particularly important role to play in ensuring the coherence and effectiveness of the social processes of integrating immigrants, in defining policies in the EU and in evaluating these policies. In its opinion on *'Immigration in the EU and integration policies: cooperation between regional and local governments and civil society organisations'* of 13 September 2006 ⁽¹²⁾, the EESC considered that active cooperation with civil society and the social partners was a key aspect of promoting European integration policies. In particular, the EESC emphasised the importance of the role played by the social partners, human rights organisations, immigrants' organisations, cultural and sports associations, faith communities, neighbourhood associations, educational communities, schools and universities, the media, etc. in the integration processes at the national, regional and local levels. The EESC also highlighted the need to promote the development, consolidation and recognition of these organisations at European level when overhauling the EU's framework for the integration of immigrants.

2.11 Establishing reception and integration policies and programmes for immigrants should go hand in hand with the widespread participation and direct involvement of social organisations and immigrant associations. This approach was also confirmed in the Third Annual Report on Migration and Integration, published by the European Commission on 11 September 2007 ⁽¹³⁾. The Annual Report reiterates the initiative to establish a **European Integration Forum**, in which stakeholders working in the field of integration in the EU can exchange experiences and make recommendations ⁽¹⁴⁾.

2.12 Promoting integration policies and exchanging experiences will also be greatly assisted by the adoption of a sound and ambitious financial framework. As part of the programme entitled 'Solidarity and management of migration

⁽⁷⁾ Commission Communication, *The Hague Programme: Ten priorities for the next five years The Partnership for European renewal in the field of Freedom, Security and Justice*, COM(2005) 184 final, Brussels, 10.5.2005.

⁽⁸⁾ EESC opinion of 21.3.2002 on 'Immigration, integration and the role of civil society organisations', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 125, 27.5.2002).

⁽⁹⁾ A Common Agenda for Integration: Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union, COM(2005) 389 final, Brussels, 1.9.2005.

⁽¹⁰⁾ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/94932.pdf, point 20.

⁽¹¹⁾ Council of the European Union, Session No 2807 of the Justice and Home Affairs Council, 12 and 13 June 2007, 10267/07.

⁽¹²⁾ EESC opinion of 13/14.9.2006 on 'Immigration in the EU and integration policies: cooperation between regional and local governments and civil society organisations', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 318, 23.12.2006).

⁽¹³⁾ Commission communication: Third Annual Report on Migration and Integration, COM(2007) 512 final, Brussels, 11.9.2007.

⁽¹⁴⁾ See the communication COM(2007) 512 final, point 3.1.

flows 2007-2013', the European Fund for the Integration of Third-country Nationals ⁽¹⁵⁾ will help to develop national policies based on the CBPs and produce a new EU policy on the integration of immigrants.

2.13 The Reform Treaty adopted in Lisbon on 18 October 2007 (the 'Lisbon Treaty') also acknowledged that establishing a common European policy for integrating immigrants is a key policy for the EU. As a consequence of Title V of the Treaty on the Functioning of the Union (TFU), the European Union will for the first time have a legal base (Article 63 a4, the new Article 79.4) on which to develop common legislative measures to encourage and support the work of the Member States to integrate third-country nationals ⁽¹⁶⁾.

3. EESC proposal to establish the European Integration Forum

3.1 The EESC considers that the coherence of the EU's policies needs to be improved, given that a number of instruments are already in place, including the Common Agenda for Integration, the European Integration Fund, the National Contact Points on Integration, the Handbooks on Integration, the Annual Reports on Migration and Integration, the website, etc. The Committee considers that it would be useful to revive the debate on the open method of coordination. The European Commission should propose that the Council make use of the open method of coordination on integration, which the Council rejected a few years ago.

3.2 In order to improve the coherence of this policy and its instruments, a **platform for civil society participation** should be put in place. The EESC therefore welcomes and feels honoured by the European Commission's request for an exploratory opinion.

3.3 Bearing in mind other existing platforms (for other EU policies) and the different national experiences, the Committee proposes that the European platform be known as the **European Integration Forum** (the name adopted by the European Commission ⁽¹⁷⁾).

3.4 The Committee considers that the Forum should be set up gradually. Its first meeting should be held in the autumn of 2008 to draw up its work programme and finalise its structure.

⁽¹⁵⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/funding/integration/funding_integration_en.htm.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Article 63.a.4: 'The European Parliament and the Council, acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure, may establish measures to provide incentives and support for the action of Member States with a view to promoting the integration of third-country nationals residing legally in their territories, excluding any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States'.

⁽¹⁷⁾ COM(2005) 389 final.

3.5 The tasks of the European Integration Forum

3.5.1 In a number of opinions ⁽¹⁸⁾, the EESC has stated the need for a holistic approach to integration, requiring the involvement of all players concerned, especially the social partners and organised civil society.

3.5.2 In its communication on the Common Agenda for Integration ⁽¹⁹⁾ the Commission considers that the Forum's main tasks could be 'consultation, exchange of expertise and drawing up recommendations'.

3.5.3 The Committee agrees and considers that these tasks could be fulfilled by drawing up reports (which could include guidelines) on integration policies.

3.5.4 The Commission, Parliament and the Council could consult the Forum on European integration policies.

3.5.5 The Forum could draw up own-initiative reports for the EU institutions in order to improve the integration of third-country nationals.

3.5.6 Exchanging technical know-how and good practice should be one of the Forum's main tasks, to be carried out in cooperation with the network of National Contact Points.

3.5.7 The Forum could contribute to the Conferences on the Handbook on Integration and to National Contact Point meetings.

3.5.8 The Forum's activities, reports and conclusions will be published on the EESC website and on the Commission's dedicated website for integration, which will enable European citizens and third-country nationals to become involved (a virtual forum).

3.6 Membership of the Forum

3.6.1 The Forum will have a maximum of 100 members and will meet twice a year.

3.6.2 The Commission considers that 'Its added value would be to assemble a range of stakeholders active in the area of integration at EU level; [...] for example, EU umbrella organisations having a membership across a number of Member States ⁽²⁰⁾'. The EESC shares the Commission's view and considers that labour integration with equal treatment is a priority, and it is therefore important that the social partners also have a place in the Forum.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Opinions of the European Economic and Social Committee of 21.3.2002 on 'Immigration, integration and the role of civil society organisations', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 125, 27.5.2002) and of 13 and 14.9.2006 on 'Immigration in the EU and integration policies: cooperation between regional and local governments and civil society organisations', rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 318, 23.12.2006).

⁽¹⁹⁾ COM(2005) 389 final.

⁽²⁰⁾ COM(2005) 389 final.

3.6.3 It is crucial that the Forum's work adopt a European approach, based on national experiences and practice. The EESC therefore proposes that the Forum's members include representatives of organisations working at both the EU and national levels.

3.6.4 One-third of the Forum's members will represent EU organisations which work in the field of immigrant integration, and this could include the social partners.

3.6.5 The remaining participants will come from consultative bodies from the Member States (with each Member State sending between one and four representatives). In this way, the forums, platforms, councils and similar institutions that exist in the Member States — especially those involving immigrant organisations — will also be represented in the European Forum. In those Member States where no such organisations exist, the economic and social councils (or similar institutions) could have a place in the Forum.

3.6.6 The EESC considers that immigrants' organisations, most of which are organised on national lines and do not have European networks, must be encouraged to become involved in the European Integration Forum; the Member State forums, platforms, councils or ESCs should, therefore, nominate delegates from the most representative immigrants' organisations.

3.7 When nominating participants, organisations should take account of the gender balance.

3.7.1 The Forum could invite observers and experts, in particular from the specialist European agencies, as well as academics and researchers and European local authority networks, to attend its meetings.

3.7.2 In order to promote the broadest possible participation, the European Integration Forum should network with civil society organisations (at the local, regional, national and European levels).

3.7.3 The EESC will take part in the Forum's meetings, as set out in point 3.8; representatives of the Commission, the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions could also take part.

3.8 *The EESC's commitment*

3.8.1 The Committee will be highly committed to the Forum's activities and to this end will set up a permanent 15-member study group on integration within the SOC Section. Through this permanent group, the Forum will work together with the EESC on drawing up opinions.

3.8.2 The members of the permanent study group will take part in the Forum's plenary meetings.

3.8.3 Bearing in mind the new legal base that is the Lisbon Treaty, the EESC will draw up new opinions containing proposals and political recommendations to encourage and support Member States' action in the field of integration.

3.9 *Structure of the Forum*

3.9.1 The EESC proposes that the Forum adopt a very simple structure:

- A president, appointed by the EESC in agreement with the Commission.
- Three vice-presidents appointed by the Forum.
- The president and the three vice-presidents will constitute the Forum's Bureau, which will meet at least four times per year.
- A small secretariat (of 2 people) from the EESC.
- The Forum will meet in the EESC building, where it will be based.
- The Forum's plenary will meet twice a year, when convened by the president.
- For drawing up reports, small study groups could be set up.

3.10 *The Forum's Agenda*

3.10.1 The Common Basic Principles will provide the roadmap for the Forum's activities and consequently its agenda.

3.10.2 The work agenda will be drawn up by the Forum's Bureau, taking account of the agendas of the EU institutions and civil society organisations.

3.10.3 The Forum could assess the objectives and programmes of the European Integration Fund, as well as the other instruments provided for under European integration policy.

3.11 *Rules of Procedure*

3.11.1 The EESC proposes that the European Commission approve the Forum's Rules of Procedure, at the proposal of the EESC.

3.11.2 The EESC proposes that the European Commission, at the proposal of the EESC, appoint the Forum's members.

3.12 *Financial framework*

3.12.1 The Forum should be funded by economic resources provided by the EU institutions.

Brussels, 9 July 2008.

The president
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS