



Empowering local actors: building a human-centred and inclusive EU migration agenda

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CEMR key messages

For a stronger and more effective EU policy agenda on migration and inclusion CEMR calls for:

- 1. Empowering the role of LRGs.** Supporting local and regional governments (LRGs) by reinforcing their role in migration governance through enhance multi-level cooperation. This includes ensuring strong financial support, targeted capacity-building, and strengthened partnerships between EU institutions, national governments, and municipalities. Such collaboration facilitates the development and implementation of inclusive migration policies effectively tailored to local needs and circumstances.
- 2. A human-centred approach to migration policy.** CEMR calls for a balanced and sustainable EU migration and asylum policy that upholds human rights, legal clarity, and municipal capacities.
- 3. Local dimension of the EU migration and asylum pact.** CEMR stresses for LRGs to be systematically involved in the implementation of key measures under the EU Migration and Asylum Pact. Their role in reception, integration, and emergency response must be recognised and backed by clear procedures, real-time information, and sufficient financial and administrative resources.
- 4. Temporary Protective Status (TPS) for Ukrainians.** Advocating for continued and coordinated EU-level support for beneficiaries of temporary protection, with a focus on long-term integration beyond emergency measures. This includes access to housing, employment, and essential services. To ensure effective and sustainable outcomes, long-term planning must be developed with the active involvement of municipalities.
- 5. Inclusion in labour markets.** Facilitating the labour market integration of migrants through skills recognition, targeted employment policies, and local partnerships with businesses and civil society.
- 6. Securing long-term EU funding for inclusion.** Emphasising the need to preserve and strengthen EU funding in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) particularly through AMIF and ESF+, to enable municipalities and regions to continue implementing effective and innovative integration programmes.

Background

Migration continues to shape Europe's social, economic, and territorial dynamics. Local and regional governments (LRGs) are at the forefront of receiving and integrating newcomers, yet they often lack sufficient support, resources, and formal recognition in EU migration policymaking.

CEMR calls for a sustainable, human-centred EU migration and asylum policy that empowers municipalities and regions to act and reflect the lived realities of people on the ground. A sustainable EU migration policy must be rooted in a human-centred and territorial approach, ensuring that it reflects people's lived experiences, protects fundamental rights, and builds on the capacity of local authorities to act.

The EU Migration and Asylum Pact, the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians, and the integration of migrants into the labour market are key areas where LRGs must be empowered.

The EU migration and asylum pact

LRGs are central actors in managing the multifaceted realities of migration, yet they are frequently under-recognised in EU-level policymaking. Across Europe, municipalities and regions are directly responsible for delivering key services that form the backbone of both immediate reception and long-term integration. These include emergency shelter provision, language and vocational training, access to healthcare and education, housing assistance, psychosocial support, and community engagement to foster social cohesion. The Migration and Asylum Pact introduces wide-ranging reforms to streamline and harmonise migration governance in the EU. While its overarching goal is to establish a more coordinated and sustainable system, its success ultimately depends on the effective and adequately resourced involvement of LRGs in both its design and implementation phases.

The Pact currently fails to sufficiently acknowledge the strategic role of LRGs. They are often treated as end-level implementers rather than as partners in governance, despite their proximity to local communities and their ability to detect emerging needs and manage integration in context-specific ways. Without structured mechanisms for consultation, predictable funding frameworks, and legal clarity regarding their responsibilities, there is a significant risk of implementation gaps and local-level bottlenecks. For example, in cities such as Palermo, Italy, or Mechelen, Belgium, municipalities have had to innovate independently in the absence of coordinated national support, developing tailored approaches to unaccompanied minors or intercultural dialogue programmes. These initiatives demonstrate the added value of local leadership but also underscore the uneven distribution of resources and capacity across territories.

The Pact introduces several provisions that pose challenges for LRGs. The expansion of accelerated and border asylum procedures places pressure on municipalities to deliver reception services within very short timeframes, often in transit or border areas with limited infrastructure. This raises operational and legal concerns around procedural safeguards and the ability to provide dignified living conditions. Similarly, the complexity of the solidarity mechanism and the criteria for relocation risk creating uncertainty at the local level, where clarity is needed to prepare housing, service provision, and community readiness.

Furthermore, the external dimension of the Pact, namely, partnerships with third countries aimed at managing returns and addressing root causes has so far lacked a territorial lens. LRGs are rarely consulted in the design of these partnerships, despite being key to ensuring their on-the-ground viability, particularly in diaspora engagement, local development cooperation, or reintegration efforts. For instance, some EU cities with strong migration links, such as Lisbon with Lusophone Africa could play a vital role in supporting rights-based cooperation with countries of origin, if empowered and involved.

The Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians

To ensure the EU's activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainian refugees has been a landmark decision, allowing millions of displaced persons to access housing, education, healthcare, and employment. The TPD has demonstrated the EU's capacity for solidarity and swift response to humanitarian crises. However, as the situation prolongs, the challenge now lies in transitioning from emergency support to long-term integration.

Municipalities have played a crucial role in implementing the directive, yet they face persistent challenges. Housing shortages remain a pressing issue, with many cities struggling to provide adequate and affordable accommodation. Inadequate housing not only affects refugees' health and well-being but also exacerbate social inequalities, leading to unequal living conditions and opportunities. The consequences for cities and regions are wide-reaching: higher healthcare costs, increasing marginalization of vulnerable groups, and risks to economic, social, and territorial cohesion.

Given these challenges, it's crucial to build a deeper understanding of how the TPD is affecting local territories. Municipalities are facing mounting pressure as they balance short-term emergency needs with long-term integration strategies. The impact on refugees, host communities, and local infrastructure will have long-term consequences, making it essential to address these issues now to ensure a more cohesive and sustainable future for all.

Additionally, while Ukrainian refugees have been granted access to employment, bureaucratic obstacles, such as unclear regulations lengthy permit processing and administrative procedures, language barriers, and the non-recognition of qualifications have hindered their full participation in the labour market.

The temporary protection status has been extended again until 4 March 2026. The EU needs to work closely with local and regional governments to develop sustainable long-term strategies. This includes:

- Expand housing options with financial and administrative support.
- Improve access to vocational training, language classes, and employment.
- Provide legal clarity and pathways to permanent residency.
- Strengthen partnerships with local businesses, schools, and civil society.

The EU can support these efforts by providing targeted financial resources, streamlining bureaucratic processes, and offering expert guidance on housing construction, education, and labour market integration. While more ambitious interventions, such as establishing a unified EU-wide legal framework for refugee integration or directly engaging in local housing development, may present

challenges, they remain critical as long-term policy goals. Strengthening partnerships between local authorities, businesses, and educational institutions is also key to fostering economic and social integration. The EU can facilitate this by funding cross-sectoral projects, promoting knowledge exchange, and developing policies that incentivize collaboration between public, private, and civil society actors.

Labour market inclusion of migrants

The economic integration of migrants is essential for both host communities and newcomers. Migrants contribute to local economies through various forms. However, their integration into the labour market remains a challenge, with barriers such as complex administrative procedures, skills mismatches, discrimination, and limited access to training and language programs. Bureaucratic hurdles can leave migrants in informal or precarious work, while mismatched qualifications often result in underemployment. Discrimination, based on ethnicity or nationality, further limits opportunities for career growth. For example, even qualified migrants may struggle to secure jobs due to biases. Additionally, limited access to language and training programs hinders their ability to improve employability. These challenges can lead to poverty, social exclusion, and dependency on social welfare, depriving both migrants and host communities of potential economic benefits.

LRGs, due to their close connection to communities, institutions, and employers, are uniquely positioned to address migrant employment challenges. They have an in-depth understanding of the local labour market, including the demand for specific skills, gaps, and mismatches in employment opportunities. By leveraging this knowledge, LRGs can design targeted initiatives that match migrant skills with local needs. For example, municipalities such as Hamburg have introduced vocational training programs that cater to migrant populations, while others like Barcelona have launched skills recognition schemes that help migrants gain official recognition for their foreign qualifications. Additionally, partnerships with the private sector can create direct pathways to employment. However, these efforts often face challenges, including language barriers that prevent migrants from accessing these opportunities. To overcome these obstacles, LRGs must ensure that initiatives are adequately funded and expanded to meet the growing demand. Only through sustained investment and collaboration with local businesses can these programs effectively address the barriers migrants face in the labour market.

A key issue is the recognition of foreign qualifications, which often prevents skilled migrants from working in their respective fields. The EU should simplify and harmonize procedures for credential recognition to allow migrants to contribute effectively to local economies. Additionally, municipalities should be supported in developing entrepreneurship hubs and business incubators that provide migrants with the resources and training needed to start their own businesses. Enhancing cooperation with the private sector to promote inclusive hiring practices is also essential for creating sustainable employment pathways.

Sustaining inclusion through EU Multiannual Financial Framework

The upcoming review of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) presents a crucial opportunity to ensure continued support for inclusive policies at the local level. EU funds such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) have been instrumental in supporting cities and regions in their efforts to welcome and integrate migrants.

One example is the Swedish project Etableringslyftet, a collaborative initiative between the Public Employment Service and the municipalities of Upplands Väsby, Sollentuna and Sigtuna. Initially co-financed by AMIF and now by ESF+, the project supports recently arrived migrants in acquiring the skills and qualifications needed to enter the labour market. The project has proven how targeted, locally led initiatives, backed by EU funds, can significantly improve employment outcomes for migrants.

As the EU prepares for the next MFF cycle, it is essential to safeguard and strengthen funding for inclusive actions. Local governments must continue to have access to resources that allow them to run comprehensive programs like Etableringslyftet. Simplifying application procedures, ensuring flexible co-financing rates, and encouraging partnerships with civil society and national institutions will further enhance the impact of EU-funded projects on the ground.

Strengthening multi-level governance for migration

A comprehensive and effective migration strategy requires collaboration across all levels of governance. While EU institutions and national governments set the legal and policy frameworks, it is municipalities and regions that implement them on the ground. However, their role is often overlooked in policymaking, leading to gaps between legislation and local realities.

The lack of structured dialogue between local, national, and EU institutions on migration governance hinders effective policy implementation. Additionally, fragmented funding mechanisms make it difficult for municipalities to access EU resources, leaving them without the necessary financial support to provide essential services. Furthermore, cross-border cooperation on migration management remains limited, preventing coordinated responses to shared challenges.

To address these issues, the EU must establish formal mechanisms that include local and regional governments in migration policymaking. Direct funding streams for municipalities managing significant migrant populations should be expanded, ensuring that resources are distributed efficiently to the area's most in need. Furthermore, cross-border cooperation initiatives should be strengthened, allowing cities and regions to share best practices and coordinate migration responses more effectively.

Contact

Annelies Coessens

Officer – Equality and migration

Square de Meeûs 1, 1000 Brussels

+ 32 470 88 33 42

annelies.coessens@ccre-cemr.org



**Local &
Regional
Europe**

**Council of European Municipalities and Regions
Conseil des Communes et Régions d'Europe**

+ 32 2 511 74 77 \ info@ccre-cemr.org \ www.ccre-cemr.org

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