



AKTH Stakeholder Workshop

“Exchange of experience and good practices on how to promote integration and unite European citizens through environment events and activities”

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Welcome Speech

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Firstly, I would like to thank the organisers of this event for inviting me to speak to this workshop, representing the Office of the Ombudsman and the Anti-Discrimination Body. I am no less grateful to you, my friends Xenia and Michalis Loizides for giving me the opportunity to be here today. I would also like to welcome you all in Cyprus and wish you all a pleasant and successful meeting.

Cyprus is becoming nowadays a multicultural country. Migrant population has turned the island into an increasingly diverse place. The accession to the European Union, ten years ago, the shift from national citizenship to EU citizenship and the implementation of the fundamental freedom of movement have become a reality with a large number of European citizens living and working in Cyprus. Those developments challenge, first and foremost, one of the most widely accepted myths about migration, communities and minorities in Cyprus. I am referring to the myth that Cyprus has always been a homogeneous country and that only recently, namely in the beginning of the 90s, it has become a country of migrant reception. They have also begun to put on the agenda the issues of migration, integration, exclusion and social participation of migrant and other communities of Cyprus society.

In saying that I should add that the Cyprus problem continues to define public life for many years; the division of the island and the separation of people into two communities, generate an atmosphere of mistrust and fear and drives the society to becoming more closed and less eager to accommodate diversity.

There is no doubt that in public discourse, the issues of tolerance, racism, xenophobia and migrant integration are particularly difficult, contested, disputed and complex. They are significantly important since they play a vital role in preserving cohesion in modern societies especially now that we face the challenges of a major economic crisis. The managing of these issues often creates tensions and their regulation reflects our social, legal and political civilization.

The most recent general census illustrated that migration has a wider and deeper impact on Cypriot society. The population of the country exceeded 800.000, from which 179.500 or 21.5% has a migrant origin. From this number, 62, 6% (112.424) comes from EU member states and the rest (67.123) originate from third countries. This effectively means that one out of five permanent residents has a migrant origin. This number has doubled since 2001. It is also important to underline, that the great majority of migrants are female domestic workers with Cyprus having one of the highest percentage of women migrant workers in Europe.

The results are indicative of a new cosmogony that takes place in the Cypriot society, which if handled properly, may be promising for social cohesion, tolerance, acceptance of pluralism and diversity.

The Anti-Discrimination Body was established in 2004 since Cyprus accession to EU. Ever since we expressed the view that Cyprus should draft and implement a comprehensive immigration policy with particular emphasis on the integration of migrants. We participated in the Committee of Experts who, under the coordination of the Ministry of Interior, drafted the first national action plan for the integration of migrants. We submitted our concrete proposals and

suggested basic principles underlining that integration is a two-way process that involves both the host society and the migrant population.

The issue of integration touches upon very fundamental values within ourselves and our society. In my view integration is at the end a feeling of belonging, a feeling of being accepted and of being part of a society. We are aware that the endorsement of this feeling is a complex task. But we can facilitate the process by developing integration policies that enable the migrants to become part of the social and political life.

Education is a crucial factor for the integration of migrants and the promotion of pluralism. Most public schools have a large percentage of immigrant children, but there are limited language learning opportunities for adult immigrants. The pressure exerted by the Ombudsman to allow migrant children to enroll to schools regardless of their residence status, has been a significant step towards the smooth integration of migrant children into the Cypriot education system. Despite the recent reforms of the Ministry of Education and Culture However, the educational system remains in essence monocultural despite the 10% of students with immigrant background.

Immigrants from third countries have always been identified with undeclared employment, discriminatory practices, exploitation and violation of human rights. Third country nationals, as in most southern European countries, are concentrated in low skill, low paid jobs at the bottom of the labour hierarchy. They have limited and strictly regulated access to specific sectors of the labour market, provided that they can obtain a work permit to work for a specific employer. Also the circumstances and strict preconditions of changing employer increases vulnerability since migrants can change employer only in case of labour dispute upon having been granted permission by a special committee or where they have obtained a release agreement by their employer. It is evident that there is an absence of a specific integration policy in that aspect and that there are rather fragmentary measures and contradictory policies. The fact that an

increasing proportion of migration today is irregular and unauthorized facilitates abuse and exploitation

In addition, there are no diversity management policies in place, neither in public nor in private sector, while no percentage of job posts is reserved to ethnic cultural minorities whatsoever. Believers of religion other than the Christian Orthodox are not allowed to abstain from work to exercise their religion. No other religions' festivities are recognized in education and employment sector for leave purposes.

Political participation of migrants is extremely low. Non- Cypriots who have a right to participate in local elections are EU citizens who are residents in Cyprus. Nevertheless, even their participation in elections is surprisingly low while differential treatment (in comparison to Cypriots) has been noted in a number of municipalities. Having political rights is significant because migrants develop a sense of belonging and participation in national life. It is therefore extremely important to extend the right to stand and vote in local and European elections to third country nationals, as provided in the European convention on the participation of foreigners in local life.

Concerning especially the free movement of the EU citizens it has to be noted that though great advances have been made in several areas there is still a long way to go to speak about a genuine mobility culture. Usually we notice an exercise of substantial restraint in terms of how the EU law is transposed in national legislation. In reality there are still some resistance and delays in parts of the administration regarding the respect of rights of EU citizens and their family members from third countries who tend to feel the effects of policies and practices that in essence deny to the EU citizens full social and economic participation in the host country. Our experience shows that politicians and administrators sometimes forget that the fundamental rights of free movement and residence in another member state is conferred directly on Union Citizens by the Treaties and are not dependent upon their having fulfilled administrative procedures. Often the problems of maladministration become acute of EU

citizens and their families on the areas of access to employment, recognition of diplomas, accessing working rights and family reunification. Needless to say that the right that often contested in practice is the right to equal treatment with nationals as regards social benefits. It is this aspect of citizenship that most of EU countries are unwilling to recognize. In particular what we face in practice is that the administration is willing to separate the right to residence from the right to equal treatment in social benefits.

It is also interesting to observe the way the media present issues of migrant and asylum seekers. From our experience we have noticed that undocumented migrants are frequent subjects of media reports which generally tend to portray them as threat for the Cypriot society. Whereas in some cases the media tend to be sympathetic towards immigrants, especially when covering heart breaking personal stories, they equally demonstrate xenophobic views when they refer to migrants as members of groups of a certain ethnic origin.

Under the current conditions of economic crisis, xenophobic voices are echoed and it is often said that migrants will “alter” our national identity and our presumed ethnic homogeneity. These arguments tend to ignore that Cyprus has been evolved and transformed through various ethnic, religious and cultural identities. They also ignore that the evoking of a supposed ethnic homogeneity is a myth that was always used as a means of exclusion and discrimination. Evidently, the discussion of who is “Cypriot” is directly related not only with well established perceptions and stereotypes on citizenship but also to the unresolved political problem.

It should also be added, that issues of tolerance and discrimination not only concern migrants. Nowadays, people with disabilities, people with different sexual orientation and generally vulnerable groups of population have limited access to their rights and are very often socially excluded. Our society is composed of cultural diversity and of traditional and new forms of diversity which should not only be tolerated and respected but should also be recognized and protected.

In conclusion, I would like to say that Cyprus, a country with its own turbulent political past and its own particularities, needs to rethink of its future by welcoming and respecting greater diversity through establishing an effective dialogue between people and different cultures. After all, accommodating people with different backgrounds and working together to build a common peaceful future is a core value of an inclusive society. Developing a concept of inclusion, especially in case of Cyprus, in which people get together, are interconnected and share sense of belonging is beneficial to social cohesion and solidarity and serves the prospect of an inclusive sustainable future.