



EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON
REFUGEES AND EXILES

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INCLUDE REFUGEES AND THEIR FAMILIES IN EU INTEGRATION POLICIES

On the occasion of the 2008 Ministerial Conference on Integration organised by the French Presidency on 3/4 November in Vichy, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) calls for including refugees and their families in mainstream EU integration policies.

The process of trying to integrate as newcomers into European societies is one affecting many types of immigrants, including refugees. In contrast to other immigrants refugees do not choose to leave their countries of origin, but flee because of serious danger and persecution. Therefore refugees are one of the most vulnerable groups joining European society, but also among the most resilient, having successfully escaped oppression. Due to the forced nature of their migration and their experiences, compared with other migrant groups, refugees will often have specific needs that have to be met in order to support their integration. The rapid and effective integration of refugees carries social, cultural and economic benefits for the EU, Member States and local communities, as well as for the individuals concerned.

In the June 2008 Communication *A Common Immigration Policy for Europe*, the Commission stresses that immigrants should be provided with opportunities to participate and develop their full potential. The European Pact on Immigration and Asylum invites Member States to establish ambitious policies to promote harmonious integration of immigrants who are likely to settle permanently. And in its report to the 2008 Ministerial Conference the European Commission calls for removing structural barriers against the empowerment of immigrants.

At the same time, EU asylum policy-making has been focusing on deterring asylum seekers, while paying little attention to the barriers these policies create for the integration of those who eventually become new European citizens. In addition, once recognised as refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary forms of protection, they are excluded from mainstream EU integration policies for other third country nationals such as the European Integration Fund, the Long Term Residence Directive and the forthcoming European Integration Forum.

Integration Fund

ECRE believes that successful integration policies should aim to mainstream -where possible- support for specific groups such as refugees. In practice, many integration projects are targeted both at third country nationals and refugees, for example projects aimed at developing and improving language and introduction programmes. ECRE is therefore disappointed about the decision to exclude refugees and persons with subsidiary forms of protection from the European Integration Fund and urges the Ministers to advocate for reversing this decision at the earliest opportunity.

Long Term Residence Directive

The Long Term Residence Directive is an important legal instrument that grants a more stable status to third-country nationals who have legally resided on the territory of a Member State for five years. ECRE believes that extending the scope of the Directive to refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary forms of protection is a crucial and necessary development that would demonstrate that EU Member States are serious about promoting the integration of refugees in their societies. However, despite ongoing negotiations consensus on amending the Directive has still to be reached by Member States. ECRE urges the Ministers to include refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary forms of protection in the Long Term Residence Directive.

European Integration Forum

ECRE understands that the Commission intends to propose excluding organisations representing refugees as members of the forthcoming European Integration Forum. ECRE represents 68 refugee-assisting NGOs in 30 European countries of which many are directly involved in delivering integration services to refugees (and also other migrants). It would be a waste of extensive knowledge and experience not to include organisations such as ECRE in the official dialogue with Civil Society in the field of Integration of Third Country Nationals. ECRE urges the Ministers to call for the inclusion of organisation representing refugees as members of the European Integration Forum.

Access to employment

In most EU countries, government policies focus on trying to get refugees and migrants into any kind of employment as soon as possible, aiming to make people self-sufficient and independent of state support. In practice this often leads to a situation where skilled migrants and refugees end up working in low skilled, temporary and badly paid jobs. The need to make a living and lack of financial support prevent them from participating in vocational training and (higher) education, which would help them to eventually find employment commensurate with their skills and qualifications. ECRE calls upon the Ministers to introduce mechanisms in their integration policies that facilitate refugees' and migrants' access to vocational training and (higher) education, for example by granting them permission to study (for a reasonable period of time) without losing social benefits, scholarship programmes or facilitating the possibility to work and study part-time.

Participation and citizenship

There are considerable differences between European states in their naturalisation and citizenship criteria and procedures reflecting distinct historical experiences and different concepts of nationhood. Member States should facilitate the naturalization of migrants and refugees by removing legal obstacles, allowing people to continue to hold their original nationalities where possible, enabling migrant and refugee children to obtain at birth the nationality of the country in which they were born, and introducing accessible, transparent and affordable naturalisation procedures.

In addition, participation in the political decision-making process promotes integration. In countries that give refugees the right to vote and stand for election, refugee issues are placed higher on the political agenda with politicians becoming more responsive and aware of the concerns of this group. The right to vote and stand for election at the local and European levels should be granted to refugees after a maximum of three years residence, as already practised in a number of EU Member States.

Measures targeting the host society

European governments are increasingly placing the onus on newcomers to demonstrate their willingness to integrate, and attaching sanctions to non-compliance with certain integration measures. ECRE recalls the important and widely recognised principle that integration is a dynamic two-way process, which begins from the day a refugee arrives within the new host society. While a refugee clearly has responsibilities to adapt to a host country's rules and values, the host society must also take steps to be welcoming and to offer support and opportunities that promote their integration.

Family reunification

ECRE is concerned about the call in the European Immigration Pact to regulate family migration "more effectively", asking each Member State to assess its integration capacities for family members, in particular regarding support and accommodation needs and language knowledge. The Pact does not mention the Directive 2003/86 on family reunification for third country nationals, which sets out EU-wide hard law on conditions for family reunification and applies to all Member States (except Denmark, Ireland and the UK).

It is difficult for refugees to rebuild their lives without the support of their families. For children (especially separated children) but also for refugees in general who have found safety and protection in Europe, one of the most pressing issues is concern for their family members left behind. ECRE is concerned that in a recent report on the application of the Directive, the Commission concludes that not all member states apply the more favourable provisions for the family reunification of refugees. In addition, the report mentions that due to some "may" provisions of the Directive, Member States introduce or maintain certain requirements (fees, waiting periods, stable and regular resources as an economic condition and integration criteria such as language and other tests) in a too broad or excessive way, having the effect of restricting the given right to family reunification.

ECRE urges the Ministers to take into account the following important recommendations when discussing the topic of family migration:

1. The scope of the Family Reunification Directive should be extended to beneficiaries of subsidiary forms of protection
2. The concept of family unit should be extended to adult children, elderly parents and or other relatives that may depend on the refugee
3. No restrictions should be imposed relating to the length of residence, employment status, access to housing or earning capacity on the right to family reunification of refugees.

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