

Launching Conference of the Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies

Organised by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and hosted by the Portuguese Parliament

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It is my pleasure to be here at the launching conference of the Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies.

Over the seventy years since the end of the Second World War, migration has steadily increased across the European continent. A number have migrated within Europe, while others have come to Europe from third countries. Some arrived as refugees, others left their home countries in search of better opportunities abroad. Regardless of the reason for their migration, many retain strong links with their homelands and a continuing interest in political, cultural and societal developments there. Advances in technology have greatly facilitated the maintenance of such links.

Countries of origin and of destination are growing increasingly aware of what diasporas have to offer. Home countries benefit from remittances sent to family by workers abroad and from the wider opportunities for investment and growth created by its nationals overseas. Host countries reap the rewards of diversity and the rejuvenation of workforces by motivated immigrants seeking to improve their lives.

At the same time, the presence of large diasporas can cause tension within communities. Racial hatred and prejudice can lead to incidents of hate crime and violence.

Diasporas can also be a source of tension in relations between home and destination states. Governments of the home country may encourage their nationals abroad to act or to vote in a way that coincides with national interests, to the frustration of host country governments. Rights and freedoms accorded to migrants in destination countries – including in particular freedom of expression – may vex home country governments as attention is drawn to “internal” issues by nationals protesting abroad.

Diaspora populations also have particular interests and needs of their own, which require promotion and protection.

The opportunity to participate in political life, in their home countries, host countries or both.

Protection against prejudice and discrimination on grounds of their national or ethnic origin.

The possibility to access education, employment and healthcare.

The right to use and to teach their children their national languages.

The freedom to continue their traditions and to practice their religions.

A lack of opportunities and the failure of integration policies can leave members of diasporas isolated, impoverished and vulnerable to radicalisation.

The challenge for CoE member States is how to promote the integration of diasporas in their host countries, while allowing them also to preserve their links with their countries of origin. CoE standards and activities can provide assistance in meeting this challenge.

Mr Rouquet has explained the important work being done by the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE to ensure recognition of and respect for the rights of diasporas. In particular, PACE recommendations and resolutions have underlined the importance of the political participation of migrants.

The European Convention on Human Rights applies to all those within the territories of CoE member States. The rights it enshrines must be guaranteed without distinction on grounds of national origin. These rights include the right to freedom of expression and to freedom of religion. The First Protocol to the Convention includes the right to education and the right to participate in elections. Of course, these rights are not absolute and States may limit them for good cause. However, those imposing restrictions on rights enjoyed by diasporas may be called on to justify the restrictions before the European Court of Human Rights, which is charged with ensuring the effective application of the Convention. The Convention is therefore an important tool to protect diasporas from discrimination and to allow them to press for the recognition of rights they deem necessary to further their interests.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) monitors discrimination, violence and prejudice against all those present on CoE States' territories. Since diasporas are often a target of such treatment, ECRI's work is of particular relevance to them. ECRI produces reports and recommendations to Member States on how to tackle the specific issues it identifies in the course of its country monitoring activities. Its General Policy

Recommendations address thematic issues relation to racism and intolerance. They are key to informing integration policies and initiatives.

The CoE's Intercultural Cities programme can also help cities to develop comprehensive intercultural strategies and thus harness the many benefits diversity can bring.

Various other CoE instruments, such as the European Social Charter, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages, have an important role to play. The Framework Convention, for example, aims to promote the equality of all those belonging to minorities and their right to express, preserve and develop their culture, religion, language and traditions.

While all of these bodies and instruments are clearly relevant for diasporas in Europe, none has diasporas as its particular focus. This new initiative establishing a Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies is therefore a timely one, to enable states to come together and exchange ideas and examples of best practice in this area.

Policies for diasporas are sorely needed. The expertise of the Council of Europe together with national parliamentarians and diaspora associations can help ensure that new policies promote the inclusion of diasporas in host societies, while protecting their right to be different.