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Integration of refugees in times of critical pressure: learning from recent experience and examples of best practice

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

Rapporteur: Mr Pierre-Yves LE BORGNI, France, Socialist Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media welcomes the report by Ms Susanna Huovinen (Finland, SOC) on behalf of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, which presents a catalogue of best practices in integrating refugees in European societies, and its proposed draft resolution. Europe is indeed facing a refugee crisis of unprecedented dimensions. Many of the people who have applied for asylum in Europe in the past two years have received or will receive refugee status. According to data of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for 2016, the average length of time a refugee spends in exile is about 20 years. This gives rise to a pressing question: how can European countries successfully integrate these refugees into their societies?

2. The rapporteur shows that, regardless of the public anxiety and hostility from certain political quarters, many countries have made impressive efforts to respond to the challenge. The various examples of best practices prove how States can cope with even very large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers if there is clear political will, good communication of policy and effective mobilisation and co-ordination of administrative and social resources.

3. The rapporteur rightly points out in the explanatory memorandum that essential responsibility-sharing mechanisms such as relocation and resettlement have proved unsatisfactory, and that European solidarity has been placed under extreme strain. The committee considers that the draft resolution should include a stronger political statement to urge all 47 member States of the Council of Europe to demonstrate solidarity with those countries that receive the most of asylum seekers and migrants. Both strong messages and clear policy lines are needed to find positive and sustainable solutions for a successful integration of refugees all across Europe, notably in a world faced with growing tendencies of racism, xenophobia and extremism.

4. Access to the labour market, including through the recognition of diplomas and training, and quality education for refugee children and adolescents on the one hand and inclusion in social, cultural and sporting activities on the other, constitute the best means for bringing refugees and the host communities together. The committee endorses the proposed recommendations, but wishes to make some proposals to strengthen the draft resolution.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 13903](#), Reference 4169 of 25 January 2016. Reporting committee: Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced persons. See [Doc. 14329](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 27 June 2017.



B. Proposed amendments

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

At the end of paragraph 2, add the following sentence:

“The Assembly believes that solidarity and the sharing of responsibilities should be a common concern beyond the boundaries of the European Union, and to this end calls on all member States to demonstrate political courage in finding sustainable solutions for the integration of refugees in their societies.”

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 6.6.1, insert the following paragraph:

“designating a central contact point for refugees, which has the necessary geographical coverage, and through which all of the key integration-related information and services could be co-ordinated and channelled;”

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

At the end of paragraph 6.7.1, replace the words “the needs of the migrants concerned and their family circumstances” by the words:

“the social and community needs of the refugees concerned, the possibility to practise their culture and religion, and their family circumstances”

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 6.7.2, insert the following paragraph:

“creating as far as possible conditions for the validation of academic and professional qualifications along the best practice from European countries; introducing special methods of evaluating and recognising academic and professional qualifications of those refugees who cannot provide documentary evidence of their qualifications, building, for example on the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, piloted by the Council of Europe and the Greek authorities;”

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

At the end of paragraph 6.7.3, add the following words:

“providing for the possibility for refugee children to continue education even in cases where relocated families decide to resettle to a place other than that originally foreseen”

Amendment F (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 6.7.3, insert the following paragraph

“strengthening the capacity of schools and teachers to receive and fully include children with a refugee background in the teaching and social life and environment at the school, including the possibility to develop modules about human rights, non-discrimination and asylum-related issues in teacher training programmes;”

Amendment G (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 6.7.3, insert the following paragraph:

“providing young unaccompanied migrants with support for their integration through social participation and access to education, while ensuring support in their transition to adulthood in view of the legal vacuum that exists on reaching the age of 18;”

Amendment H (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 6.7.6, insert the following paragraph:

“exploring ways of offering cultural integration support to refugees beyond the initial adaptation phase and until they acquire citizenship;”

Amendment I (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 6.7.6, insert the following paragraph:

“involving diaspora associations in the framing and implementation of policies concerning different aspects of the integration process, including educational, cultural and social integration; encouraging the development of joint initiatives, including social media and information platforms, and providing adequate financial aid to these support programmes;”

Amendment J (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 6.7.7, after the words “such as”, insert the following words:

“the European Parliamentary network on diaspora policies, the Council of Europe Sport migrant integration platform and”

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Pierre-Yves Le Borgn’, rapporteur for opinion**1. Introduction**

1. The refugee crisis in Europe has brought the topic of refugee and migrant integration to the fore, and placed it high on the political agenda. Some of the European States, notably the Nordic countries, have identified the area of integration as one of the most important political priorities in the years to come, and have adopted measures to strengthen not only the economic integration of refugees, but also the social and cultural aspects, and recognised in policy documents and action plans the importance of investing in early support in order to enhance the refugees’ prospects of integration.

2. These countries² should be commended for having developed exemplary holistic integration models that encompass legislation, funding and institutional structures where immigrants and refugees have access to mainstream services, social support and education after recognition and can access help like any other citizen. In addition, refugees receive targeted post-recognition integration support during a transition period, which helps them access mainstream services and rights in practice, as this is often difficult upon arrival without knowing the local language or having the requisite knowledge about the host society. These are examples to learn from.

3. On the other hand, many other countries struggle with receiving asylum seekers and migrants. The European Union’s response to the refugee crisis has been chaotic and divisive, characterised by squabbling over sharing responsibility, cascading border closures and finger-pointing. Several EU countries are focused on preventing arrivals and deflecting responsibility to neighbouring countries.³ Others are delaying the relocation or have agreed to accept only very small numbers of asylum seekers on the grounds that they would be unable to absorb and integrate even very small numbers. It appears evident to me, in the situation where the UNHCR estimates that 84% of all asylum seekers have a grounded claim to qualify as refugees because of wars or other circumstances, there should not only be solidarity between the EU member States but also beyond, extending to all European countries.

2. Notably Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

3. According to the European Commission press release, “MEPs to urge EU countries to speed up transfer of refugees from Italy and Greece”, Brussels, 15 May 2017, as of 11 May 2017, only 18 418 relocations (11%) of the 160 000 had been carried out in total, 5 711 from Italy and 12 707 from Greece. Finland and Malta are the only States on track to reach their targets. Poland and Hungary have taken none. The pace of resettlements from Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon etc. has continued more on track, with 16 163 people of the agreed 22 504 resettlements under the EU resettlement schemes having been carried out.

4. The recent terrorist acts have interjected fear of terrorism into the mix. Those who seek to keep refugees out with appeals to prejudice and panic are exploiting that anxiety. Negative portrayals of migrants and asylum seekers in the media and by public figures do a tremendous disservice to the vast majority of those arriving, and to the principle of inclusive societies. It is not only far-right, anti-immigrant parties that have distorted reality to prey on people's fears. Any xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric from people in positions of power risk nurturing a climate of intolerance in a region where minorities, including Muslim communities, and asylum seekers already face significant levels of discrimination and hate crime. If not countered forcefully through responsible rhetoric, anti-discrimination measures and accountability for hate crimes, this climate will fundamentally undermine the integration of newcomers into European societies.⁴

5. Refugees do not travel aimlessly, nor are they satisfied with merely arriving at the safe borders of the European Union. Refugee networks share information on countries of transit and arrival and their rules regarding asylum and welfare, and information travels fast through online news, social media, and mobile communications. And their journeys do not end at a country's borders. Large cities across Europe function as hubs for initial reception and transit, and often as the end destination of the refugees' journeys. Ultimately, it is those communities, rather than national governments, that have to deal with accommodating and integrating new arrivals. The responsibilities facing these cities and municipalities are enormous, especially during the period of great social unease given the recent terrorist attacks, rising tension around cultural and religious differences, and growing volatility in local, State, and national politics. In many respects, this complex and contentious environment requires greater focus on how cities design and deliver successful integration strategies⁵.

6. On 23 May 2017, the committee had the opportunity to exchange views with Mr Andreas Wolter, Vice-Mayor of the City of Cologne. This German city of slightly over a million inhabitants, 40% of whom are of immigrant origin, has received over 14 000 refugees in the last two years, and is successfully putting into practice integration policies in terms of housing, education and training, workforce development, health care, language courses, public safety and extracurricular activities like sports, arts and cultural events.

2. Priorities for successful integration

7. A successful integration process needs to start right at the beginning. Many integration studies identify a close interdependence between different integration policy areas and that of employment as being a key factor for successful integration. At the same time, factors such as language skills, education and training, health and accommodation impact refugees' possibilities to access employment and achieve economic independence.

8. It is essential to keep in mind that refugees cannot be treated as a homogenous group, even when they come from the same country. They face common structural obstacles when they arrive in a country, but individual backgrounds, gender, age, personality, psychosocial and educational resources, professional skills, history or plight, trauma and a variety of other factors impact their resilience and preparedness to face the challenge of meeting a new culture, learning a new language and starting a new life in a new country. Integration programmes should therefore take into consideration the individuality of each person and, where possible, develop individually tailored integration plans.

9. However, as seen in some recent EU relocation and resettlement cases, even where States have made considerable efforts to match the employment, language learning, educational, housing and social needs of refugee families, this has not laid the conditions for their successful integration. The rate of success of integration largely depends on the presence of the social network of the diaspora from the same community. For example, refugees in Germany generally wish to integrate into German society, for they see that their long-term projects could materialise there. In other countries, especially those that have been traditionally transit countries, such as the Baltic States, for instance, the story is quite different. In Estonia, 31 of the 142 refugees relocated from Greece in 2016⁶ have already left the country (mostly to Germany to "visit relatives"), for even with the most favourable conditions put in place, they felt excluded and left for somewhere they have social networks and family connections.

4. Sunderland J., For Europe, Integrating Refugees Is the Next Big Challenge, *World Politics Review*, 13 January 2016.

5. Katz B et al, Cities and refugees : the German Experience, 18 Sept 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/cities-and-refugees-the-german-experience/>.

6. Baker A., When Home Isn't Where the Heart Is, <http://time.com/4793913/finding-home-estonia-where-the-heart-is/?iid=sr-link3>.

10. In this context, I am particularly concerned about the cases of refugee children who, having been relocated into host countries which their families then leave again, fall into an irregular situation and lose access to education. Such cases are not so massive that they could not be dealt with by the countries concerned. What really needs to be avoided is creating new situations where these children again have to disrupt their education and thereby risk falling victim of forced marriages or slavery.

3. Access to education

11. Access to education is a basic human right, enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. In times of displacement, education is crucial. It can foster social cohesion, provide access to vital information, address psychosocial needs, and offer a stable and safe environment for those who need it most. It also helps refugees and asylum seekers rebuild their communities and pursue productive, meaningful lives. Without the chance to study, an entire generation could be at risk.

12. In October 2016, the UNHCR released a report “Missing Out: Refugee Education in Crisis” showing that more than half – 3.7 million – of the 6 million school-age children under its mandate had no school to go. Some 1.75 million refugee children were not in primary school and 1.95 million refugee adolescents were not in secondary school. Only 50% of refugee children have access to primary education, compared with a global average of more than 90%. And as these children become older, the gap becomes a chasm: only 22% of refugee adolescents attend secondary school compared to a global average of 84%. At the higher education level, just one per cent of refugees attend university, compared to a global average of 34%. The figures may be slightly better in the European context; however, considering that the average length of time a refugee spends in exile is about 20 years, which is more than an entire childhood, and represents a significant portion of a person’s productive working years, education of refugees has to be taken very seriously.

13. The report by Mr Gvozden Srećko Flego on “Access to school and education for all children”⁷ clearly points out that whereas children benefit from most of the humanitarian assistance offered, sectors specifically targeting children, such as child protection and education, are strongly underfunded at global level. Over the last decade, education was the least funded humanitarian sector, with almost two thirds of needs unfunded and an allocation of only 3% of overall humanitarian assistance.

14. Despite efforts by governments and donors to provide education for refugee children, the problem is largely in the numbers, which have dramatically increased in recent years – on average by 600 000 children and adolescents annually since 2011. At this pace of growth, UNHCR calculates that an average of at least 12 000 additional classrooms and 20 000 additional teachers would be needed on an annual basis.

15. In Cologne alone, 5 300 children have arrived since 2015, for whom the local authorities have set up 180 new school classes and 2 new special schools, and this is not enough. About a hundred children are still on the waiting list.

16. While education can also be provided in reception centres, best practice mandates integrating children into the mainstream national school system, with the help of preparatory classes to help them learn the language and adjust to the whole new system. According to Mr Wolter, the Cologne experience shows that most refugee children master the German language in nine months and can be integrated into mainstream schools. Many Syrian refugee children have a good educational background, despite the war, and they have no problem catching up with German children. A greater challenge is linked to the authoritarian behaviour patterns of teenage boys, notably vis-à-vis their female tutors. It is therefore important to include in their curriculum discussions on values and rules.

17. On the other hand, the presence of significant numbers of children from different educational and cultural backgrounds poses obvious challenges for teachers and the entire school community. So it is important to invest in adequate training and support for all professionals, but also to introduce more classes that teach human rights, tolerance, social justice, anti-discrimination and refugee-related issues. I would like to add that, as a matter of fact, such an investment is likely to be beneficial not only to refugee children, but to the whole school community.

7. [Doc. 13934](#).

18. Education and notably learning the local language is also an essential step towards integration for adults. Ideally, asylum seekers have access to language classes, often run by volunteer organisations in many countries, from the beginning of the process. Member States should also consider the possibility of introducing combined language and job training programmes and activities.

19. In her explanatory memorandum (paragraph 43), Ms Huovinen rightly points out that “Ensuring refugees’ and asylum seekers’ access to labour markets requires assessment of their existing skills and qualifications. Most refugees will have fled without documentary proof of their educational or vocational qualifications or professional experience, and so the authorities should be flexible and accommodating in accepting alternative forms of proof”. In this respect, I wish to commend the Council of Europe pilot project “European Qualifications Passport for Refugees”, initially proposed by the Norwegian agency NOKUT and the British agency UK NARIC and now being tested by the Council of Europe together with the Hellenic Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, in co-operation with UNHCR and ENIC-NARIC recognition offices from Greece, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom. The goal of this project is to establish a multinational framework to organise and establish a fast-track scheme to evaluate refugees’ educational and training background while still ensuring their mobility around Europe. In the long term, this methodology can save costs for host countries by facilitating and accelerating the process of recognition of undocumented or non-verifiable foreign qualifications across borders in Europe – and possibly beyond. The first documents were issued in Athens in March 2017.

4. Diaspora communities as a vector for integration

20. In June 2016, the Assembly adopted [Resolution 2124 \(2016\)](#) on educational and cultural networks of migrants and diaspora communities in which it endorsed the role of educational and cultural networks in building cohesive societies by strengthening pluralism and democracy. It also asked member States to set up national platforms which would allow the different ministries and specialised institutions to work transversally with diaspora associations, to encourage the establishment of similar platforms at local level and to provide adequate financial support programmes to help them to professionalise their activities, develop and consolidate their networks and conduct joint initiatives.

21. I think that the role of diaspora communities could be much more explored in the current situation. Voluntary organisations, due to their informal structure, are easier to reach by the newly arrived than embassies and consulates and frequently serve as the first point of contact for them. They can help with maintaining links with the country of origin, but also help with daily administrative matters, schooling of children, native language services like doctors, etc.

22. At the same time, States should not count on spontaneous help from the diaspora. They should actively engage with diaspora associations in order to involve them at the various stages of policy making and implementation of integration policies involving refugees. They should also encourage and financially support joint initiatives for creating platforms for social media, media and information dissemination (local newsletters, “welcome radio stations” in different migrant community languages).

5. Sport for integration

23. Sport has the unique power to bring people together, regardless of background, gender, culture or belief. The Olympic Games 2016 in Rio reminded us all of this unifying power of sport. The best example of this was the participation of the first-ever Refugee Olympic team. The refugee athletes participated alongside all 11 000 athletes of the world from all 206 National Olympic committees. They competed not as refugees but as Olympic athletes, like any other Olympic Team.

24. The creation of the Refugee Olympic team sent a strong message of hope and inclusion to the millions of refugees in the world. Their participation was proof that refugees – like any other human beings – are an enrichment to society, just as they are an enrichment to the Olympic family.

25. As pointed out in Mr Rigoni’s report on “Migration as an opportunity for European development”, the sports sector can be very helpful in the promotion of better social and work participation of migrants and refugees. He presents the example of Germany, where the football club Bayern Munich created a “training camp” which offered food, German language classes and football equipment for young refugees. Moreover, in February 2016, this club “raised 1 million euros at a friendly match to support integration projects in Germany”.⁸

26. The Council of Europe Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport has recently set up a “Sport migrant integration platform” for indexing and sharing knowledge on good practices which are taking place at pan-European level, on current activities and future projects focusing on newly arrived migrants and their integration via sport. The aim of this project would be to bring together various stakeholders, and by doing so give them a platform to share their experiences in this field.

27. In conclusion, the importance of successful integration procedures cannot be stressed enough. To act decisively now could help prevent even bigger problems in the future. However, there are still many obstacles refugees will have to overcome, and their integration into European societies will remain a challenge – perhaps one of the most profound Europe has ever had to face.

8. <https://www.devex.com/news/the-role-of-the-private-sector-in-alleviating-the-refugee-crisis-87901/>, private sector engagement.