

Event Report

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INTEGRATING MIGRANTS: HALFWAY TO BEST PRACTICE

Policy Dialogue - 21 November 2007

Summary

EU Member States need to improve their record on integrating their immigrant populations, as demonstrated by the Migrant Integration Policy Index, speakers agreed at a Policy Dialogue organised in cooperation with the King Baudouin Foundation, the British Council and the Migration Policy Group. Improving rights to participate in politics and gain nationality would be major steps forward, and stronger implementation of EU anti-discrimination laws is crucial.

Full Report

Michael Bird, Director, British Council, Germany, said his organisation, which was one of the bodies responsible for the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), believed that the “big issues of the day” had to be addressed by working together with “neighbours and partners”.

Jan Niessen, Director, Migration Policy Group, said the Index was designed to assess EU governments’ policies on integrating migrants. It studied integration laws and policies in 25 EU Member States (plus three ‘model’ countries outside Europe) to compare their performance and track policy developments in each country.

As a standard-setting and monitoring exercise, the Index assesses integration from a citizens’ viewpoint, tracking the changes in migrants’ status, including their participation in politics and access to nationality. It uses benchmarks to identify countries’ strengths and weaknesses, highlight improvements and demonstrate best practice.

Mr Niessen said the concepts and definitions used in the EU’s own migration and integration policy were vague, and policy statements often cast immigrants as “objects” rather than citizens. He argued that EU integration standards were slipping, and assessed the effects of ‘exceptions’ to EU immigration policy being used to undercut standards in Member States - a trend which is becoming increasingly common.

The Index used a “complementary approach” to compare policy outcomes versus actual performance, and stressed that if migrants were properly integrated, this did not mean they became “just like us”.

Mr Niessen outlined the key findings:

- Europe is halfway to best practice in integrating migrants;
- strong EU anti-discrimination legislation has a positive impact on Member States;



- more anti-discrimination laws are not necessary, but existing ones need to be better implemented;
- the main weaknesses in integration policy are the lack on migrant's right to political participation and access to nationality;
- 'old' EU Member States are better at integrating migrants than those in Central and Eastern Europe.

Political participation and citizenship: what trade-off?

Dirk Jacobs, Associate Professor, Université Libre de Bruxelles, said the results of the Index suggest that more should be done to allow migrants to participate in politics: while ten of the 'old' Member States allow political participation, countries in Eastern Europe do not and, in most countries, (with a few exceptions) they are not allowed to vote in local elections.

In terms of political liberties, most countries, with the exception of a number of new Member States, allow migrants to join political parties, and there is a correlation between those countries which are most likely to grant citizenship and those which grant the broadest electoral rights.

On the issue of migrants' rights to become nationals of their host countries, most had a poor record, requiring at least five years of residence.

Turning to the issue of public perception of migrants, the Index suggests that policy-making can change public opinion. The research found a strong positive relationship between allowing migrants to participate in politics, and support for an increase in the proportion of members of Parliament of different ethnic origin.

Overall, Mr Jacobs concluded that policy-makers should strive for better inclusion of immigrants, and emphasised that firm political leadership can have a positive impact on public perceptions.

Welcoming the "new Portuguese"

Bernardo Manuel Vieira e Sousa, Director, High Commission for Immigration and Intercultural Dialogue, Portugal, said his government's approach to integration was based on "reciprocity" (i.e. granting political rights to nationals from countries which grant rights to Portuguese nationals), using the principle that this stimulates immigrants' involvement in their host community.

However, he acknowledged that the reciprocity principle could cause problems, because it could lead to immigrants from different countries having different rights.

In 2006, Portugal introduced a Citizenship Law, which ensures that migrants who have been educated in Portugal, or whose parents have lived there for six years, are granted citizenship. This extended the right to nationality to two-thirds of the immigrant population.

Mr Vieira e Sousa described this law as a proactive and positive policy for integration, recognising the principle of equal rights for all citizens. He pointed out that it bucks the trend in most other European countries, which are tightening up immigration laws.



The Portuguese government is welcoming these “new Portuguese” with open arms, as they will help to enrich the country, making it stronger and better. Mr Vieira e Sousa said it was “unsustainable” to prevent immigrants who pay taxes from participating in political society, as expecting people to accept laws which they cannot influence creates a democratic deficit.

Estonian Citizenship Policy and Political Participation

Tanel Mätlik, Director of the Non-Estonians’ Integration Foundation, pointed out that Estonia only became a state in 1991 and has a population of just 1.3 million. Of these, 82% are Estonians (only those who had lived in the country since 1945 were eligible), 10% are from other countries and 8% are of ‘indeterminate status’.

Each year, approximately 4,000 people wish to take up citizenship. In order to do so, they have to pass tests on language and on the Constitution and Citizenship Act. Russian-speaking citizens make up the largest non-ethnic group in Estonia, and polls suggest that only one-third of them feel they are well-integrated with the rest of the population.

In order to ensure that all Estonians feel they have an equal stake in the country, minorities must be encouraged to participate in political life, and more measures are needed to strengthen the ties between ethnic and non-ethnic Estonians and establish a common state identity.

Mr Mätlik outlined four main challenges:

- speed up the naturalisation process among people with indeterminate citizenship;
- promote similar political pluralism among ethnic and non-ethnic Estonians;
- strengthen ties between ethnic Estonians and Estonian citizens with an ethnic minority background, so that minorities are included in the democratic process;
- establish a framework to develop a state identity that all inhabitants share.

Jean-Philippe Moinet, Counsellor to the Director of Population and Migration, National Identity and Co-Development of France, said that since 2004, the government has been working to stamp out racism and anti-Semitism. In 2006, this work was given a higher priority to encourage greater social cohesion.

Under President Nicolas Sarkozy’s government, immigration, integration, nationality and co-development have been brought within a single ministry. Work is underway to manage migration flows, reform policies to integrate foreign residents and promote citizenship “à la française”.

Mr Moinet said French identity is based on five core values: liberty, equality, fraternity, laicity (state secularism) and democracy, and this new ministry’s role is to help people to understand these terms. This is designed to help promote integration and encourage citizens to participate in political life.

The ministry’s priority is to manage migration, particularly to encourage economic migrants and welcome those with skills that France needs from a broader range of countries.



Mr Moinet believed that the new French approach was converging with the rest of Europe, balancing diversity and unity. He stressed that national identity was not opposed to European identity - pointing out that during the traditional Armistice Day Ceremony, French allies' flags had been flown alongside the French tricolour.

Discussion

Questioned about whether migrants imposed a burden on a country's social services, Mr Bird stressed the importance of bringing people together to develop policies to address migration, not to blame migrants. Mr Niessen added that migration has been shown to be beneficial to the host country, and, in any case, migration policy is not just a matter of economic interest.

Asked about the conduct of countries such as Italy, which is seeking a derogation from EU immigration rules, Mr Niessen was concerned that individual countries might attempt to overturn EU rules, discarding 50 years of basic rights.

Asked about general trends, Mr Jacobs said Portugal took the most inclusive approach, France had an average record, while Estonia was the most unwelcoming to outsiders because national identity was considered so important. Mr Mätlik said the MIPEX would be useful for Estonia as it highlights that the country needs to do more on anti-discrimination.

Questioned about the dynamic of the migration process, Mr Vieira e Sousa said that, as a country with a long-term history of emigration, Portugal treats its immigrants as it wants its citizens living abroad to be treated.