



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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OPINION

Action plan on the integration of third country nationals

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- points out that the political level closest to citizens is where the real integration policy is carried out. This means that a multi-level governance approach is highly appropriate, clearly one with a special focus on local and regional authorities, since they are confronted most directly with the challenges and opportunities of integration;
- emphasises that integration is a two-way process that should form part of the framework of rights and obligations for the third country national and the host society, both of which have to shoulder their responsibilities;
- emphasises that the social and economic costs of the failure to integrate third country nationals may well exceed the investments needed in integration policy and the potential which results from this;
- is convinced that integration policy should focus more on the considerable diversity that exists within the various third country nationals' groups and their different needs;
- stresses that European society is based on fundamental norms and values such as democracy, the rule of law, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, equality between men and women, human rights, solidarity, tolerance, etc.; is convinced that, if integration is to be successful, both third country nationals and the host society must understand and accept these European norms and values. Integration policy should also cover civic integration and community-building;
- points out that knowledge of the language of the host country is vital in order to be able to integrate successfully; calls for systems to be set up, possibly based on internships, as well as advisory services and legal assistance, enabling third country nationals to gain access to the labour market as quickly as possible;
- calls on the Commission to limit excessive administrative complexity and bureaucracy with regard to the monitoring mechanisms of the different European funds that are used for integration projects.

Rapporteur

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Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals

COM(2016) 377 final

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions –
Action plan on the integration of third country nationals**

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General framework and basic principles

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

¹ COM(2016) 377 final.

² TFEU Article 79(4).

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

The challenges and opportunities of integration

10. supports the Commission's analysis that a failure to integrate third country nationals would entail an enormous loss both for the third country nationals and the host society; the social and economic costs of this failure may well exceed the investments needed in integration policy and the potential which results from this;
11. is convinced that a successful integration policy is one of the key conditions for addressing the relatively lower achievements of third country nationals, with regard to the labour market, education, income, housing, health, civic engagement and social cohesion as shown by the OECD indicators⁶;
12. supports the Commission's call for a more made-to-measure approach and is convinced that integration policy should focus more on the considerable diversity that exists within the various third country nationals' groups and their different needs. A good integration policy is therefore based on tailor-made solutions, not a one-size-fits-all approach. Account must be taken, *inter alia*, of language skills, cultural background, level of education, expected duration of stay, reasons for migration, skills, work experience, possible traumas experienced, etc. Local and regional authorities are well placed to respond to the significant diversity that exists among third country nationals and their specific needs, and can provide a platform for the exchange of knowledge and experience in this field. In this connection, the Committee of the Regions refers to good practices based on the perspective of the individual, involving integration and civic integration courses that match third country nationals' needs;

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

⁴ COM(2016) 385 final.

⁵ COM(2016) 378 final.

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

13. welcomes the view of the Commission and the European Parliament⁷ that integration policy in general, and the labour market integration of refugees in particular, should not be conducted at the expense of policies designed to help other vulnerable groups in the host society;

Building cohesive societies

14. stresses that European society is based on fundamental norms and values such as democracy, the rule of law, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, equality between men and women, human rights, solidarity, tolerance, etc.; welcomes the fact that the links between integration and these norms and values were discussed during the rule of law dialogue at the General Affairs European Council meeting on 24 May 2016⁸ and calls on the future EU presidencies (Malta, Estonia) to continue this dialogue with a view to developing a deeper understanding among Member States, the EU institutions, local and regional authorities and civil society on the protection of these norms and values and how they can become an element for integration;
15. is convinced that, if integration is to be successful, both third country nationals and the host society must understand and accept these European norms and values. This ties in with the idea that integration policy should also cover civic integration and community-building, and that therefore appropriate tools for building mutual understanding need to be developed and supported at the different levels with appropriate support from the European level, including civic education both through classical courses and innovative teaching formats;
16. highlights the need to develop mechanisms that strengthen solidarity and cooperation among all EU regions on the one hand, and collaboration between the various administrations and specialist actors on the other. Raising awareness among Member State governments, which have jurisdiction with regard to asylum, is a vital challenge;
17. refers in this respect to good practices of civic integration where third country nationals are offered social orientation courses to familiarise them interactively with European norms and values, and the way of living in the host society. The aim is to support them in acquiring the necessary tools to become fully participating members of society;
18. suggests identifying initiatives in various EU Member States where third country nationals are asked to sign a commitment or participation declaration which includes *inter alia* fundamental norms and values, enquiring how these initiatives influence the society in question, and share the results and experiences with such schemes to allow local and regional authorities to benefit; and emphasises that not only third country nationals, but also the local population should actively commit to these fundamental norms and values;
19. reiterates that integration is a two-way process in which the host country also has a part to play. In this connection, host societies must enable third country nationals to become active participants by removing barriers and ensuring they have access to basic services. They must also organise

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

⁸ Presidency non-paper for the Council (General Affairs) on 24 May 2016 - Rule of law dialogue (13 May 2016).

the integration process in such a way that third country nationals become familiar with the society in which they are living. Particularly in the case of the immigration of families, the host society has an important role to play in the integration process. We refer in this connection primarily to the Member States and local and regional authorities but non-governmental organisations, civil society, the private sector, religious communities and ethnic minority communities within the host society are also key partners in integration policy;

20. points out that all of these different stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure that the host society is prepared for the arrival of third country nationals and to promote acceptance, and stresses in this connection the importance of providing correct information to the host community;

Policy priorities in support of integration

Pre-departure/pre-arrival measures

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

Education

25. welcomes the Commission's focus on education as one of the key elements of a successful integration policy and calls in this connection for continued efforts to monitor the subsidiarity principle;
26. stresses that learning the official languages of the host society should take priority so that third country nationals and their children can begin to interact with the host society as quickly as possible, assume their rights and fulfil their obligations. Here too, it is important to have a tailor-made approach to education, based on the profile of the third country national and their specific needs;

27. refers to the good practices employed in primary and secondary education concerning reception education for third country nationals who are speakers of another language; schools are able to offer a tailor-made approach to third country nationals by placing them in a separate class, providing them with additional support in conventional classes, or using a mixture of the two⁹;
28. highlights the good practices employed to overcome language barriers. These include the use of community translators and interpreters in education who help teachers and mentors ensure that third country nationals not yet competent in the language of the host country can still actively interact with the educational establishments attended by their children;
29. welcomes the Commission's proposal to look further into the possibilities for civic education courses in secondary education, given the need to inform everybody about the law, culture, norms and values and standards of society; and suggests to do this also in adult education and vocational training;
30. calls for more attention to be paid to the target group of 16-18 year-old third country nationals who are often at an age where education is no longer compulsory and in many cases still do not have the tools they need to enter vocational training or higher education or to succeed in the labour market;

Labour Market Integration and access to Vocational Training

31. welcomes the fact that labour market integration is one of the Commission's priorities in relation to third country nationals being able to become established in and be a part of society, given the challenges posed by the generally lower employment rate of third country nationals, particularly women, compared with that of people born in the host country¹⁰;
32. calls for systems to be set up, possibly based on internships, as well as advisory services and legal assistance, enabling third country nationals to gain access to the labour market as quickly as possible. This will open up opportunities for them to practise their language skills through contact with colleagues and so create networks that can lead to a job and means of supporting themselves;
33. welcomes, in the context of training system and labour market integration, measures for third country nationals who are past school age giving them another chance to acquire basic vocational training and improving their readiness for training;

⁹ <http://www.flanderstoday.eu/education/okan-schools-help-youngsters-feel-home-flanders>

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

34. is convinced that targeted economic labour migration can help meet the challenges posed by an ageing workforce, the need for workers with specific skills and the pressure on our welfare systems, but stresses that the reception and associated integration of refugees, and the principle of family reunification, should primarily be seen as being in the interest of both the host society and the migrant, as well as being based on fundamental rights and international obligations, and not be mistakenly depicted as the solution to our labour market problems;
35. recognises the need to be able to assess and validate the skills and qualifications, whether academic or vocational, of third country nationals both quickly and accurately, as enabling third country nationals to participate in the labour market or preparing them for this through vocational training is a priority. The Committee therefore looks forward to, among other things, the Commission's proposals in connection with its new skills agenda for Europe¹¹;
36. stresses, in connection with the revision of the blue card directive¹², that European economies must attract highly-skilled workers to fill genuine vacancies;
37. welcomes the meeting of the Tripartite Social Summit held on 16 March 2016 to discuss the refugee crisis, but calls for input from the world of education too, given that it is an important partner capable of furthering the debate on (labour market) integration;

Access to basic services

38. reiterates that a clear distinction must be drawn between (economic) migrants and refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, especially in the political debate about access to basic services, as each group can have different needs, thus requiring a fundamentally different approach; underlines, however, that the need to enable successful integration concerns all third country nationals residing legally in the EU;
39. emphasises that it is for Member States to shape their own social security schemes and takes note of the political debate in several of them that highlights the principle of insurance and thereby leads to the decision to progressively open up certain social rights, including for third country nationals, on the basis of the contributions paid;
40. calls, with regard to health care, for more attention to be paid to mental health, which can be particularly important in terms of the reception and integration of refugees – especially children and young people – who have lived through war or other trauma;
41. is aware that Member States have the right to require migrants who have no right to protection under international law to be able to support themselves when they arrive in their host societies and thus not to claim social security benefits;

¹¹ COM(2016) 381 final.

¹² COM(2016) 378 final.

42. states that sufficient attention should always be paid to social housing, notwithstanding the fact that tenants – whether they are third country nationals or not – should eventually become self-reliant which enables them to find accommodation on the private market;
43. is pleased to note the Commission's position that no integration policy must be implemented at the expense of policies aimed at other vulnerable groups within the host society;

Active participation and social inclusion

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

Political tools to support integration

Policy coordination

49. welcomes the efforts made by the Commission, which, in the context of transforming the current network of National Contact Points on Integration into a European Integration Network, wants to place more emphasis on sharing best practices, especially in terms of cooperation with civil society and local and regional authorities;

50. calls on the Commission to ensure that the European Integration Network becomes a platform that encourages and supports cooperative and co-responsible action between the different levels of national, regional and local government in defining integration policy initiatives and in the coordination and distribution of powers¹³;

Funding

51. regrets – without denying that it is a matter that falls within their own competence – that in the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework, Member States have allocated fewer resources to integration through their national programmes for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), even as need has increased, particularly in the light of the current migration, asylum and humanitarian crisis;
52. welcomes the fact that in the 2017 draft budget, the Commission aims to use the AMIF to increase the EU's financial support to Member States as regards integration policies;
53. is of the view that synergies must be found between the various European funds that could support integration policy. Of course, this remark applies primarily to the AMIF, but some integration projects should also be possible under the Internal Security Fund (ISF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)¹⁴;
54. urges the European Commission to consider introducing a specific thematic objective on integration under post-2020 cohesion policy, in order to ensure more efficient and targeted concentration of ESIF resources on integration projects. With regard to the 2014-2020 programming period, further guidelines - as clear and detailed as possible - on integration-related activities that are eligible for the ESIF should be given to the management authorities;
55. calls for it to be made as simple as possible for Member States, local and regional authorities and civil society to put forward proposals for national programmes under the various funds and therefore welcomes – among other things – the Commission's proposal to rely more heavily on the use of partnership arrangements;
56. calls for greater and more targeted use of Interreg to support integration projects. This could include adjusting the rules and priorities of the relevant operational programmes. It underlines the central role that European territorial cooperation can play in enhancing integration policies, especially at local level, by facilitating synergies and exchange of best practice;
57. calls on the Commission to limit excessive administrative complexity and bureaucracy with regard to the monitoring mechanisms of the different European funds that are used for integration projects so that Member States and local and regional authorities can effectively focus all their

¹³ Article 79(4) TFEU.

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

energy on integration policy on the ground, but without sacrificing monitoring that is sufficiently strict to ensure that public funds are being used efficiently;

58. calls on the Commission to ensure that the tailored approach required by integration policy should also be extended to the monitoring mechanisms of the different European funds that are used to support integration projects, without undermining the rigorous checks that must be carried out to ensure that public money is being spent properly;

The role of local and regional authorities

59. points out once again that integration policy itself is mainly implemented at local and regional authority level and that it is local and regional authorities that are most immediately confronted with the challenges and opportunities arising from integration;
60. calls on the Commission to therefore take the specific needs of local and regional authorities into account, as well as to involve them more extensively than in the past in the integration policy drawn up, pursued or promoted at European level and to provide them with maximum support in this regard:
61. calls on the Commission to encourage the Member States and the regions and provide them with financial support in implementing integration initiatives, especially in educational and vocational training courses and entry into the labour and housing markets, and to facilitate exchange of best practice already put in place by regions which have implemented integration measures, such as the distributed reception approach;
62. asks the Commission, in this context, to view it as a privileged partner – being an EU advisory body made up of representatives of European local and regional authorities – but also to encourage other forms of cooperation with local and regional authorities, their associations, and other partnerships, networks and platforms, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly, the Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership, joint consultative committees, working groups, the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, etc., with the aim of having local and regional authorities make the broadest possible contribution;
63. calls on the Commission to actively involve it in its efforts – aimed at local and regional authorities – to enhance and share best practices specifically related to integration policy that is implemented prior to departure or arrival, as well as in relation to education, the labour market and vocational training, access to basic services, and active participation and social inclusion, and in this connection refers to the comparative study it conducted on integration policies¹⁵;

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

64. calls on the Commission to continue to make progress on the issue of unaccompanied minors in the migration process, the management of which is a competence of certain regions, and also calls on the Commission to encourage Member States to share the burdens and responsibilities between the European, national and regional levels. We therefore eagerly await the Commission's new comprehensive strategy, which is to be implemented as a follow up to the Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010-2014), so that the situation of missing and unaccompanied children is taken into account;
65. welcomes the Commission's explicit reference to the SHARE Network, with its "Share City Curriculum" project¹⁶, giving local and regional authorities access to a toolkit that will help them with regard to measures aimed at the host society when refugees are being resettled;
66. calls on the Commission to enable it to actively participate in the new European Integration Network, the European Migration Forum, the partnership for the integration of third-country nationals under the Urban Agenda for the EU¹⁷, as well as in the assessment and subsequent follow-up of the "integration indicators".

Brussels, 8 December 2016

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Markku Markkula

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Jiří Buriánek

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

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

II. PROCEDURE

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