

*Final conclusions of the Annual Diaspora Forum on “The Democratic Participation of
Diaspora”*

Istanbul, 10 June 2019

1. Background of the Annual Diaspora Forum

The Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies, in cooperation with The Grand National Assembly of Turkey, held its Annual Diaspora Forum on “The Democratic Participation of Diaspora” in Istanbul, Turkey, on 10 June 2019. The democratic participation of diaspora is an issue which has been revisited on several occasions by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), with a report presented by the PACE on this issue as recently as 2015. The report emphasised that the democratic political participation of diaspora should be facilitated to strengthen political, cultural, economic and social ties between countries of origin and host countries. The democratic participation of diaspora is therefore a priority area for the Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies and the decision to dedicate the Annual Diaspora Forum to this topic was made to continue dialogue on this issue with a wide variety of stakeholders and with the aim of formulating recommendations and proposals on how to facilitate the democratic participation of diaspora.

The following conclusions and recommendations emerging from the discussions in Istanbul are intended to serve as a solid basis for the future work of the PACE and the Parliamentary Network in this area.

2. General Conclusions

Diaspora communities form a significant presence in most Council of Europe member states. Freedom of movement amongst EU member states, labour mobility throughout the Council of Europe and conflict-driven migration, both past and present, have contributed to the proliferation of diaspora communities across Europe. Combined with technological advances which facilitate connectivity and information-sharing across borders, this results in diaspora communities playing a prominent role in democratic processes in their countries of origin, as well as in their host countries.

In some member states, diaspora communities significantly contribute to the GNP of their countries of origin by sending remittances. This substantial economic contribution to their countries of origin should be accompanied by the right to participate in political processes.

Diaspora policies across member states should focus on promoting the political integration of diaspora communities into their host countries, while also encouraging and facilitating ongoing democratic engagement with their countries of origin. Member states should also harmonise standards and procedures to enable diaspora communities to continue exercising their right to democratic participation in their countries of origin.

Member states, parliamentarians and diaspora associations should actively promote and communicate positive narratives about diaspora communities by highlighting their accomplishments as contributors to their host countries and countries of origin and as facilitators of diplomatic and political ties between countries.

The media also has a major role to play in the promotion of political and cultural diversity both within and across nations and in countering negative stereotypes about migrant and diaspora communities by displaying their political, economic and cultural potential as active members of society. Additionally, social media serves as an important platform for connecting and mobilising diaspora on the politics of their countries of origin. This is particularly relevant during election and referendum campaigns. Amid emerging concerns about the potentially harmful aspects of online political mobilisation, social media

companies should facilitate the online political engagement of diaspora communities while ensuring that community standards relating to online election and referenda campaigns uphold the integrity of the political process and international standards on fair and free elections.

Governments should engage diaspora in decision-making processes on issues which directly affect them, notably through recognising and facilitating the possibility for diaspora to elect representatives of their communities to national parliaments. This can be facilitated by the creation of formal institutional channels dedicated to diaspora issues under the remit of relevant government agencies and departments.

3. Thematic Conclusions and Recommendations

Political participation of diaspora as a dimension of integration

- Recognise and value diaspora communities not just for their economic contribution, but also as democratic, political actors who have much to offer to their host countries and countries of origin.
- Acknowledge that the political participation of diaspora communities contributes to creating and maintaining peaceful and stable societies.
- Local authorities should promote the political and civic participation of diaspora communities by holding regular training and information sessions on the political systems of their host country and their right to democratic participation, both as electors and potential candidates.
- Governments could assist diaspora communities in navigating administrative requirements for exercising their right to political participation by allocating diaspora focal points in national electoral commissions.
- Diaspora associations should be active players in promoting the political participation of their community members in their host countries, supporting and empowering eligible members of their communities to run for election.
- Member states of the Council of Europe are encouraged to ratify the Council of Europe's Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local level ETS No.144 and align national electoral laws regarding the participation of diaspora communities with the standards set out in the convention.
- The political participation of diaspora should be promoted as a means of combating discrimination, racism xenophobia and hatred. When diaspora communities participate in political processes, they become active and contributing members of society, making it harder for extremist and populist groups to take advantage of the political exclusion of diaspora communities by using them as scapegoats.

Voting rights of diaspora and citizenship

- While acknowledging the need to ensure the integrity of elections and political processes, member states should develop frameworks and standards for the ongoing involvement of their diaspora in political processes after they have left their countries of origin.

- While recognising the diversity of political, historical and social particularities across the Council of Europe, member States should nonetheless strive to harmonise criteria for political participation and dual citizenship to the largest extent possible. In this regard, the organisation of multi-stakeholder consultations at national level between diaspora associations, minority groups, business actors, government officials and other relevant actors, should be promoted to inform state policies on political participation and citizenship.
- Council of Europe member states should strive to prevent large discrepancies between member states who apply time limits on absence from the country before revoking citizens' rights to vote and those who adopt a more liberal approach to engaging their national diaspora in democratic processes.
- Embassies and consulates should facilitate the registration and maintenance of diaspora communities on electoral rolls and provide voting facilities for elections or referendums taking place in countries of origin. Host countries should assist the embassies and the consulates by eliminating extra administrative work during the elections and as appropriate provide assistance in finding safe electoral places.
- Where appropriate, member states could consider best practices of states who have developed national and/or international institutions which organise their diaspora into regional constituencies to facilitate their democratic participation.
- Electronic and postal voting should be promoted and used more regularly across Council of Europe member states to facilitate the democratic engagement of diaspora communities who would otherwise be required to travel to their countries of origin to vote. In the event of consulate or embassy-facilitated voting in host countries, electronic online voting and postal voting should also be available. Furthermore, the potential for new technologies, such as blockchain, could be explored as potential solutions for facilitating secure e-voting processes.
- Member states should consider how to navigate the interface between citizenship and diaspora policies, with a view to eliminating barriers for holders of dual citizenship to participate in elections in both countries where they hold citizenship and which would also be considered as a strong message on the part of the host countries in their fights against discrimination racism and xenophobia.

Other decisions and final remarks

The recommendations set out in the final conclusions would be communicated to national authorities, international organisations and diaspora associations.

Participants and organisers congratulated The Platform of Women of the Congolese Diaspora of Belgium on being awarded the European Diaspora Prize.

Participants expressed their sincere gratitude The Grand National Assembly of Turkey for hosting the Forum and for their organisational support, and to the Swiss Confederation for its generous contribution, which made the work of the Network possible.