



## **Immigrant Integration: Priorities for the Next Decade**

### **Council Statement from the Fourth Plenary Meeting of the Transatlantic Council on Migration**

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#### **Introduction and Context**

Immigrant integration is both very complex and costly. To succeed, it must be constantly evaluated and adapted to the ever-changing realities on the ground. Yet while the true benefits of successful integration emerge gradually — over decades and even generations — our political culture demands virtually instant results from our public investments. And despite rhetoric about integration as a “two-way street,” what most people and all but the most thoughtful of politicians actually expect is near-assimilation rather than the mutual accommodations true integration entails.

As countries grapple with the legacy of the Great Recession — in most instances soaring unemployment for immigrants, minorities, and youth; competition for society’s resources; and spikes in anti-immigrant sentiment — the consequences of our actions today will be felt for decades during the long recovery that lies ahead. Considering the continuing, and in many instances rising, need for immigrants, losing momentum on integration is not an option.

The goal of this meeting of the Transatlantic Council on Migration, held in May 2010, was to show how to shift our focus back onto integration as a continuous and interactive process — and to do so amidst the tumult of a persistent economic crisis. In doing so, participants considered the critical question of how to invest smartly in a new world that confronts two competing realities: increased integration needs with reduced spending capacity. The Council convened senior political leaders, seasoned policymakers, and global experts to deliberate on how to make investments — including whom to target and when to invest — that promise to deliver the best outcomes.

#### **The Great Recession and Immigrant Integration**

The recession’s most distinctive feature has been the diversity of its effects across countries. Unemployment rates have ranged from 3 percent in Norway to nearly 20 percent in Spain, where over 30 percent of nonnationals are unemployed. But while some categories of immigrants have fared poorly — particularly men (reflecting the recession’s decimation of workforces in the manufacturing sectors), youth (who are always the most marginally attached to the labor force and hence are the most expendable workers), and minorities (especially African-born ones) — immigrants as a group have

actually outperformed natives in some Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. And immigrant women have fared much better than men, as they have been disproportionately represented in the growing health and care-giving sectors.

Those on temporary work permits and less-regulated worker channels have served as welcome “flexible valves” in the labor market, with flows responding most directly to the decreased demand for jobs. In some countries, these workers and many immigrants have also been more willing to relocate and switch sectors in order to find work. However, most of those who lack an explicit right to return (such as unauthorized immigrants, European Union [EU] Member State nationals with temporary work restrictions, or permanent residents penalized for long stays abroad) have chosen to stay put, even during the most severe phase of the economic crisis. This is an unintended natural experiment that clearly argues for greater flexibility to be built both into labor markets and immigration systems, so they are able to react more nimbly to business-cycle fluctuations.

Looking forward, the Council’s analyses and discussions made clear that policymakers must be prepared for more funding shortfalls ahead. National and subnational budget crises are far from over, and extraordinary and sustained job creation will be necessary before unemployment begins to approach pre-Great Recession levels. The economy will also be appreciably different, with many employers in the manufacturing sector demanding workers with better skills relative to those needed prior to the recession (a product of capital investments and other production-process adjustments made during the downturn) and with construction (among other sectors) claiming a smaller share of the job market in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, and Ireland.

What does this mean for immigrants in the labor market? As noted, unemployment has been particularly vicious for minority and immigrant youth, and the danger of substantial and long-term “economic scarring” is great; that is, workers who either attempt to enter the labor market or who lose their jobs during a recession are likely to suffer *permanent* income and mobility disadvantages relative to the rest of the workforce. Yet there is little appetite for increased investments to bridge these gaps; the winding down of stimulus funds and growing concern in many countries about high levels of public debt are likely to exacerbate concerns that immigrants compete with natives for diminishing public expenditures designed to cushion the effects of the recession for workers and families.

## Public Opinion and Politics in the Recession

The public’s views on immigration are neither simple nor linear. While the crisis has not yet led to acute negative reactions, it has created space in the public discourse for more hostile political rhetoric and has strengthened the political fortunes of parties that are more explicitly skeptical about immigration, in some instances propelling anti-immigration parties to electoral success.<sup>1</sup> The growing prominence of anti-immigration sentiment in some countries is aided by the fact that immigration-related views tend to be intensely held. For instance, in the United States, 80 percent of the public considers illegal immigration to be a problem, and three-quarters of those consider it to be a “very serious” one; in the United Kingdom, 77 percent of the public says net immigration should decrease or that no immigration should be allowed at all.

Public opinion on immigration is also marked by ample ambiguity: voters might oppose reform while simultaneously abhorring the status quo. In the same vein, people might enjoy the benefits of legal and illegal immigration while expecting others to deal with its adverse consequences. This paradox lies at the heart of the political challenge. Public attitudes speak to the reality that many of the fears about immigration are not in fact about the immigrants themselves: anti-immigration sentiment is frequently

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<sup>1</sup> The Dutch Party of Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders, which campaigned on a strong anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant platform, gained 15.5 percent of the vote and 24 seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections, becoming the third-biggest party in the Dutch parliament. With this success, it gained a chance to form part of the next coalition government in the Netherlands.

a proxy for the *pace* of social, economic, and cultural change more broadly, to which immigration contributes mightily, and the growing sense of lack of *control* over that change. The composition of recent flows, that is, the perception of “distance” and “difference,” further contributes to the discomfort.

Public attitudes might be managed better if leaders understand the importance of “priming” public opinion. This may require emphasizing the importance of orderly immigration, including immigration controls and enforcement. Furthermore, the public must be assured that economic-stream immigrants are admitted only in response to measurable labor market needs, and/or as part of explicit economic growth and competitiveness policies. Both the challenge and the opportunity is to present orderliness and strict selection criteria in immigration as the means through which immigrants become the economic (and social) assets they typically are, rather than the liabilities they are often portrayed (sometimes correctly) to be.

Adding to the issue’s complexity is that widespread discrimination continues to plague many immigrant-receiving countries, a phenomenon not conclusively tied to the recession, although it may be exacerbated by it. This is particularly troublesome because minorities often do not report discriminatory incidents or even violence, due in great part to the belief that filing a complaint will change nothing. This level of resignation among minorities and immigrants suggests they themselves believe public attitudes toward visible difference are deeply rooted.

But what effect on politics? Many far-right politicians have exploited an alternative narrative based on a “clash of civilizations,” discussing immigration in the context of the supposed unassimilability of certain groups and the “ownership” of a country based on history and blood ties. However, it is difficult to assess how far extremist groups are capitalizing on real fears concerning jobs, or simply employing savvy — though short-sighted — politicking strategies. There is also evidence that some mainstream politicians, finding themselves rather powerless to effectively manage the financial and economic maelstrom unleashed by the recession, are seizing on immigration as a way to prove that they can be in control of at least one large phenomenon: immigration-induced social change. This is evident most starkly in the American state of Arizona, with its new immigration law,<sup>2</sup> and in the recent statements (for instance) of UK Labor leadership candidate Ed Balls.<sup>3</sup>

## Thinking Long Term Even in the Short Term: Rewriting the Political Narrative

While the economic crisis preoccupies governments, less visible long-term trends and needs must be incorporated into public thinking. Demographic change and aging workforces are on a collision course with the high living standards and social protections of modern life. Thus, focusing squarely on labor market needs and reforms — through a combination of policy actions such as encouraging more women (and others who are not in the workforce, most notably immigrants) to work; lengthening work lives; increasing productivity through better education and training programs; *and* increasing

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<sup>2</sup> The Arizona legislation, signed into law in April 2010, makes it a state crime to be in the country illegally and allows law enforcement officers to inquire about a person’s legal status during the performance of a lawful stop, detention, or arrest when reasonable suspicion exists that the person is in the United States illegally. The Obama administration filed suit in July 2010, challenging the state law on grounds it would interfere with federal enforcement of immigration law and divert resources that should be targeted at criminal and terrorist elements.

<sup>3</sup> In June 2010 Ed Balls published an opinion piece in *The Observer* titled “We were wrong to allow so many eastern Europeans into Britain: It’s essential there is a debate on what restrictions on unskilled labour mobility are needed in an enlarging Europe.” He argued that: “There have been real economic gains from the arrival of young, hard-working migrants from eastern Europe over the past six years. But there has also been a direct impact on the wages, terms and conditions of too many people – in communities ill-prepared to deal with the reality of globalisation, including the one I represent.”

immigration levels in orderly fashions — is critical to continuing prosperity and future growth. This realization is hard to act on at the best of times; but in a context of high unemployment and uncertainty, it may be particularly difficult to implement.

How can this new political discourse be framed? The narrative told by politicians is very important. While the current narrative, including a focus on deportations, resonates with many in the public, it misjudges the complexity of public concerns about immigration while also promising much more than it can deliver. The result is the further erosion of public trust in governments. Thus, it is critical to articulate a compelling new story about immigration that resonates with the public, is based on the facts and sets forth a realistic vision for the way forward. The Council believes that a focus on immigrant integration is an indispensable component of such an approach, especially if it sets realistic and hence achievable goals.

## Smarter Investments in Immigrant Integration

Just as the crisis impacted different countries in different ways and to differing degrees, its effects on government budgets — and the fiscal reactions of governments — have been equally diverse. While some countries have slashed spending on integration for newly arrived immigrants, others have redoubled their focus on language training and on facilitating immigrant access to the labor market. Regardless of their initial responses, however, one thing is clear: the bulk of the fiscal tightening on both sides of the Atlantic is yet to come. Governments — city, regional, and national — will be looking for more and more ways to save money.

Integration policies can easily become the soft target. Pressure to focus public investments first and foremost on citizens, particularly the most vulnerable ones, is strong and likely to get stronger. Yet failure to also invest in immigrants and their families at such a crucial time will have a generational impact with much larger long-term fiscal and societal consequences. Put simply: governments can neither afford to play “beggar thy neighbor” games with their public investments nor to “save” money on immigrant integration, if for no other reason than they will need strong and well-prepared workers in order to be ready for (and react to) the onset of robust economic growth.

However, money must be spent smartly. As detailed in the strategies below, the Council believes that how governments prioritize limited resources and how they structure necessary reforms — as well as how they communicate these changes to the public — can have as much of an impact as the *policies* they pursue.

### Reconceptualizing Integration Strategies:

- ***A new immigration framework.*** Developing a new, fact-based narrative on the role of immigration in modern society, and the policies that can support it, is necessary to reduce the frequently dramatic access and achievement gaps between immigrant groups (and their progeny) and natives. From education and employment rates to income and mobility projections, these gaps are wide in many countries. Immigration, well-conceived and carried out, can become a central element of the economic future of countries on both sides of the Atlantic, whether in boom times or in downturns. Investing in anti-discrimination policies — and informing vulnerable groups of their rights — must be an integral part of this plan. At the same time, any narrative must honestly and forthrightly address fears of immigration’s consequences.
- ***Mainstream services.*** Although many immigrants are more vulnerable during a recession, the challenges they face, particularly in the areas of education and skills development, are similar to those faced by all disadvantaged natives and, typically, minorities. This means that while certain services and programs have to be designed to address the unique needs of immigrants and

other vulnerable groups, they should be made available to all who need and qualify for them. For example, including the needs of immigrant children under mainstream, systemic education reforms — and thus making schools accountable for the performance of immigrants — is an effective way to improve outcomes. Such efforts can also “fly under the political radar,” thus disarming those opposed to targeting resources to immigrants in times of crisis. So that funding for immigrants does not get lost if placed in a bigger purse, accountability structures are needed to ensure resources are allocated fairly and effectively.

- ***Willingness and built-in capability to adapt.*** Governments must become more open to learning proper lessons from others’ experiences and much more nimble in adopting innovative new ideas. Clearinghouses that can undertake *meaningful* evaluation of ideas and establish which are clearly effective — and transferable to different contexts — are a critical investment.<sup>4</sup> Governments must also commence and/or make significant progress in monitoring how their investments are impacting vulnerable groups and be always ready to adapt programs accordingly. This requires building flexibility into programs that allow public and private service delivery groups to rethink and adapt their strategies in the face of new knowledge and ideas.

### **Worthwhile Priorities:**

- ***Invest early.*** Too often, human capital is needlessly wasted in the early stages of immigration, when newcomers’ education, skills, and experiences are most up-to-date and hence relevant. Early interventions in the economic integration of immigrants — via orientation classes, language programs, skills identification, and augmentation, and assistance with essential labor market information — will facilitate early entry into the labor market at a level that reflects and builds upon existing skills. This can be more cost-effective in the long term, even if the stay in the destination country turns out to be a short one. For those who return home, the investment will continue to pay dividends in terms of opening up better personal opportunities and reducing the need to reemigrate.
- ***Improve access to the labor market.*** Successful long-term integration hinges upon the adoption of policies that ease immigrants’ early access (and reentry) into the labor market. This applies to all immigrants, regardless of nationality or generation. Some effective policies in this regard are:
  - *Individualized assessments.* Interviewing immigrants upon arrival to assess their existing skills, language proficiency, and the most helpful and cost-effective additional education and training needed can help determine the appropriate integration support, and can facilitate effective entry into the labor market. And while such assessments are easier for countries with such systems already in place for natives — and relatively small numbers of immigrants — the concept is one that deserves careful emulation.
  - *Apprenticeships and wage subsidies.* Programs designed to offer immigrants a chance to get work experience in country, while also allowing employers to assess and build skills on site, can be critical policy tools. Such programs, which target those who need support in entering or reentering the labor market, are relevant to immigrants and natives alike.
  - *Vocational training.* Many immigrants arrive with skills and experiences needed in the labor market but require “bridging” education and training assistance to match the specific requirements of the host country’s labor market. Employers and government

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<sup>4</sup> Examples may be the US government’s newly launched clearinghouse designed to analyze medical spending in light of the new health care law, or the European Union’s investments in pulling together and promoting good integration initiatives and fledgling efforts to develop a (still voluntary) system of integration indicators, a Spanish EU Presidency accomplishment.

agencies alike need to include immigrants in their programs to develop and improve upon existing skills.

- ***Optimize recognition of skills.*** Developing and investing in systems for recognizing existing skills and qualifications is critical; no country currently manages to do this well, and there is a systematic underutilization of skills among immigrant populations on both sides of the Atlantic. Investments in common standards for skills recognition would not only bring economies of scale for governments but ensure that immigrants can contribute to the host economy and society in the fullest way possible.
- ***Engage civil society and the private sector.*** Effective public-private cooperation on skills development for immigrants can act as a multiplier for public budgets, generating better outcomes with fewer resources. Similarly, partnering with civil society in imaginative ways can lubricate the process of integration and complete the *whole-of-society* approach that is at the heart of societies that succeed *with* immigration — and thus change the narrative about it. When governments work hand-in-glove with the private sector and civil society, they can ease and facilitate the social and economic integration of immigrants while also mitigating discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment.
- ***Focus on the next generation.*** Smart investments in the education of immigrant children will create multiplier effects and avoid creating a “lost generation.” Priorities should include improving early childhood education, parental engagement, and teacher quality. Specifically:
  - *Teacher quality.* Countries must first elevate the status of teaching in society and assign the most qualified teachers to work with the neediest children, an approach that does not require more resources, simply a smarter allocation of them.
  - *School content.* Curricula should strike a balance between the needs of society and those of immigrant children. As with most aspects of integration, this is a two-way street: Children need to be integrated into the culture of the host country, but curricula should also be responsive to the specific needs, values, and assets that immigrant children bring with them. Furthermore, curricula should integrate language learning with subject-matter content, so that nonnative speakers do not fall behind in school.
  - *A greater focus on skills.* Innovative methods should be explored, including focusing on apprenticeships or vocational training, so that students graduate with needed skills to succeed in the labor market.

## Conclusion

While the recession might be over, the economic crisis for individuals, families, and communities continues — and threatens to get worse as stimulus funds are withdrawn. The Transatlantic Council on Migration underscores not only the critical role integration plays in helping families weather the economic crisis, but also the role that smart investments on integration will play in helping immigrant-destination countries be better prepared to grow and compete once the economic recovery takes off.

The Council thus urges governments to make sustained, focused investments in five key areas:

- Making early and sustained integration investments in language training
- Improving newcomers’ access to the labor market, for example through workforce training and skills-bridging programs
- Optimizing recognition of skills, credentials, and experiences
- Focusing on the next generation by improving education for immigrant youth
- Engaging often overlooked actors, such as civil society and the private sector in all aspects of integration.

Reshaping immigration policies based on a positive, but fact-based, political narrative is the first step toward realistically achieving these goals. At the same time, building flexibility and adaptability into the immigrant integration system, and targeting *all* disadvantaged groups, will improve the effectiveness of these efforts.

## About the Authors

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Demetrios G. Papademetriou is President of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank dedicated exclusively to the study of international migration. He is also the convener of the Transatlantic Council on Migration and its predecessor, the Transatlantic Task Force on Immigration and Integration (co-convened with the Bertelsmann Stiftung). Dr. Papademetriou also convenes the Athens Migration Policy Initiative (AMPI), a task force of mostly European senior immigration experts that advises EU Member States on immigration and asylum issues, and the Co-Founder and International Chair Emeritus of *Metropolis: An International Forum for Research and Policy on Migration and Cities*. He also serves as Chair of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Migration. Dr. Papademetriou has taught at the universities of Maryland, Duke, American, and New School for Social Research. He has held a wide range of senior positions that include Chair of the Migration Committee of the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; Director for Immigration Policy and Research at the US Department of Labor and Chair of the Secretary of Labor's Immigration Policy Task Force; and Executive Editor of the *International Migration Review*.

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