

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN EU IMMIGRATION AND INTEGRATION POLICY: A TWO-WAY PROCESS?

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Summary

Civil society plays a significant role in European integration and immigration, so more should be done to strengthen their ability to advocate on behalf of migrants, particularly as they can foresee trends which institutions are unaware of, speakers told an EPC Policy Dialogue held in cooperation with the Network of European Foundations and the King Baudouin Foundation. The European Commission is working to increase civil society participation through the Integration Forum and the Integration Portal.

Full Report

Françoise Pissart, Director, King Baudouin Foundation and Chair of the European Programme on Integration and Migration (EPIM), welcomed the fact that both integration and immigration are now included in the EU's common immigration policy.

More must be done to strengthen civil society organisations' (CSOs) work at the national and EU level, she said, as their proximity to immigrants and to the host society enables them to strengthen integration on a daily basis.

To boost this role, 11 of Europe's major foundations have formed EPIM, an umbrella organisation pooling funds worth €3 million over a three-year programme to support 15 national and European projects. EPIM's three priorities are:

- defending the rights of undocumented migrants in the EU;
- making sure the voices of the migrants are heard in the debate;
- ensuring the media presents immigrants in a balanced way.

The project is also looking at how CSOs working in this field can make their voices heard in Brussels to influence EU policy and to break down the barriers migrants' face.

Elizabeth Collett, EPC Policy Analyst, said EU institutions often seem detached from reality, and the citizens themselves are absent, while there are many civil society organisations in Brussels pushing forward policy changes.

CSOs have a number of different functions, she said. They can act as advocates and lobbyists, they can provide a link to local and national actors, they can facilitate debate and inform policy-making, and they can implement policies and projects.

What role should they play in Brussels? Ms Collett said Brussels-based CSOs have several options for influencing policy-making within the different EU institutions: when lobbying the Council, they have to consider whether it is better to do this at the EU or national level, whereas when approaching the European Commission, the reception they receive depends on the topic and the department – for example, the Directorate-General (DG) for Employment relies more on civil society participation than does DG Justice, Freedom and Security.



It is now easier to approach the European Parliament, as it is becoming more involved in immigration and integration, and both the European Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions offer increasing possibilities of influencing policy, often at the national level.

Nevertheless, CSOs face many barriers – they have limited financial and human resources, they have a plethora of issues to cover and a variety of access points, and as many rely on Commission funding, their independence could be undermined.

Two questions remain: can Brussels-based organisations represent people across Europe and have CSOs become disconnected from their core clientele, given the lack of migrant voices in the debate?

Guilia Henry, Immigration and Asylum Unit, Directorate-General Justice, Freedom and Security, European Commission, said her DG was working on a range of immigration and integration measures. A new unit is being created, the European Integration Forum and an Internet Portal are being established, and there is a European Integration Fund.

Since 2005, the EU has had a common agenda on integration, with relevant stakeholders invited to participate, and the recent edition of the EU Handbook on Integration draws on CSO experience.

The European Integration Portal to be launched during the Czech EU Presidency in early 2009 will be a “one-stop shop” for integration to share information and exchange best practices. It should be a useful tool for CSOs, as it will provide information on funding and suggest matching partners for projects.

The European Integration Forum will also be set up during the Czech Presidency to bring together a range of stakeholders to advise on promoting integration policies.

The third important measure is the European Integration Fund, designed as a concrete tool to promote transnational and national projects, to which CSOs will have access. The fund has €825 million for the period 2007-2013, with €768 million distributed among Member States on the basis of the number of third country nationals living there and €57 million for community actions. As 93% of the funds are given directly to EU Member States, CSOs will need to ensure they are involved in national strategies for funding.

In June this year, the Commission adopted a Communication on “A Common immigration policy for Europe: principles, actions and tools”, which lays out the policies and tools to be used, including consulting with stakeholders, including civil society.

Doris Peschke, General Secretary, Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), said much had happened in the area of integration and immigration since 1990.

Before 2004, the CSO platform on integration and asylum was constantly consulted on the 1999 Tampere Programme. However, after 2004, CSOs were no longer invited to participate. Ms Peschke said it was therefore surprising to learn now that the Commission intended to establish good cooperation with CSOs to improve migrant integration.

She was also concerned about plans to introduce new measures to improve CSO participation, when the Commission had failed to act on earlier good initiatives, such as those contained in the 2002 White Paper on Governance.

It is important to consult civil society, said Ms Peschke, and, for example, the Commission had acted on CSO advice to shorten the times for asylum claims and to include family reunification and humanitarian clauses in the Dublin Regulations, although sadly these are not fully applied. CSO



warnings had also turned out to be true – for example, when they warned that the increasing number of asylum seekers would put a strain on Europe’s border countries: Greece, Cyprus and Malta.

Last year, DG Justice Freedom and Security opened regular consultations on the Common European Asylum policy, and CSOs have also been brought into the discussion on trafficking, which requires good cooperation between the authorities and CSOs to develop proper policies and expertise.

At the same time, consultation must not be too selective as it needs to be open to emerging actors in the field. There are instances, such as the dialogue on migration and development, where consultation with civil society organisations needs to be broadened to bring in new actors.

The Integration Forum is very important, said Ms Peschke, but presents challenges in bringing together actors from different levels and ensuring that the right people are involved.

Many CCME members are concerned that EU integration programme funding for practical programmes such as language courses and integration services at the national level has been reduced. These have been replaced with new funding instruments which have created uncertainty.

Karolina Dybrowska, European Economic and Social Committee, gave more details about its proposals for the European Integration Forum. It proposed that the Forum should have 90 members, one-third of whom should represent EU umbrella organisations, including the social partners, with the remaining two-thirds drawn from consultative bodies from EU Member States, again including CSOs.

The Forum, which will meet twice-yearly and have a permanent study group, aims to stimulate CSOs in the field to feed into the discussion at national and EU level to inform EU policy.

Discussion

Responding to a remark about the EU empowering migrant organisations, Ms Peschke said changes in EU funding meant some governments have delegated funding to the local level: for example, in the Netherlands, cities have had to take over funding for migrants. However, there are still people who fail to receive support, so CSOs have to step in to help them, when it should be the job of the local authorities.

Ms Henry believed that CSOs could lobby governments to fund projects. The Handbook stressed the importance of building migrants’ capacity and, while this was EU Member State responsibility, in some countries (such as Italy) governments have passed this to CSOs.

Ms Peschke added that while one must integrate migrants and refugees, the needs of other marginalised groups must not be ignored, so programmes should be directed at all marginalised sections of the population.

Asked about Commission consultations with CSOs, Ms Henry agreed it was difficult to find a compromise on whom to consult and whether one should restrict the numbers, as there was a trade off between representativeness and effective dialogue.

Responding to a question about what integration models to follow, Ms Henry said the Commission did not promote one model over another, but concentrated on promoting good practice. However, it was important to see integration as a two-way process: while migrants had to assimilate, the host society had to adjust to their presence as well. Ms Peschke added that the European Convention on Human Rights should be applicable to every resident in Europe.



Asked about the role of foundations, Ms Peschke praised them as being far more flexible than the Commission in their funding programmes, as they can react to new phenomena. Some foundations also have a lobbying role, for example the Open Society Institute brought the plight of the Roma to public attention. Ms Collett said the foundations' funding and philosophy differs across EU Member States, but it was impressive that they had come together as EPIM to work on common objectives.

Replying to a remark about the rise of populist anti-immigration alliances across Europe, Ms Peschke said one needed to work on the myths surrounding migration, and be "more courageous" about rebutting them and changing perceptions.