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Committee on Migration Issues

Integration of migrants: Complementarity between civil society and institutions

Summary of the field study visit

Lisbon (Portugal) – Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain)

Based on the reports by Mr Daniel Guéry (Vice-Chair) and Mr Marc Van den Reeck (Bureau member)

12 – 16 October 2026

Introduction

From 12 to 16 October 2026, Mr Daniel Guéry (Vice-Chair) and Mr Marc Van den Reeck (Bureau member) led a study visit to Lisbon (12–13 October) and then Barcelona (14–16 October) on behalf of the Committee on Migration Issues of the Conference of INGOs.

The visit is part of the mandate entrusted to the Committee in 2026: "the complementary role of civil society and public institutions in supporting migrants towards integration based on access to work, cultural dialogue and adherence to fundamental European values". It follows on from the Committee's recommendations of 2023 (access to rights and services) and 2025 (accommodation).

This summary is based on the two visit reports, the concept note of 30 May 2026, the note on integration of 14 January 2026 and the "Complementarity" questionnaire. Part I cross-references the observations from the two cities; Part II draws recommendations from them, linked to the mandate.

I. Lessons from the field visits to Lisbon and Barcelona

The two settings differ in their migration history but converge on one point: local proximity is the most effective lever for integration, provided it is backed by a national or regional guarantee.

1. Two contrasting contexts

	Lisbon – Portugal	Barcelona – Catalonia
Scale	1.5 million arrivals in two years for a population of 11 million	2 million people born abroad, twice as many as ten years ago
Origins	High share of Portuguese speakers; non-Portuguese speakers mainly from Nepal, Bangladesh and India	Three quarters from outside the EU, mostly Latin Americans (Peru, Colombia, Venezuela); large Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities
Status and employment	Right to work before regularisation, but no social protection in case of job loss	55% in an irregular situation, 80% unemployed or in informal work (metropolitan area)

	Lisbon – Portugal	Barcelona – Catalonia
Regularisation	Lengthy procedures, malfunctions at AIMA	Extraordinary regularisation in spring 2026: 250,000 applications, 83,000 granted
Housing	No investment in affordable housing for decades	40% of migrants share a single room with others
Governance	Proximity through the freguesias and the CLAIM centres	Participation council of the Generalitat and 8 territorial tables

Figures as reported by the people we met.

2. Governance: local action backed by a national or regional framework

- ✓ **A long-term timeframe.** In Lisbon, all those we met stressed that integration can only be achieved over the long term, which requires a stable strategy.
- ✓ **Proximity as a method.** In Portugal, cooperation between freguesias (neighbourhood authorities) and NGOs makes it possible to identify individual situations and respond to them appropriately.
- ✓ **The weaknesses of decentralisation.** Portuguese civil society fears limited municipal resources, reversals after each election and the fading of a national strategy.
- ✓ **The Catalan response.** As some municipalities refuse to apply the law, the Generalitat is legislating to ensure it is applied everywhere, anticipating a rise of the far right in municipal councils.
- ✓ **Structured consultation.** The Catalan participation council reserves seats for small NGOs; eight territorial tables provide a local perspective. This directly addresses the risk, raised in Lisbon, of marginalising small organisations, which are often closest to migrants.
- ✓ **Uneven mainstreaming.** The Generalitat has adopted a cross-cutting integration strategy intended to involve all its departments. Its implementation remains very uneven across sectors: effective in education, much less so in the department for children and youth.

3. Children and schools, bridges to integration

Both cities make the same observation: children who learn the language at school draw their families into integration. In some ethnic communities, this is almost the only path to integration for mothers who remain "hidden" in the family sphere.

- ✓ The Portuguese **TEIP** scheme (Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária) targets neighbourhoods according to poverty and cultural diversity. Even without systematic funding, it creates momentum for cooperation between local authorities and NGOs.
- ✓ The **Passos Manuel school cluster** (45% of pupils of foreign origin, "Espaço Mais" project) offers Portuguese tuition tailored to each pupil's needs and talents and brings together a local network of NGOs and public services.
- ✓ Conversely, children become an obstacle when there is no childcare for the very young: mothers can then neither train nor work nor take part in the society around them.

4. Employment and autonomy: formal work as the key

- ✓ **Regularisation opens up formal employment.** For the Generalitat, the extraordinary regularisation facilitates integration, removes the scope for exploitation and contributes to social security.
- ✓ **Unjustified delays.** The two-year wait before being allowed to work after registration is considered useless, even harmful, to the integration process.
- ✓ **Deskilling.** In Lisbon, the uncertain recognition of qualifications confines skilled people to lower-level jobs and exposes them to exploitation.

- ✓ **Business as partner.** The Sant Joan de Déu Hospital Foundation in Barcelona (En Marxa project) works with companies to provide accredited training leading to employment.
- ✓ **An economic ambivalence.** Strong demand for labour (particularly in agriculture) sustains irregular employment: society tolerates the irregularity that serves it, which the delegation describes as an instrumentalisation of migrants.

5. Housing and dignity: preconditions

Several Lisbon NGOs consider the lack of affordable housing a greater obstacle than the language barrier; the far right exploits it against migrants. Civil society's only lever here is advocacy.

In Barcelona, the Union of Muslim Communities of Catalonia makes the same observation: the housing crisis affects the whole population and stems from the absence of a social housing policy; yet it is blamed on immigrants, whom far-right parties single out as responsible.

In Barcelona, the **Santa Anna field hospital** (78% of those it receives are migrants, most of them undocumented) shows what holistic support looks like: a safe place, healthcare, meals, social networks, preparation for work, and challenges to refusals of registration or unlawful exclusion from services. People regain their dignity there, a precondition for their inclusion.

6. Rights and procedures: family life and administrative time

- ✓ Portuguese civil society deplores a rollback of family reunification, including for culturally close communities such as Brazilians, even though integration works better within a family than alone.
- ✓ The length of procedures is a concern everywhere. In Lisbon, it is due as much to malfunctions at the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA) as to a decline in political will, albeit smaller than elsewhere.

7. Intercultural dialogue and the role of religions

- ✓ In both countries, Christian charitable institutions (Caritas in particular) are credible, supported by the public authorities and present in almost every initiative.
- ✓ In Lisbon, the imam of the Central Mosque organises language classes for men and for women and preaches mainly in Portuguese in favour of genuine integration, while pointing to an incipient radicalisation among some young people.
- ✓ In Barcelona, the Muslim community is fairly large and growing: more than 400 prayer rooms in Catalonia, including more than 35 in Barcelona. The meeting with the Union of Muslim Communities of Catalonia (more than 25 associations) brought out three lessons:
  - **A guidance role.** Mosques and prayer rooms are often the first place where newcomers are received. Volunteer mediators and interpreters refer them to the relevant service: city council, Generalitat, public employment service or neighbourhood associations. During regularisations, the Generalitat and municipalities rely on these associations to inform the entire immigrant population.
  - **Word of mouth.** Lacking resources of its own, the community mobilises its networks: a bed in a member's home for a month or two, or contacts with employers in construction and transport.
  - **Social media and disinformation.** Asked about the lack of a counterweight to the far right on social media, the Union acknowledged that the far right is more present there and reaches young people more, whereas associations have limited influence online. It would like partnerships with the public authorities, which have greater communication resources, and support open to all religious associations.

8. Public opinion and toxic narratives

Widespread hostile rhetoric fuels distrust of civil society, even within NGOs. Both delegates stressed the need for places and platforms to talk about migration, coordinate action and respond to this rhetoric. According to the President of the Parliament of Catalonia, the aim is for everyone to feel that their country is "the one where their children live", not the one where their parents lived.

9. Good practices to retain

Practice	Location	Actors	What it brings
Participation council with seats reserved for small NGOs	Catalonia	Generalitat, NGOs	Structured and representative consultation
8 territorial tables	Catalonia	Generalitat, local actors	Detailed knowledge of local realities
Regional law ensuring that all municipalities apply the law	Catalonia	Generalitat	Protection against local political reversals
Freguesia–NGO cooperation	Lisbon	Freguesia da Misericórdia, NGOs	Individualised local responses
Local one-stop shops: local integration support centres (CLAIM)	Lisbon	CEPAC, public authorities	Reception, guidance and access to rights as close as possible to people
Priority education areas (TEIP)	Portugal	State, schools, NGOs	Targeting of neighbourhoods and a culture of cooperation
Tailored Portuguese tuition and local network around the school	Lisbon	Passos Manuel school cluster	The school as the pivot of family integration
Accredited training leading to employment	Barcelona	Sant Joan de Déu (En Marxa), companies	Direct access to skilled employment
Comprehensive support and defence of rights	Barcelona	Santa Anna field hospital	Restored dignity, a gateway to inclusion
Inter-NGO platforms	Barcelona	Caritas, platform of Christian organisations	Holistic and coordinated approach
Dedicated contact points for religious communities (Directorate-General for Religious Affairs; Office of Religious Affairs)	Catalonia	Generalitat, Barcelona City Council	A stable channel to inform and guide migrants through their communities
Preaching in the national language and language classes	Lisbon	Muslim community	Intercultural dialogue driven from within

II. Recommendations proposed by the Committee on Migration Issues

The Committee proposes 16 operational recommendations, grouped according to the areas of its mandate and addressed to member States, local and regional authorities, employers and civil society organisations. Each refers to the field observation on which it is based.

A. Complementarity between public institutions and civil society

R1 **Institutionalise consultation.** Set up permanent bodies for dialogue between public authorities and NGOs, with seats reserved for small grassroots associations and territorial coverage.

- **Basis:** participation council and 8 territorial tables in Catalonia; risk of marginalising small NGOs raised in Lisbon.
- **Addressed to:** States, regions, local authorities.

R2 **Back local action with a national or regional guarantee.** Accompany any decentralisation with a national strategy, transferred resources and a mechanism ensuring that all municipalities apply the law uniformly.

- **Basis:** concerns of Portuguese civil society; Catalan regional law in response to reluctant municipalities.
- **Addressed to:** States, regions.

R3 **Ensure continuity of integration policies.** Provide multi-year funding for NGOs and local authorities, so that action does not depend on the electoral calendar.

- **Basis:** integration "over the long term", risk of discontinuity after local elections (Lisbon).
- **Addressed to:** States, local authorities, funders.

R4 **Develop jointly run local one-stop shops.** Roll out local support centres where an approved NGO provides reception in liaison with public services, and encourage inter-NGO platforms.

- **Basis:** CLAIM centres (Lisbon); Caritas and Christian organisations platforms (Barcelona).
- **Addressed to:** local authorities, NGOs.

B. Access to employment and autonomy

R5 **Open up access to formal work quickly.** Reduce waiting times before work authorisation and maintain social protection during the transition period, including in case of job loss.

- **Basis:** two-year wait considered useless (Catalonia); no social protection before regularisation (Portugal); positive effects of the extraordinary regularisation.
- **Addressed to:** States.

R6 **Speed up the recognition of qualifications.** Introduce simple and rapid procedures for recognising qualifications and skills.

- **Basis:** deskilling and exploitation of qualified people (Lisbon).
- **Addressed to:** States, professional bodies.

R7 **Encourage business–NGO partnerships.** Support accredited training designed jointly with employers and leading to employment.

- **Basis:** En Marxa project of the Sant Joan de Déu Foundation (Barcelona).
- **Addressed to:** employers, NGOs, employment services.

R8 **Combat informal employment and exploitation.** Step up inspections in high-demand sectors and protect workers who report abuse, in order to end the tolerance of "useful" irregularity.

- **Basis:** agriculture and irregular employment, instrumentalisation observed (Barcelona).
- **Addressed to:** States, labour inspectorates.

R9 **Remove obstacles to women's autonomy.** Provide childcare for young children linked to language classes and integration pathways.

- **Basis:** "hidden" mothers, lack of childcare as an obstacle (Lisbon).
- **Addressed to:** local authorities, NGOs.

R10 **Make affordable housing a pillar of integration.** Revive investment in affordable housing and include it in integration strategies, in line with the Committee's 2025 recommendation.

- **Basis:** housing a greater obstacle than language (Lisbon); 40% overcrowding (Barcelona); absence of social housing policy and crisis blamed on migrants (Lisbon, Barcelona).
- **Addressed to:** States, local authorities.

C. Intercultural dialogue and social cohesion

R11 **Make the school the pivot of family integration.** Identify adequately resourced priority education areas, offer language tuition tailored to needs and build local networks involving parents, NGOs and public services.

- **Basis:** TEIP and Passos Manuel school cluster (Lisbon); role of children in both cities.
- **Addressed to:** States, local authorities, schools.

R12 **Involve religious communities and community leaders.** Support those that promote the language of the country and integration, and work with them on preventing radicalisation.

- **Basis:** action of the imam of the Central Mosque of Lisbon; role of the Christian charitable organisations met in Lisbon and Barcelona; reception and guidance role of Barcelona's prayer rooms; dedicated contact points at the Generalitat and Barcelona City Council.
- **Addressed to:** local authorities, communities, NGOs.

R13 **Create spaces for debate and counter toxic rhetoric.** Open places and platforms to talk about migration and disseminate reliable data, including on social media in partnership with the public authorities, in order to restore trust in civil society.

- **Basis:** toxic narrative and distrust observed in both cities; weak presence of associations on social media compared with the far right (Barcelona).
- **Addressed to:** local authorities, NGOs, media.

D. Respect for fundamental European values and rights

R14 **Guarantee procedures within a reasonable time.** Provide immigration administrations with the human and technical resources needed to decide quickly.

- **Basis:** malfunctions at AIMA and slow decisions (Portugal).
- **Addressed to:** States.

R15 **Preserve family reunification.** Guarantee the right to respect for family life (Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights) by avoiding rollbacks, since the family is a factor of integration.

- **Basis:** rollback observed in Portugal, including for Brazilian nationals.
- **Addressed to:** States.

R16 **Promote democratic values through reciprocal intercultural dialogue.** Develop with NGOs spaces for intercultural education and dialogue bringing together migrants and the host society, as well as pathways combining language, knowledge of rights and of the democratic framework, gender equality and participation in local life; guarantee non-discriminatory access to services.

- **Basis:** action of Santa Anna against unlawful exclusion from services; language classes and preaching in Portuguese at the Central Mosque of Lisbon; communication of the Conference of INGOs "Migration and electoral context" (April 2024), which calls for "a dynamic reciprocal process of intercultural education and genuine dialogue between all stakeholders".
- **Addressed to:** States, local authorities, NGOs.

Conclusion and proposed follow-up

The visit confirms the analysis put forward by the Committee on Migration Issues since the start of its work on integration: a migration policy focused on border control remains incomplete without an ambitious integration policy, carried jointly by institutions and civil society.

The Committee proposes to take this work forward in two ways. The recommendations set out here are intended to feed into the Committee's draft Recommendation on integration, planned before the end of its mandate, and thus to open a dialogue with the other bodies of the Council of Europe.

This summary will also be shared with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, following on from the consultation of local and regional authorities launched on 7 May 2026. The experiences of Lisbon and Barcelona show that the complementarity between public institutions and civil society is built largely at local level.

Reference documents

- Introductory note on the integration of migrants, working group of the Committee on Migration Issues, 14 January 2026
- Concept note for the study visit to Spain & Portugal, 30 May 2026
- Visit report – Lisbon, Portugal, 12–13 October 2026 (D. Guéry, M. Van den Reeck)
- Visit report – Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, 14–16 October 2026 (D. Guéry, M. Van den Reeck)

Strasbourg, October 2026