



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Combating Discrimination against Migrant Workers and Facilitating Their Integration into the Societies in Which They Are Legally Residing

As prepared for delivery by Tamar Jacoby
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I'm Tamar Jacoby. I'm here as a national speaker on behalf of the United States. And I'd like to start with a little de Tocqueville – almost no American can start without a little de Tocqueville – who warned, and of course this was way back in the 1830s, “Do lead an American to talk of Europe. For he will ordinarily show great presumption and a rather silly pride.”

Well, I'm not here to speak of Europe. But I would like to talk a little about the American experience of integrating immigrants – and I'll let you decide if there are any useful for the OSCE.

The United States is a nation of immigrants. According to our Census Bureau, 11 percent of the U.S. population – or more than 30 million people – were born abroad. As President Bush said a few years ago at a large swearing-in ceremony for new citizens: “We're a diverse country, and getting more diverse – and these virtues are what keeps this great country together.”

Now of course, where there are migrants, there is also usually discrimination. Many people believe migrants take jobs from the native-born and that they burden social services. But the truth is – and economic study after study bears this out – immigration contributes to job creation and economic growth. And by and large, in the United States, we believe that immigration serves our national interest.

So I'm here today to talk about integrating immigrants, and I've been asked to share some ideas about “best practices.” But I'm afraid – and I want to say this at the outset – I'm afraid that what I have to say may disappoint you. Because the truth is, I don't think America's success in integrating immigrants – and its related success in tolerating cultural difference – is ultimately a product of governmental policies or institutions. I believe America's success as a nation of

immigrants is far more deeply rooted – that it grows out of our very definition of who we are and the attitudes that stem from that definition.

Now please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that other OSCE nations can't develop the kind of culture that serves America so well in this regard. But to do so is going to require more than a little legislation here and an occasional cross-cultural dialogue there.

So what are these mysterious attitudes that are the key to America's success as a nation of immigrants? There are three components. The first is our minimal, flexible national identity. The second is our culture of assimilation – or integration, if you prefer. And the third is the culture of tolerance that both feeds and grows out of those first two components.

Now, of course I'm simplifying here. But the point about the American national identity is that it's minimal. We as a nation require very little of our citizens. Not similar bloodlines, not a common faith, not a shared sense of history, not even allegiance to any particular cultural heritage. All we require is knowledge of the rudiments of the language and loyalty to a set of political ideals: liberty, opportunity, equality before the law.

But the point is that adherence to those ideals grants you membership. As long as you accept that creed and play by those rules, we accept you as one of us. To be sure, historically, there have been exceptions: we as a nation haven't always lived up to our best idea of ourselves. But over the past 250 years, we have seen tens of millions of outsiders agree to that basic covenant and become insiders.

Now of course, as you become a member, you change. Though the American national identity is minimal, it's also transformative. The very fact of living in a free society with plentiful and equal opportunity breeds a certain kind of character in Americans – and we're proud of that. But our concept of integration has never required that immigrants obliterate the culture they inherited from their parents and grandparents.

This is the great paradox at the heart of what makes American work as a nation of immigrants. We expect newcomers to stand loyally by the United States. Part of the credo we expect them to adopt is that what we all have in common is more important than our differences. But as long as they accept those fundamental ground rules, they are free to live their lives as they see fit.

At home, on the weekends, in their families, in their places of worship, in their decisions about how to conduct their private lives, we feel they should be free to do as they like. And throughout history, Americans have done just that – as

long as it doesn't interfere with the basic ethnic and religious neutrality that are at the heart of our credo and our legal system.

And the beauty is that all of these three elements work together. The minimal national identity gives rise to the culture of integration, which requires but also engenders tolerance, which is also, of course, at the heart of our national identity.

But what makes it all work is that America is a membership society. The key is the fundamental – definitional – idea that anyone who wants to can join. Join not just as a second-class citizen, or non-citizen – but as a full-freight, equal member of the body politic.

And the key to this – and if there's one “best practice” that I'd recommend to you, it would be this – the key is our naturalization law. No one is barred from naturalization in the United States. Migrants are not immediately eligible – they can't apply for citizenship until they've lived in the country for five years. We also require a certain minimal knowledge of our history and law – and we test applicants on that. But no one is barred from naturalizing because of who they are or where they're from. And even once they become citizens, no one looks askance at what makes them different as long as they view and conduct themselves as members of larger commonweal.

Now, of course, this isn't the sort of change countries make overnight. And whether or not the OSCE nations decide to embark on this kind of change is up to them. But the one thing I'm quite certain of: this is the key to America's success as a nation of immigrants. The other is us – or can be, if he wants to join.

Thank you very much.