

## Building Europe with new citizens: Policy Recommendations:

*Summarized by Doris Peschke, CCME, for the Conference in the European Parliament, Brussels, 16 May 2007 on behalf of the POLITIS team*

The POLITIS research project provides an insight to the activity and active participation of immigrants in society, but also looked at factors promoting or inhibiting involvement. The insights naturally differ from country to country, as also civil activity across the 25 - now 27 - EU member states differ. We have tried to link these insights to current policy debates, e.g on the integration of migrants in the EU as discussed by the regular meetings of EU Ministers responsible for integration or by the integration focal points network of non-governmental organisations coordinated by ECRE - the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, and Caritas Europa as well as in various meetings of parties and committees in the European Parliament.

One very concrete conclusion from the project is that **international students** are an asset: they have been vital for the project to gain insights to immigrants' communities. But more generally, they often serve as bridge builders between migrant communities and mainstream society. It is apparent from the research undertaken within this project that education is an important factor for civic activity. To enhance possibilities for studies for migrants may well contribute to more civic activity not only of the students themselves.

### Integration and naturalisation

Generally, the discourse on integration focuses on the long-term integration of immigrants. However, many immigrants do not originally foresee to stay for a longer period. Thus, if one looks at possibilities to engage immigrants into decision making procedures or social activities, one may have to acknowledge this fact.

While naturalisation and citizenship remain important for the integration of migrants, citizenship ought not to be an inhibiting factor for becoming active: founding an association or becoming a member of an association, the eligibility to become an - accountable - board member of an organisation should not depend on the decision to become a citizen of a country. EU member states could have a close look at stipulations in their country whether there are inhibiting factors, such as opening bank accounts or joining necessary insurance schemes for migrants.

It appears that many first generation immigrants - the group which was the focus of the POLITIS research - are active in society as well as with organisations in relation to their home country. We may have to revise our perceptions of migrants being active **either** for their home **or** for the receiving country: it seems they have developed already activities which accommodate more than one identity and a more transnational approach of life.

Activities are often linked to the living conditions, and thus focus on the local level. Improved access to participation and decision making at the local level appears as an important factor for the participation of migrants. To realise the potential among immigrants, it may be important to lower barriers to their involvement.

Generally, from the interviews with active immigrants, one can conclude that there is a high level of appreciation for consultative bodies established in many EU member states, particularly if they are given a meaningful role in decision making. In a considerable number of EU member states, third country nationals have voting rights at local level, which is much appreciated and highly regarded by active immigrants.

Europe is perceived by a considerable number of immigrants as a symbol or model for diversity, recognising various identities and developing cooperation. At the same time, the EU is also shaping policies relevant to EU member states as well as to neighbouring countries.

In the interviews we conducted with civically active immigrants, the need to address issues of exclusion, equality, gender sensitivity as an increasing number of migrants today are women, have been raised. These interviews underline the role of policies which are developed at EU level, like the anti-discrimination legislation. However, it is also observed by immigrants that equal treatment does not sufficiently cover the treatment of third country nationals. Thus, policies against discrimination need also to be complemented with policies which underline equality before the law: Immigrants deplore the fact that they are treated differently on the grounds of their status.

The POLITIS findings underline the need to look more closely into the civic activity in EU member states, and therefore we wish to recommend more research, qualitative as well as quantitative, into the role and factors of civic activity of migrants, certainly also beyond first generation immigrants.

#### **Recommendations for mainstream organisations:**

The analysis confirms that mainstream associations' approaches towards immigrants matter and have an impact on the process of successful incorporation of immigrants. A misguided reception may deter immigrants knocking at the door looking for incorporation.

We argue that the incorporation of immigrants in mainstream associations is a social process that entails a sequence of steps towards active membership.

- Migrants become active in mainstream associations of various natures when they are attracted by a clear image or message of the association.
- The first contact with an organisation is important. While some immigrants actively approach associations and offer their services, others attend events and meeting without any open display of their desire to participate, while still others need to be actively approached by associations. Associations need to show an interest in the immigrants' approach, and it appears that mentoring programmes for newcomers to bigger organisations are perceived as helpful.
- A successful incorporation of new immigrants requires that associations delegate tasks and responsibilities to new members without expecting too much or too little. Active immigrants expect fair treatment to be able to realise their ambitions according to their abilities. If immigrants feel discriminated and barred from responsibility and prestigious positions they may become frustrated and leave the association. The POLITIS project shows that active immigrants may be very sensitive towards false pretensions and unequal treatment and respond by withdrawing.

Due to the demographic development in EU societies, mainstream associations as well will require a more proactive approach aiming at the successful incorporation of immigrants. An approach based on the conscious and sensitive dealing with active membership seems to be the dictate of the moment. Training and awareness raising particularly for members who may be the first contacts for immigrants, as well as for leadership of mainstream organisations will be helpful not to miss the chance to broaden the basis in European societies. The interviews underline the important role of key figures in mainstream organisation for attracting migrants: A candidate of a party in an election calls on an immigrant for advice and participation in a campaign, or a board member of an association invites a migrant to join an activity of the organisation – these were examples for initiating activity.

In many regions and on various levels, diversity training is developed and this may be an important tool to assist mainstream organisations to become able to work with people of various backgrounds.

Organisations may use benchmarking as a tool to measure how inclusive of all sections of society they become with certain measures.

### **Building Europe together....**

Further exploring immigrant activism may be useful in understanding how to be active across our national borders, and the study on immigrants' perceptions of Europe may be an inspiring starting point for considering the contribution of migrants to building Europe together – with old and new citizens.

POLITIS has made us aware that highly active immigrants take on **bridge building** functions between migrant communities and mainstream society, they **transfer** knowledge and understanding between these groups, and they **communicate** and **translate**. This is a **valuable resource** for European societies, we would even say a treasure.

Mainstream organisations have an important role to play to realise this potential.

- Supporting the participation of immigrants in society is essential: In practical terms this involves the legal and institutional frameworks to be open to migrants, and for them to have access to financial support.
- Creating welcoming conditions: Raise sensitivity and awareness of the potential desire to participate in order to accept/receive immigrants in mainstream organisations. Treat immigrants fairly and equally, expect neither too little nor too much.
- Realise the potential of immigrants, recognise the contributions they make and wish to make to building Europe together.

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The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is the ecumenical agency on migration and integration, asylum and refugees, and against racism and discrimination in Europe. Members are Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Councils of Churches as well as church-related agencies across Europe. CCME formally cooperates with the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.