

Summary of the expert conference on “Free movement and participation of EU citizens – making it work for all”, Rotterdam 3-4 September 2012.

On 3-4 September, the Netherlands and Germany hosted an expert conference on the freedom of movement and participation of EU citizens. The objective of this conference was to provide a platform to discuss how to maximize the benefits of the freedom of movement for all those players involved, notably EU citizens, employers, (local) governments and sending and receiving countries, and to share policy alternatives and good practices for receiving EU citizens and strengthening their participation. The conference was attended by representatives from central, regional and local authorities from 21 EU Member States, Norway and Switzerland, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, Eurofound, Eurocities, academics, employers and various civil society organisations and migrant associations.

Throughout the discussions and presentations it became clear that there is much support for the benefits and potential of freedom of movement and a that there is a shared conviction that ensuring the participation of mobile EU citizens is essential in unleashing the full potential of freedom of movement for both individual citizens as well as receiving and sending societies. It was argued that the right to practice mobility, move and reside and work freely within the EU, should be understood as a positive challenge and be encouraged. Intra EU-mobility was also held to be of increasing importance in view of demographic changes and in this respect it was felt by some that freedom of movement could be further strengthened.

There were, however, also reports of negative socio-economic impacts at a local level in both receiving and sending countries, such as the rupture of families and a brain drain and questions with regard to the capacity of local authorities to welcome newcomers and to maintain social cohesion as well as negative effects on local employment. A presentation on the macro economic research regarding the impact of freedom of movement supported the overall positive image although it was also noted that many aspects, such as local economic and cultural impacts and the effects on public service, are generally not taken into account and less researched. It was therefore recommended that there should be continuing efforts to understand the economic, social and cultural impact of EU migration on both sending and receiving countries, at both a local and national level.

Ensuring public support was a much heard concern. Recent political and economic tensions – particularly the prolonged job crisis –as well as the inflow of Roma –vulnerable ‘mobile’ citizens which are ill equipped to participate in the labour market- have placed EU mobility under increased scrutiny. Some speakers therefore pleaded that governments should more actively disseminate the benefits of freedom of movement and the provision of more objective information, while others pleaded for acknowledging genuine public concerns and more attention for the local impacts of freedom of movement. In this respect it was also mentioned that citizens concerned about migration do not distinguish between migration from outside the EU and intra-EU mobility.

Many speakers explained that government policies and legislation geared towards social inclusion and participation do not distinguish between third country nationals and EU citizens. The inflow of newcomers as a result of intra-EU mobility also constitutes challenges in terms of adjustment as regards public services and care provision for the citizens in terms of accommodation, work, language courses and educational support. It was also mentioned that the basic integration requirements of EU citizens are generally no different to those of other newcomers. They need to get to grips with a new language, with new institutions and, sometimes, with different social norms.

The view that the integration of EU citizens had to be seen as a two-way process seemed to get overall support. Receiving societies have responsibilities to help migrants participate, including through means such as providing equal access to services and proactive outreach to include EU citizens in language and orientation programs, while EU citizens also have responsibilities when making use of freedom of movement in terms of language acquisition, work and involvement in local communities.

The fact that intra-EU mobility generally reflects more fluid migration patterns than third country nationals was highlighted as a particular challenge as this could prevent governments from making investments and affects EU citizens' willingness to invest in their stay. Several speakers issued warnings in this regard calling on governments not to easily assume that people will not settle and to start investments in integration from the start so as to reduce the risk of individual and collective problems in the long term. It was also noted that insecurity about entitlements in terms of pensions and social security seemed to have a negative effect on the mobility of EU citizens.

The need to have a welcoming culture for newcomers was also stressed. This, inter alia, requires that unnecessary administrative hurdles and barriers would need to be removed and people are made to feel welcome throughout society requiring the active involvement of all citizens. Several speakers also made the point that although EU citizens enjoy a broad range of political, economic and social rights which facilitate their integration in the host society, there is still a gap between EU rights and practice. Key obstacles experienced by EU citizens in making optimal use of the right of movement include lack of awareness of information sources and red tape, notably in the field of social security rights, entry procedures and the right of residence for third family members and the recognition of qualifications and diplomas. This might require more attention for the correct implementation of the law through improved training and instructions for front-line civil servants, improved cooperation between European institutions and Member States, information campaigns geared to awareness on citizen's rights, and support to migrant workers in case of discrimination.

Reinforcing cooperation with employers was also a central theme throughout the discussions. It was stated that, given the fact that the possibility of states to regulate freedom of movement is very limited, freedom of movement of workers is mainly in the hands of employers. As a beneficiary of liberal immigration policy, employers would therefore have a duty to take into account social considerations through means of support such as providing housing, and language courses. There were, however, also warnings of exploitation by temporary employment agencies who bind migrants by offering an all-inclusive concept of accommodation, housing, transport and health insurance, preventing migrants from finding their own way. To avoid exploitation, it was recommended that provision of work and accommodation is separated. It was, furthermore, brought to attention that governments also have an important role to play as employers and should ensure a strict enforcement of legislation regarding labour conditions.

Migrant associations were also mentioned as an important partner. They can play an important role in the chain of information on rights and obligations as well as for information on pitfalls and long-term consequences of migration and support. Contact between migrants, their organizations and the receiving society can also make a positive contribution for social cohesion and integration.

It was generally agreed that bilateral partnerships between sending and host EU member states could be strengthened in order to identify and address integration challenges, improve information provision and support on mobility and ways to participate in the host society. Further multilateral European information exchange on the various issues addressed during the meeting was also welcomed, notably with regard to the social impact of freedom of movement at a local level, research on how EU citizens fare in terms of integration, and addressing fraud. Some noted that there should be more flexible European funding for promoting the participation of EU citizens, e.g. opening up the target group of the European Integration Fund.

Within the EU framework, relevant future instruments and activities to reinforce freedom of movement and participation of EU citizens include the extension of the Eures portal which will equip itself with post placement services in order to allow better integration in the company and country of destination, a study commissioned by the Commission to feed into the second report on the application of the Free Movement Directive that will focus on inclusion policies of EU citizens into their host society, and a proposal aiming at the provision of support to migrant workers and improvement of the means of redress to discrimination. Furthermore, it was mentioned that the 2013 European Year of Citizens will also stimulate debate about the right to free movement, in particular in terms of strengthening social cohesion.