

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Migration on the Central Mediterranean route

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	Migration on the Central Mediterranean route — Managing flows, saving lives
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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR)

Introduction and context

1. recognises that this EU communication is an important element of broader EU policy reform. It has the added value of proposing concrete measures to complement the strategic guidelines of the council of 2014 in which European leaders agreed to offer a pathway for future policy development in the area of Justice and Home Affairs, including on immigration and asylum, in the coming years;
2. considers that, in such a sensitive and strategic area, the EU Member States and the European Union institutions should continue to shape a strategy for the region in the context of the latter's relations with the European Union and, as a consequence, a genuine migration policy, and assume political responsibility for its implementation in the interests of the peoples of Europe while taking into account the specific characteristics of the Member States and of the countries of origin, and the rights of migrants according to international and European conventions;
3. recognises that migration and development policies are closely linked. International, national, regional and local cooperation is crucial for making a common European migration policy a reality, and for implementing the European Agenda for Migration;
4. advocates the adoption of a holistic approach to the management of migration, allowing for more decentralised and efficient management of migration movements. This decentralised management will guarantee equal treatment and rights;
5. stresses the utmost importance of reducing the number of deaths at sea in the attempt to cross to Europe and the need to continue and expand efforts to rescue people in distress; expresses its deep sorrow for the hundreds of lives already lost and commends all the countries and organisations involved in trying to prevent this human tragedy ⁽¹⁾; reiterates that the development of additional safe and accessible legal pathways for migration to the EU, such as humanitarian visas, resettlements and increased family reunification, must be part of the efforts to create a comprehensive and humane migration policy;
6. welcomes the additional measures that this Joint Communication has brought to strengthen initiatives along the Central Mediterranean migration route, including in and around Libya. In view of the high number of lives lost at sea and along the Central Mediterranean migration route, the question of managing flows and saving lives remains a top priority;
7. believes that multilevel governance is a prerequisite to achieving optimum results. In this framework, it is crucial that the EU, national and sub-national authorities work in close cooperation with local and regional authorities in the countries of transit and with civil society, migrants' associations and local communities in the host countries and are receptive to their input;

⁽¹⁾ CdR 5728/2014, Opinion on 'The efforts to promote genuine solidarity on a real European migration policy', rapporteur François Decoster (FR/ALDE).

8. underlines that the success of these actions requires close cooperation with the relevant partners in the countries along the Central Mediterranean route and concerted efforts by the EU institutions and Member States, as well as cooperation with international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Warns that some of the proposed actions can only be successfully implemented if the situation on the ground allows for it. These actions should be seen as complementary to the substantial number of initiatives already being implemented by the EU and its Member States, notably under the European agenda on migration and the Migration Partnership programme ⁽²⁾;

9. wishes to express its appreciation of the efforts made by Italy, Malta, Greece, Cyprus, France, Spain and Portugal, which have already connected their Eurosur national coordination centres for border surveillance to the Seahorse Mediterranean Network;

10. acknowledges that the Central Mediterranean route has become the dominant route for migrants and refugees attempting to reach Europe. Over 180 000 people were detected on the Central Mediterranean route in 2016, the vast majority of them reaching the continent via Italy. Almost 90 % of those on the route depart from Libya, where the unstable political and economic situation provides the opportunity for smugglers to expand their activities; stresses the urgent necessity to reduce the numbers of crossings and to stop dinghies and boats from leaving illegally to reach the EU. Underlines the importance of preventive actions at all level of governments;

11. notes that smugglers and traffickers themselves contribute to the instability in Libya by their actions and human rights abuses, increasing the vulnerability of migrants. Finding a lasting solution to Libya's governance and security challenges continues to be a key priority for the European Union, its Member States and international partners, as it is a prerequisite for sustainably managing the current situation;

12. observes that the majority of migrants in Libya are third-country nationals, with the largest proportion originating from sub-Saharan African countries. An effective approach therefore also has to take into account actions to the south of Libya;

13. underlines the added value of the measures announced in the communication: expanding training programmes for the Libyan Coast Guard, ensuring sustainable sources of funding to cover training needs in the future, taking firm action to step up the fight against smugglers and traffickers and providing incentives for the participation of Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt in the Seahorse Mediterranean Network to ensure sub-regional buy-in; underlines that in all these activities, the rebuilding of respect for fundamental human rights and the rule of law to the benefit of migrants and local populations must be a key priority;

The focus on Libya: needed but vulnerable

14. reiterates the need for serious engagement with the Libyan authorities to ensure that conditions in centres for migrants are improved, paying particular attention to vulnerable persons and minors, ensuring close cooperation with, and effective monitoring of the standards by, the International Organisation for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees;

15. welcomes stepping up work and engagement with Libyan municipalities to promote alternative livelihoods and support the resilience of local communities hosting migrants, as well as increasing technical cooperation so that Libyan municipalities can define development strategies for their areas and improve support services for the local population;

16. underlines the need for a medium- and long-term cooperation strategy to provide support and back-up for Libya's local and national authorities, enabling capacity building for managing their areas;

17. encourages promoting border cooperation, dialogue and exchange of information between Libya and its southern neighbours, including using the Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community to full potential;

18. notes that in undertaking joint actions with Libya, the risk that other routes could develop in neighbouring countries needs to be minimised; welcomes therefore a comprehensive regional approach by increasing cooperation with Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, deepening dialogue and operational cooperation on migration with these countries. Further assistance

⁽²⁾ COR-2016-04555-00-00-AC-TRA, Opinion on the Partnership Framework with third countries on Migration, rapporteur Peter Bossman (SL/PES).

to these countries to develop their own functioning asylum systems and support to those in need of international protection is needed;

19. bearing in mind the different projects and programmes of the EU in the region, targeting interrelated matters, it is vital to coordinate these initiatives if they are to be efficient as part of steps to secure the above-mentioned goals;

20. notes that so far, the common EU response to irregular migration has taken the form of state-centred security approaches that mainly focus on combatting smuggling practices through collaboration with state authorities;

21. calls for greater attention to be devoted to the different local political economies involved in irregular migration. Actors involved include transport companies that facilitate the irregular movement of migrants, local populations that provide food and lodging to earn a living, local security forces that increase their income through bribery and road taxes, political elites that use the financial resources earned through the facilitation of irregular migration to buy political favours and influence, armed groups that feed off human smuggling and exploitation to strengthen their position, etc. Understanding these different actors and their relationship to local governance and stability/conflict dynamics, and ensuring they are involved in the discussion of strategies to stabilise and build a future for their country, is a necessary prerequisite for effective migration management;

22. therefore welcomes the suggestion that existing socio-economic support for municipalities along the migratory route could be reinforced, involving them in the implementation of strategies for enabling the local population to have better living conditions and as a consequence, better prospects for the future of their area;

23. stresses that properly designed migration policies could contribute to alternative livelihoods and higher quality institutions in the long term — thereby addressing some of the root causes of migration from within. To ensure such effective policy formation, current migration policies need to be reconciled with the fact that issues of governance and stability are at the root of trans-Saharan irregular migration;

24. reiterates that irregular migratory routes cross many countries in the region where state authorities are weak or absent. Libya is an obvious case in point. Several reports have shown that proceeds from illicit smuggling and trafficking empower irregular armed forces that operate as *de facto* authorities on the ground, enabling them to act as spoilers in the larger conflict resolution processes. Even in those cases where formal state authorities do still exist, collaboration with such actors in the fight against irregular migration is an inherently political enterprise that may end up entrenching the interests of state-aligned smugglers and irregular armed forces. In the midst of fragmented sovereignty, neutral interlocutors do not exist.

25. stresses that climate change and natural disasters can be factors leading to migration and displacement of people. Furthermore, calls for investment in building disaster risk resilience as a preventive action to tackle the root causes of migration;

Improving migration management in Libya

26. encourages continued efforts towards systematic engagement with the Libyan authorities, with a focus on border management, countering irregular migration and addressing the human rights and the needs of migrants in Libya, including developing, in cooperation with civil society, alternatives to detention of migrants which should only be used as a measure of last resort and only under conditions that meet international humanitarian and human rights standards. Training and logistical support on these issues should be an important element of capacity building programmes supported by the EU;

27. suggests exploring with UNHCR the feasibility of taking practical steps to resettle migrants in need of international protection from Libya to EU Member States and other international partner countries;

28. calls for reinforcement of the pilot initiative aiming at community stabilisation in areas affected by internal displacement and transit of migrants, including cooperation in the definition of strategies for their areas, aimed at ensuring human dignity in the country in which they live, inter alia by creating job opportunities for persons in need of protection,

which would have the added benefit of facilitating their acceptance by host communities; and also cooperation in steps to improve public support services and facilities for local populations, amongst other things;

29. advocates enhancing ongoing assisted voluntary returns from Libya to countries of origin, if the situation on the ground allows for it and in coordination with international partners, in particular the IOM;

Local governments: vital part of the solution

30. welcomes the recognition of local and regional authorities as important actors in solving and managing migration issues, saving lives and fighting crime;

31. reiterates that cities are lead actors on the stage of global migration, and are also most directly affected by its negative consequences. Local governments have immediate responsibility for the living conditions, successes and challenges of immigrants. Local governments can succeed where many national governments are challenged and even fail ⁽³⁾;

32. underlines the role of local authorities in countries of origin, transit and destination in migration policy, especially in relation to integration and social cohesion. Local authorities are clearly in the front line in addressing migration challenges, given their mandate, their presence 'on the ground' and their experience in handling the day-to-day realities of increasingly diverse societies. After all, migration is an area of shared competence that is managed at every level — EU, national, regional and local. At the same time it is important to take local and regional situations into account so as to ensure that reception of migrants is as good and sustainable as possible and that migrants therefore integrate successfully;

33. believes that the EU should make the most of the potential and experience of the regions that make up its southern sea border — both in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic — as special links in developing mutually beneficial relations with third countries;

34. underscores the need to strengthen local communities in particular in Libya, in line with the Malta Declaration by the members of the European Council on the external aspects of migration ⁽⁴⁾ and supports therefore projects such as the Nicosia initiative; calls on the European External Action Service and the European Commission, in cooperation with the CoR and association of local or regional governments, to explore the possibilities for similar projects in other countries;

35. recognises the added value of the Nicosia initiative as a capacity building project in support of Libyan municipalities carried out in partnership with European local and regional authorities and with the financial contribution of the European Commission. Points out that this initiative should be bolstered in such a way as to boost the effectiveness of its measures and generate better outcomes, nonetheless bearing in mind the need to be alert to the complex setting as regards the issue of legitimacy in Libya and to remain sensitive to any political implications;

36. recognises that the capacity of local authorities along the Central Mediterranean route are not well developed. The challenge becomes more complex when attempting to respond to differing needs, especially in an economically fragile climate. Local authorities must have the tools to assess the most urgent needs of different migrant groups, particularly unaccompanied children and adolescents, and women;

37. emphasises the need to pay greater attention to child protection. There has been a record number of refugee and migrant deaths in the Central Mediterranean over the past 3 months, including an estimated 190 children. We join the call of UNICEF on the EU and its Member States to commit to protecting refugee and migrant children, especially those who are unaccompanied, from exploitation, violence and child trafficking and strengthening child protection programmes in Libya;

38. clarifies that EU support for local authority capacity development entails not only increasing the technical capabilities of local authorities, but also ensuring the efficient provision of basic needs and services. Empirical evidence suggests that decentralised management of social services and public goods provide optimal 'value-for-money' in development planning and delivery;

39. advocates promoting decentralisation and local governance programmes, in line with national poverty reduction strategies;

⁽³⁾ CdR 9/2012 fin, Opinion on the 'Global approach to migration and mobility', rapporteur Nichi Vendola (IT/PES).

⁽⁴⁾ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/03-malta-declaration/>

40. insists that coherence and interplay between national migration policies and local initiatives in providing services and protection to migrants and promoting their social inclusion, when they are entitled to international protection, is an area that merits further attention. As a minimum, local governments need the authority and resources to respond appropriately to the needs of migrants in the communities under their jurisdiction. Ideally, they should be able to operate in an overall policy environment that favours an inclusive approach when the right conditions are in place;

41. notes that Libya has experienced political and social turmoil over the past 6 years as a direct result of the events of the Arab spring. The overall crisis in which Libya has found itself since 2014 has caused utter chaos and a steep deterioration in living conditions throughout the country. The near absence of the state and the very limited means at the disposal of the municipal councils make institutional weakness a considerable obstacle to stability and development. At the same time, the country has opted for reforms establishing a decentralised governance system approving Law 59 (on local governance) in 2012 which, despite the instability in the country, remains a reference point in all Libyan parties, no matter what their political affiliation;

42. stresses that many young people from Libyan cities have become involved in the 'migration business', as it is a highly lucrative source of income. Young people who have participated in armed conflict and militia activities are particularly difficult to integrate. The traditional social organisations (tribes, families, schools and institutions) have difficulty in dealing with youths. Drugs and criminality are widespread. The absence of specific youth policies has made the situation worse for young people;

43. emphasises the fact that municipalities not only in Libya but in the different countries along the Mediterranean route can play an important role. As institutional and legitimate actors responsible for local issues, they are called upon to make an important contribution to stabilisation. Local economic development, coordination with security actors and efficient policies for youth and migration are the pillars of such a role. But local governments need a great deal of assistance in order to be able to shoulder these responsibilities;

44. advocates programmes to contribute to strengthening, empowering and rendering more effective local governance in Libya and other countries along the Central Mediterranean route by focusing on three dimensions of local governance: management, service delivery and participation. Efforts should also be made to increase local economic prospects, social life and political inclusion of highly educated young people in inland rural areas, cities and towns, in order to attenuate factors leading to radicalisation and migration;

45. stresses that it is possible to create traction at local level for improved governance despite the de facto lack of capacity of local governments at this stage, and advocates for the vital necessity to support local governance as this will inevitably promote stabilisation and create the conditions for future reconstruction, a prerequisite for efficient and sustainable migration management in Libya;

46. underlines the importance of women's participation and youth engagement, something that should remain crucial in the various support activities, especially through the involvement of active civil society organisations (CSOs) and independent politicians;

47. insists on the added value of targeted objectives in reducing the negative effects of the various forms of migration, displacement and unrest by increasing the economic attractiveness of rural areas and activities in support of municipalities in their new mandate, in keeping with decentralisation measures;

48. acknowledges that the tragedy starts in the countries of origin, not in the sea. Thus encourages the EU to contribute to local economic development in the countries along the Central Mediterranean route by supporting municipalities in their role of local development actors and by enabling the participation of young people and women in local affairs and socio-economic activities;

49. offers its further support in designing and implementing the EU's migration policy, also drawing on the knowledge and expertise of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM).

Brussels, 12 July 2017.

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of the European Committee of the Regions*
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