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ROUND TABLE ON
“THE PARTICIPATION OF FOREIGNERS IN
ELECTIONS”

Moscow, 27 May 2005

REPORT

“PARTICIPATION OF NON-NATIONALS IN LOCAL LIFE IN NORWAY”

by

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Minorities in Norway

Norway has always been a culturally diverse society. For centuries, Norway has been the home of national minorities (such as Jews, Kven (the Finnish-speaking people of Northern Norway), Roma (gypsies), the Romani people/Travellers and Skogfinn) in addition to the Saami people and Norwegians. However, compared to other countries the Norwegian population has until recently been quite homogeneous.

Over the course of a relatively short period of time Norway has come to feel the full impact of international migration. We receive asylum seekers and refugees; families are established across national borders, and individuals come here to work or study for short or long periods of time. The immigrant population has increased from 3 percent to 7.6 percent during the last 15 years. The total population in Norway is 4.6 million.

General policy

The policy of the Norwegian Government is based on the fact that the Norwegian population is multicultural, and that cultural plurality enriches our lives and benefits the communities. Everyone living in Norway, regardless of their background, shall have genuinely equal opportunities, equal rights and equal obligations to participate in society and make use of their resources. This will benefit both individuals and the community as a whole.

A society with continually new immigration and a growing, established immigrant population, which is diverse as regards religion, language, cultural and ethnic background, require efforts in several policy areas.

There is a need for measures to secure participation in local life, which is of great value for the individual and the different ethnic minorities as communities. And it is of great importance for the society as a whole because it has consequences for safeguarding democracy and social cohesion.

Acceptance for differences – religious beliefs, choices and lives – is both a central goal and a prerequisite for participation. In order to participate, in the different arenas of the local community as well in elections, each individual need the feeling of being included in and welcomed as an equal participant in society.

Policies and measures to combat racism and discrimination and to ensure that the public services and institutions are suited to meet the needs and requirements of a diverse population are therefore necessary. Furthermore measures to secure tolerance and attitudes of inclusion and respect are of great importance.

At the same a policy is needed which aims to unify and secure support of some common values, in particular the values embedded in human rights in addition to national legislation.

Importance of local communities

The local community is a very important arena for creating good relations across cultural or religious dividing lines and has an important impact on people's quality of life and participation in other social spheres.

Research shows that housing areas with a relatively high proportion of inhabitants with a mixed ethnic background have a positive effect on the development of tolerance and respect for people from a different cultural background.

The Norwegian government has funds for local immigrant organisations. The goal of the funding is to strengthen local organisation, give immigrants access to wider social networks, and to give immigrants opportunities to promote their interests to local authorities.

Participation in local elections

After residing continuously in Norway for more than 3 years, all foreign citizens have the right to vote in Municipal and County Council Elections. This also applies to foreign citizens in Sweden and Denmark.

Citizens from the Nordic countries have voting rights if they have moved to Norway by 31 March in the year of the election.

In order to be eligible to vote in elections at the national level, for the Storting, Norwegian citizenship is a precondition.

In the Municipal and County Council Election of 2003 about 117 000 foreign citizens had the right to vote. However, only 34 per cent of foreign nationals entitled to vote did so. In 1999 the percentage was 38. 41 per cent of Norwegian nationals with immigrant background voted in 2003.

The electoral turnout of foreign nationals from western countries was 39 per cent, while for non-westerns it was only 25 per cent. Compared with the electoral survey of 1999 the turnout decreased by 8 percentage points for non-western immigrants. The turnout for other groups was unchanged from 1999.

In 2003 there was no difference in the electoral participation of men and women among Norwegians with immigrant background.

It is also worth mentioning that the tendency to vote correlates with the length of period of residence in Norway. However, this tendency is significantly lower for non-western immigrants than for immigrants from western countries.

Participation in elections varies between different immigrant groups. Pakistanis had a turnout of 47% and Bosnians 41%, while the turnout of Moroccans, Ghanaian and Ethiopians were under 20%. Not very surprisingly – non-western immigrants with a Norwegian citizenship have a higher turnout than those with a foreign citizenship.

Mobilization among immigrants

One third of people with an immigrant background live in the capital – Oslo. In Norway immigrants living in Oslo participate more than immigrants living in other municipalities. It seems that the formation of immigrant communities in cities, gives a higher turnout in local elections. This goes for all groups of immigrants, but is most significant among the Pakistanis – which is the largest immigrant group in Norway. Norwegian citizens with background from Pakistan had a higher turnout than the rest of the inhabitants of Oslo – 65% (59.3 per cent for the population as a whole). In Oslo there is no difference between immigrants from western

countries and immigrant from non-western countries.

These tendencies are also described in a Danish study (Togeby 2000). The Danish study shows that the more Somalis who live in an area, the more Somalis vote. Formations of ethnic communities seem to increase the collective mobilization.

Immigrants as an important group of voters

In the local elections in 1999 immigrants for the first time appeared as a group of voters big enough to influence the election. They represented a group politicians paid attention to - as they had the potential to decide the faith of their further political life. The Conservative party in Oslo invited immigrant population to barbecue parties with *halal* meat in Oslo and others visited mosques for the first time

Immigrants have in other words become an interesting group in election campaigns – they are no longer considered as "objects" or as alien, but as independent acting persons with political power.

It is also interesting to observe that a large majority (80%) of immigrants in Norway vote on the Social democratic party or Left wing parties.

Representation

In Norway there are 435 municipalities. Non-western immigrants are underrepresented in municipal councils, however not dramatically.

In 26 municipalities non-western immigrants have a higher representation than their percentage of the population. It is worth mentioning that almost half of the immigrant population in Norway live in these 26 municipalities. In other words – where immigrants live, they are well represented. Pakistanis and Iranians have respectively 19 and 11 representatives, which is quite well compared to the size of these groups.

However, people of Vietnamese origin are a large and established group in Norway, but is not represented. In Denmark we can also observe the same tendency for the Vietnamese group.

33 women with non-western background are represented in Norwegian municipality councils. This constitutes the same share as among women in general.

Measures to increase voter turnout

Information measures

The Ministry of Local Government has different information measures in order to secure knowledge about how to vote, and immigrants are one important target group. Brochures are translated into the language of the largest immigrant groups in order to give information about their voting rights. Immigrant organisations also receive grants to implement project which aim at giving knowledge about the electoral process and increase participation in local elections.

Project on youth with immigrant background "ZINO"

In 2004, the project "ZINO" was implemented as a result of an initiative taken by the Minister of Municipal and Regional Affairs. The aim was to make contact with youth with an immigrant background and both local and national authorities.

As a follow up of this project, the Ministry of Local Government will grant money to projects

that aim at training youth with an immigrant background in political activities, how to influence decisions in local councils and inform about democratic processes in general.

The Contact Committee for Immigrants and the Authorities

The Contact Committee for Immigrants and the Authorities is a government appointed advisory body consisting of representatives from immigrant organizations, political parties and relevant governmental agencies and ministries.

The Contact Committee is a forum for contact and dialogue which reviews immigrations and minorities issues and policy.

The aim of the Contact Committees is to strengthen contact between immigrants and the authorities. Strengthened contact and an improved cooperation between the authorities and immigrant organizations is a prerequisite to securing immigrant influence in matters that concern them and to secure the most effective solutions to problems that arise due to inadequate information.

This year the Committee has conducted a campaign with the name "The Voice of the Minorities". Regional meetings have been held throughout the country, with participants from local immigrant's organisations and representatives from the political parties represented in the Parliament. The intention of the campaign was to present issues that the immigrant population is engaged in for the upcoming national electoral campaign.

Concluding remarks

I would like to conclude by saying that the Norwegian authorities would very much like to engage in a dialogue with other European governments on the matter of local participation of foreigners and we will of course be happy to give further information about our policies and measures to other European governments.