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Integrating newcomers in a disintegrating European Union

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The European Union was, is and will continue to be a region of immigration. Newcomers come from all over the world following constantly renewed patterns of migration, which no walls or fences can put to an end. Most settle and adapt to their new environment while simultaneously enriching the local culture and economy. Others also maintain transnational links and activities. Many of them settle forever in Europe, while for others the end of the journey is uncertain.

Developing a common European immigration policy without a corresponding European integration policy is problematic. Issues such as economic and labour-market integration, ethnic and cultural diversity, social and political participation should be discussed in terms of multilevel public policy goals – local, regional, national and European. A holistic approach is clearly needed in order to grapple with the complexity of migration and post-migration situations in the European Union.

“Excellent labour-market integration can coexist with very bad social and political integration”

Integration is a disputed concept; I propose it is best understood in terms of the fair participation of target individuals and groups in the economic, political, cultural and social spheres of their host European societies. In this interpretation, a satisfactory level of newcomers' integration is achieved when they have

similar participation patterns than non-immigrant citizens. This means similar labour-market participation (economic dimension), similar electoral turnout patterns (political), similar attitudes towards fundamental democratic values (cultural) and similar access to social goods (social).

In policy terms, it would be useful to make at least a distinction between the initial phase of integration and the following steps. I see the first step in the integration process as 'adaptation', which refers to the physical arrival of newcomers into a new society and their settlement in the first five years. During that period, they learn the language of the new country, how society works in practice, and how to access housing, schools, healthcare, the labour market and so on. After this initial settlement, the newcomer continues his or her path and encounters various difficulties and obstacles in the process of participation.

Integration does not take place at the same speed across the economic, political, cultural and societal spheres. Excellent labour-market integration, for instance, can coexist with very bad social and political integration. The case of Japanese expatriate communities in major European cities is a good illustration of this differentiation. Usually, they enjoy a privileged position in terms of employment and wages, but they do not take part in local social and political life, and do not participate in the local culture. To a lesser extent, the same could be said of many European civil servants and experts living in Brussels.

“Newcomers do not wait for government policies to start the process of integration”

The role of culture, ethnicity, race and religion in the process of integration is another difficult, though unavoidable, issue. On the one hand, 'culturalist' schools of thought explain deficiencies in newcomers' integration by referring to their cultural background; when individuals are economically, socially or politically disadvantaged, their cultural difference is often presented as the major explanation. On the other hand, 'structural' thinking explains the lack of integration by macroeconomic and political factors such as globalisation or ethnic and racial discrimination.

It seems undisputable to me that social connections rooted in culture, ethnicity, race and religion also play a positive role both in the first step, adaptation, and the following steps of the integration process. For the Senegalese Mourides arriving in Europe, Mouride religious confraternities play an important role in helping newcomers find accommodation, find a job and find their way around their new surroundings. This work by a religious organisation is critical to helping the economic and social adaptation of newcomers. It also shows that newcomers do not wait for government policies to start the process of integration, especially in the economic and social spheres. Historically, this has always been the case. Italians arriving in New York at the turn of the 20th century knew that by going to Mulberry Street they would find help with accommodation and work among the *paesani* already settled.

The integration and participation of newcomers in Europe is undoubtedly a question of multilevel governance that needs a common European approach to accommodate differentiated local policies. Incoherence between the local, national and European approaches would increase the disintegrating trends at work today in the European Union.

“Any idea of a one-size-fits-all integration policy is absurd”

The content of the national integration programmes varies from one country to another. So to avoid incoherence and contradictions, and to reaffirm European democratic principles, there are several steps that should be taken. First, integration programmes should be renamed 'adaptation programmes' and should be offered to any newcomer entering the EU legally or as an asylum-seeker. Any idea of a one-size-fits-all integration policy, though, is absurd. Integration policies should vary according to the newcomer. The content of these adaptation programmes should vary with the type of migrant entering the EU; for example, immigrants entering for family reunification and short-term circular migrants need different levels of adaptation into European society and therefore different programmes. Immigrants whose aim is to become European citizens should be helped to get as close as possible to fair participation in economics, culture, politics and social relations. Those who come and go with no intention of becoming European citizens

should be required to understand and obey the law, but not necessarily to develop a sense of identification with local society. It would be beneficial, too, to inform the newcomers about the European integration process, the functioning of the European Institutions and the rights of immigrants under EU law. In the long term, this European dimension could also stimulate the attachment of the immigrant to European society culturally.

Integration also depends on policies for the natives, whom it would also be useful to directly involve in newcomers' integration process. Fighting far-right politics is a good way to work for the integration of newcomers, and good information campaigns can help avoid the backlash effect when integration policies are implemented. Better integration of newcomers can in part be the result of successful social and economic policies. Job creation, urban regeneration, European competitiveness and good healthcare policies can all help with immigrant integration, which can in turn help Europe to further achieve these very policy goals.

It seems clear that a coherent and shared European approach to the adaptation and fair participation of newcomers would be an efficient way to move forward with the wider EU integration process. But it is also clear that the current absence of such an approach reveals the deep crisis of the European project.

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