

Migration in Europe: EU must act together and do more to support local authorities

The European Union needs to increase support for cities and regions and border countries that are on the front line of managing migration, the European Committee of the Regions said on 22 March. The EU's assembly for local and regional politicians expressed particular concern about the challenges faced by islands and coastal regions in the Mediterranean and called for greater shared European responsibility and investment.

The assembly called for local and regional authorities to be involved in every stage of framing and implementing the EU's migration-related policies, because of their role in taking care of new arrivals and then integrating them. In addition to asking for more funding, training and technical support for cities and regions, the European Committee of the Regions suggested that the EU should examine the possibility of "transferring responsibility for examining asylum applications from national to EU level".

The recommendations are contained in an opinion drafted by [Dimitrios Kalogeropoulos](#) (EL/EPP), a delegate from the Palaio Faliro municipality near Athens, and were adopted shortly after a debate with [Dimitris Avramopoulos](#), the European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship.

[Karl-Heinz Lambertz](#), the President of the European Committee of Regions (CoR), said: "Local and regional governments are on the front line, receiving, managing and integrating migrants and refugees, and they need far more support. Every EU member state must shoulder the responsibility, to avoid leaving just a few countries and communities to manage alone. Migrants and refugees are not numbers; they are people that should be protected. It is a European challenge that needs European investment, which is why the next EU budget, after 2020, must increase and why EU regional funds – its cohesion policy, which supports social inclusion – must continue to be a strong pillar of Europe's future."

Speaking during the plenary debate, **Commissioner Avramopoulos** said there was a need for a " [radical re-think](#) " on the integration of migrants in Europe across all policy areas, as well as improved access to EU funds for cities and regions. "Local and regional authorities play a positive role in creating spaces for exchanges between migrants and societies, ensuring social inclusion and active participation in the host society. But you cannot and should not be doing this alone."

Mr **Kalogeropoulos** said: "Local and regional leaders generally feel that the EU has moved in the right direction over the past two years, but, in practice, there remain difficulties for local communities as well as for refugees and migrants. Social tensions are high, local authorities are struggling to cope, and the level of consultation and coordination between

the levels of governance – local, national and EU – and with NGOs remains too low. The objectives of the EU to provide reasonable conditions for refugees and migrants to process applications for asylum speedily are not being met fully, and member states are ignoring agreements to relocate asylum-seekers equitably across the EU. We badly need a long-term commitment – from national governments and the EU – to increase funding for cities and regions and to pursue a comprehensive policy that makes migration manageable.”

The debate also focused attention on global trends, the experiences of refugees, and efforts to integrate new arrivals in Europe into the labour market, with contributions from: [Laura Thompson](#), the deputy director-general of the International Organization for Migration; **Elisabeth Bartke** from the Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry; and **Anila Noor**, a refugee and member of the European Migrant Advisory Board.

Background

- The opinion – entitled “Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration” – considers the progress made by the EU on its [migration policy priorities](#) since 2015. The CoR supports many of the actions taken by the EU and describes reform of the current asylum system as “essential”. It draws attention, however, to weaknesses and to the need for more radical action – particularly to relieve pressure on the worst-affected islands and regions, and to address difficulties assessing asylum applications. The possibility of “transferring responsibility for examining asylum applications from national to EU level” should be considered, it argues. The opinion says that local and regional authorities need more funding and calls for them to be involved in every stage of framing and implementing of the migration agenda. It argues that the powers of a new EU agency – the European Border and Coast Guard Agency – and EU naval operation (Sophia) should be strengthened, and highlights that work is needed to produce a “coherent action plan” capable of ending smuggling and the migration-linked slave trade that has emerged in North Africa. It supports the ‘hotspot’ approach to managing exceptional migratory flows, through which EU agencies can intervene rapidly to help EU member states on the front line of migration, and suggests that ‘hotspots’ in non-EU countries could be “important” as a way of creating “safe routes” for migration. It notes, however, that guidelines are needed for managers of hotspots, with input from local and regional authorities.

- President Lambertz wrote to Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, on 21 February 2018 calling for a [budget](#) after 2020 capable of matching Europe’s ambitions. The European Committee of the Regions is asking for the next budget to be “increased to 1.3% of the Gross National Income of the EU 27 as an expenditure ceiling through national contributions and new EU own resources”. President Lambertz described the EU’s cohesion policy as “the EU’s most effective means of tackling today’s challenges: climate action, migration, sustainable growth, and research and innovation”.

- The [EU external investment plan](#) is designed to boost investment in the EU’s neighbourhood and Africa, particularly in fragile, conflict- and violence-affected countries, some of which are countries from where irregular migrants originate. The European Commission is contributing

€4.1 billion, with the aim of stimulating more than €44 billion of investments by 2020.

· A recent study of global migration by the [European Commission](#) found that the world's migrant population is increasing steadily. While the number of people forced to move by conflict or persecution is surging, environmental disasters are a bigger cause of displacement. Overall, the nature of migration has become more complex, with economic development spurring migration in the short term. Migration has become a big business, eased by digital technology. Globally, migration is primarily an urban phenomenon, with one in five migrants living in the world's 20 largest cities. Of legal migrants who arrive in the EU, more than half come to be re-united with their family or on humanitarian grounds. Highly skilled migrants are heading primarily to other [OECD countries](#) rather than to the EU. The number of irregular migrant arriving by sea has dropped sharply (to 160,000 in 2017), but immigration remains the second greatest concern of Europeans (after terrorism). It was their principal concern in 2014-16.

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