

FINAL CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE ON “DIASPORAS’ ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN STATE-BUILDING PROCESSES”

Tbilisi, 16 December 2019

1. Background of the conference

The Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies, in cooperation with the Parliament of Georgia in the framework of the Georgian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, held a Conference on “Diasporas’ Active Participation in State-building Processes” in Tbilisi, Georgia, on 16 December 2019. The conference brought together 90 participants from 22 countries, including members of parliaments, high level government officials, members of diaspora associations, experts, academics and diplomatic representatives.

A growing number of countries are interested in rebuilding relations with their diasporas. Over the past decade, a wide range of different strategies, policies, programmes and projects have been developed and implemented worldwide as well as in Europe. Diaspora engagement strategies differ a lot from country to country, depending on their goals and motivations; some countries prioritise the promotion of their culture and language abroad, others put emphasis on the economic engagement of diasporas in their own development or direct financial support of diaspora organisations abroad. Whatever the differences, leveraging and harnessing the resources, contacts, knowledge and talents of diaspora settled globally, rather than simply seeking to encourage their return, is now generally viewed by states as an effective policy approach.

Migration has changed the social, cultural and demographic structure of many societies. However, until today the potential of diasporas has been overlooked by many states and retrograde approaches have dominated the relations between governments and diasporas. Many host states continue treating diaspora members simply as migrants, restricting their involvement only to integration policies. This concept should now be broadened to give diaspora communities a more active role in state-building processes in the countries where they have settled.

2. General conclusions

The increased movement of populations in the 21st century pushed states to adopt new migration-related strategies. Involving diaspora communities in development policies, for instance, is currently seen as an innovative model of governance.

Diasporas nevertheless still face many challenges in trying to engage with their host countries and countries of origin:

- there is insufficient knowledge of diasporas and of their interaction with their countries of origin;
- the efforts of diaspora groups to become involved are often met with little receptiveness on the part of the state officials;
- mechanisms providing diaspora members with access to state-building processes are often characterised by weak structures and lack of coordination;
- there is often a lack of trust between governments and diaspora communities.

To overcome these challenges, states should work together with diaspora organisations to develop national diaspora-related policies, to create active networks of diaspora associations and to ensure that diaspora representatives benefit from democratic rights.

The necessary legal frameworks should be created to provide voting rights for diasporas. State policies designed to allow, encourage or deny the formal acquisition of dual or multiple nationality, as well as regulations regarding the rights and duties retained by citizens when absent from the national territory, should be reformed according to new, more positive approaches.

In their recommendations, the members of the Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies have on several occasions encouraged the member states of the Council of Europe to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local level (ETS No.144) and align their national electoral laws regarding the participation of diaspora communities in elections with the standards of the convention.

The experiences of several countries presented during the conference has shown that diasporas are powerful partners for states, and the prioritisation of diasporas' cooperation should be a major goal of state-building processes.

The general conclusions and the following recommendations are intended to serve as a basis for future work in this area.

3. Thematic conclusions and recommendations

Having heard the presentations by panellists followed by intensive debates on the theme of diasporas' active participation in state-building processes, the members of the Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies, recognising the importance of diasporas' contribution to state-building processes and supporting the establishment of coordinated mechanisms enabling this contribution, recommend that member states:

A) *With respect to diasporas' involvement in state-building:*

- elaborate and apply a comprehensive methodology for collecting and maintaining diaspora-related data in host countries and in countries of origin;
- introduce national policies and legal frameworks to enable and facilitate diaspora involvement in state-building processes in countries of origin and host countries, in particular the right to vote and stand for election at national or local level, the right to be represented in national parliaments, the right to observe national elections, voting by post and e-voting in order to significantly facilitate the participation of diasporas in elections;
- review the national legislation with a view to granting a special status to diaspora members in their countries of origin;
- review the national legislation with a view to facilitating the return of diaspora members to countries of origin;
- ensure the representation of diaspora networks in the development and implementation of state-led development strategies in home and host countries;
- provide direct financing in state budgets to support diaspora initiatives;

- coordinate the diaspora-related policies of host countries with the diaspora-related programmes of countries of origin, with a view of achieving the most efficient results;
- ensure that staff in diplomatic representations are trained to deal with diaspora programmes/projects, and that they compile and maintain databases of their diaspora representations;
- facilitate the development of a central online hub connecting all the diaspora associations by virtue of an online platform maintained by the responsible institutions.

B) With respect to creating a positive image of the country of origin and promoting intercultural dialogue:

- facilitate the development of cultural initiatives that promote a sense of unity among the diaspora members in host countries;
- create grant programmes in countries of origin to assist diaspora associations in promoting the culture of their countries abroad;
- organise festivals promoting the cultures of different diaspora communities in their host countries;
- ensure the promotion of the spirit of volunteering among the diasporas through the development of internship and volunteer programmes in various sectors for young diaspora representatives;
- recognise diaspora achievements by establishing diaspora awards;
- develop structures for e-learning in specialised educational institutions targeting diaspora professionals and encourage the establishment of inter-university networks;
- develop exchange programmes and partnerships in higher education;
- support joint diaspora-related research projects;
- organise regularly conferences at national level to discuss diasporas' contribution to the promotion of the culture of origin and intercultural dialogue.

Other decisions and final remarks

Once discussed and adopted, the recommendations set out in the final conclusions will be communicated to national authorities, international organisations and diaspora associations.

Participants expressed their sincere gratitude to the Parliament of Georgia for hosting the conference and for their organisational support, and to the Swiss Confederation for its generous contribution, which has made the work of the Network possible.