



## EESC position on migration

Position paper – December 2016

*"The challenging situation requires European Member States to show solidarity both towards people fleeing war, persecution, conflict and poverty and towards each other. Ensuring safe entry and welcoming them is the responsibility for all Member States and is part of our fundamental European values." EESC resolution on the current refugee crisis<sup>1</sup>.*

### Background

The 2015-2016 migratory movements towards the EU have been exceptional compared to the previous trends. According to the International Organization for Migration, in 2015 alone there were approx. 1.1 million arrivals of third country nationals to the EU. In 2016, 500,000 applications for international protection have been lodged by the end of May<sup>2</sup>.

**Civil society** has played a vital role in contributing to a more humane migration crisis management. Without the response of various NGOs, charities and individuals, the tragic humanitarian situation which has unfolded in many European countries could have been much worse.

The EESC has conducted **12 fact-finding missions** to meet with civil society organisations working with refugees. The key messages were presented to the EESC plenary session by the Vice-President for Communication, Gonçalo Lobo Xavier. The [synthesis report](#) of the visits to Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden and an additional one to Turkey concluded that there is a need to: reduce the number of (irregular) arrivals to Europe, receive and assist refugees in a humane way, offer better support for CSOs working in the field and change the current narrative and ensure the integration of refugees.



1. EESC resolution on the current refugee crisis, 16 Sept. 2015: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.press-releases.36736>  
2. EASO Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the EU, 8 July 2016: <https://www.easo.europa.eu/news-events/easo-annual-report-situation-asylum-eu-and-latest-asylum-figures>

The EESC argues that refugees need **safe, legal routes** to come to the EU. A more coordinated approach from all European and national stakeholders, based on shared responsibility, fair allocation, convergence and respect for fundamental rights, is needed to include more options for family reunification, relocation and resettlement.

The EESC has advocated for a long time that a new migration and asylum policy based on solidarity and harmonised legislation is needed, while existing legislation should be consolidated by means of an **Immigration Code**<sup>3</sup>. Greater shared responsibility should be at the root of a common immigration policy, insists the EESC. Moreover, the EESC supports the idea of the reform of the Common European Asylum System to ensure a more efficient, fair and humane asylum policy. Cooperation with third countries of origin or of transit is vital in tackling the root causes of involuntary migration<sup>4</sup>, especially in the current foreign policy climate.

Above and beyond this, the EESC wants to see EU policy take a **humanitarian approach** that challenges the often xenophobic national discourse that plays on the perceived threat posed by 'irregular migrants'. The EESC's fundamental position is that migrants are human beings with exactly the same fundamental rights as EU citizens, which must be respected and safeguarded irrespective of a person's legal status<sup>5</sup>. The EESC is concerned to note that intolerance, racism and xenophobia towards immigrants are on the rise in Europe.

The EESC also wants to see hate speech, misinformation about refugees and xenophobic discourse firmly counteracted, with the **positive contributions of refugees** highlighted. Refugees should be seen not as a threat but as an opportunity for Europe's economic and social model. Sustainable long-term integration policies covering skills

screening and recognition, education and training should be put in place to stimulate the economy.

The EESC and the European Commission co-organise yearly the **European Migration Forum**, a platform giving voice to over 150 civil society organizations active in the field of migration and integration and which fosters an active dialogue with European institutions on topics such as migration, asylum and the integration of third-country nationals. The most recent European Migration Forum, held in April 2016, offered civil society's feedback on the EU Action Plan on integration of third country nationals, adopted in June 2016.

### The role of civil society

It is vital that civil society is properly consulted in the development of a future EU migration policy, in order to ensure the implementation and practice of EU rules on the ground. This is because civil society organisations can help guarantee effective multi-actor responses to crises through their role in facilitating access to services and justice, as well as information. They can also play an active role by de-bunking myths about migration, leading to a more honest debate<sup>6</sup>.

The EESC has consistently emphasised the key role of organised civil society, in Europe and in third countries, in providing European immigration policies with a social dimension and added value. While governments can create the framework for immigration, integration itself can only occur at the grassroots level; in workplaces, schools and clubs, etc.

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3. EESC Opinion on European immigration policies, September 2014:  
<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.rex-opinions.32966>

4. EESC Opinion on European Immigration policy and relationship with third countries, July 2014:  
<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.rex-opinions.32577>

5. Immigration: Integration and Fundamental Rights:  
<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/qe-30-12-822-en-c.pdf>

6. European Migration Forum Report:  
[http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/1st-european-migration-forum\\_workshop-conclusions.pdf](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/1st-european-migration-forum_workshop-conclusions.pdf)

As the EU body representing organised civil society, the EESC has played a key role in setting the agenda for migrant integration. The EESC stresses that integration of newcomers is a complex, long-term social process with many dimensions and many stakeholders involved, particularly at local level. Since the early 2000s, the EESC has been advocating for a proper integration policy at EU level, urging national, local and regional authorities to adopt a range of policies covering education, healthcare and families.

In 2009, the EESC was also behind the creation of the European Integration Forum, which brought together representatives of civil society organisations active in this area. In 2015, the forum was transformed into the European Migration Forum, extending its scope to cover topics related to immigration and asylum.

In 2016, the EESC has been very much engaged on the issue of migration. In March, the Committee organised "Your Europe, Your Say" (YEYS) focusing on the theme of migration. YEYS is a yearly event where 16 to 17 year-olds from across the EU come together to debate major issues affecting Europe. In November, the annual EESC Civil Society Media Seminar focused on the theme of "Communicating Migration" and in December, the EESC Civil Society Prize, was given to initiatives aimed at improving migrants' lives and fostering their integration.

## Integration and the labour market

The EESC has often emphasised the positive effects of a controlled flow of immigrants, not least in addressing Europe's demographic time bomb; by 2025 more than 20% of Europeans will be 65 or over<sup>7</sup>. A responsible and balanced

European immigration policy, with appropriate measures to ensure the social inclusion of migrants, will help rejuvenate the workforce and thus boost the economy.

The Committee believes **employment is essential to integration**. Capacity-building for matching labour supply and demand, fostering entrepreneurship and vocational training are necessary elements of improving the employability of migrants. One of the greatest problems afflicting many immigrants and many businesses in Europe, the recognition of academic and professional qualifications also needs to be resolved. The EESC calls for a European strategy and measures to promote 'brain gain' – i.e. making the EU more attractive to talented individuals – and to tackle unjustified barriers to entry, such as lacking recognition of professional and academic qualifications.

## Policy Framework

The 2015-2016 migratory turmoil triggered a number of political decisions and policy choices at European level. In May 2015 the Commission adopted the **European Agenda on Migration**, outlining the broader approach to both legal and irregular migration in the Union and the four pillars to support it. The communication on managing the refugee crisis followed shortly, together with the Council's measures to relocate people in need of international protection. The approach to dealing with migration flows in front line countries has led to the reform of the **Common European Asylum System**, such as the revision of the Dublin mechanism, or to the implementation of the **'Borders Package'**. Last but not least, The **Valletta Summit** in November 2015 brought migration issues to the heart of the EU's relations with the African continent while

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7. Healthy ageing:  
[http://ec.europa.eu/health/ageing/policy/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/health/ageing/policy/index_en.htm)

the [EU-Turkey Statement](#) in March 2016 established new ways to manage migration flows.

In June 2016 the [Action Plan on the integration of third-country nationals](#) was adopted and a [New Migration Partnership Framework](#) was announced, to further reinforce cooperation with third countries to better manage migration. In addition, the EU is striving to prevent irregular migration flows coming through Central and Eastern Mediterranean route<sup>8</sup>. Cooperation with third countries of origin or transit in the context of EU instruments such as the high-level dialogues, reviews of the European Neighbourhood Policy, Partnership Frameworks of cooperation or even the [European External Investment Plan](#) launched in

September 2016, have further improved cooperation with non-EU countries.

[EU financial instruments](#) are also helping to create a better future closer to home for those who might otherwise have been prepared to risk their lives on a dangerous journey to Europe. The Regional Trust Fund for Syria, [Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#) and [Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#) have complemented existing financial programmes in countries of origin. Inside the EU, the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund, and the European Structural Funds are tools to help the national efforts for the settlement and integration of newcomers.

8. *European Council Conclusions, 20-21 Oct. 2016.*  
<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2016/10/20-21>

## Further information

### **EESC opinions and events on immigration, asylum and integration:**

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.immigration-and-asylum>

### **EESC event "Your Europe, Your Say 2016" - Youth's view on Migration and Integration:**

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/YourEuropeYourSay/>

### **EESC Civil Society Media Seminar 2016, on Communicating Migration:**

<http://eesc.europa.eu/media-seminar/>

### **EESC Civil Society Prize 2016, on Migrants:**

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/civil-society-prize/>

### **European Migration Forum:**

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.immigration-and-asylum-european-migration-forum>

### **European website on integration:**

[www.integration.eu](http://www.integration.eu)

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**About the EESC:** Established by 1957 Treaty of Rome, the EESC is a strong bridge connecting civil society and Europe. Reflecting the economic, social and civic realities facing European citizens, the Committee's 350 members, appointed by the Council of the European Union, bring local and sectorial expertise and connections to EU policies and its 'opinions' (official statements) have real bearing on EU legislation.

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