

Looking forward for not regretting after that: the educational approach of the ALLMEET project to xenophobia

Guardando al futuro per non avere rimpianti: l'approccio educativo alla xenofobia proposto dal progetto ALLMEET

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ABSTRACT

Since the collapse of Soviet Union, the socio-political and economic changes, the unbalanced relationships between the ethnic Russians and the many "visible minorities" and the increased migration flows have caused a growth of xenophobic attitudes in the Russian Federation. This article presents the findings of the Tempus IV financed project "Actions of Lifelong Learning addressing Multicultural Education and Tolerance in Russia" we conducted aiming at counteracting this xenophobic trend through education. The results of our project have confirmed that education is the first and most important step in tolerance development and struggle against xenophobia in Russia and that the HEIs can be the key actors in this process. Furthermore, in this article we support the idea that a healthy engagement between academics and policymakers is essential to the provision of informed, evidence-based policymaking aimed at solving or at least reduce conflicts in multicultural society.

Dal collasso dell'Unione Sovietica ai giorni nostri, i cambiamenti socio-politici ed economici, i rapporti poco egualitari tra il gruppo etnico russo e le tante "minoranze visibili" e l'accresciuta portata dei flussi migratori hanno provocato un forte aumento delle attitudini xenofobiche nella Federazione Russa. Questo articolo riporta alcuni dei risultati conseguiti dal progetto "Actions of Lifelong Learning addressing Multicultural Education and Tolerance in Russia", inserito nel programma Tempus IV e realizzato con l'intento di contrapporre a questo trend xenofobico efficaci azioni educative. Dal progetto è emerso come l'educazione debba essere il primo importante gradino nella promozione della tolleranza e nella lotta alla xenofobia in Russia e che le istituzioni di educazione superiore possano assumersi il ruolo di attori principali. In questo articolo sosteniamo l'idea che una proficua collaborazione tra mondo accademico e policymakers sia essenziale per ridurre il tasso di conflittualità nelle società multiculturali, gestendo con sinergia di prospettive e intenti situazioni per loro natura complesse.

KEYWORDS

Xenophobia, Russian Federation, Intercultural Education Platform, Higher Education Institutions, Tolerance.

Xenofobia, Federazione Russa, Piattaforme Di Educazione Interculturale, Istituzioni Educative Superiori, Tolleranza.

Introduction¹

According to Yakushko (2009), xenophobia is a form of attitudinal, affective, and behavioural prejudice toward immigrants and those perceived as foreign and as such it is a characteristic of any society, and Russia in this case is not an exception. Intolerance to “the other”, xenophobic attitudes and stigmatization of newcomers are widespread among the country’s ethnic majority - Russians, and in particular among young people (Alexseev, 2005). In order to sketch a better frame of the topic, an additional and crucial distinction should be made between minorities of ‘Slavic’ and ‘non-Slavic’ appearance – the so-called “visible minorities” (Prina, 2014). The report *Protecting the Rights of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in the Russian Federation: Challenges and Ways Forward* underlines that “while this distinction is not clear-cut, xenophobic sentiments tend to be targeted primarily at darker-skinned people, and particularly those from the Caucasus and Central Asia and Roma people” (Prina, 2014, p. 6).

The usual absence of violent reactions by the minority groups is not a consequence of their adoption of nonviolence ethics, but a matter of *time*. Therefore, according to Mukomel (2014) negative reaction and violence steaming from discriminated ethno-cultural groups and migrants are potentially possible in the future, especially taking into consideration that the second generation of migrants has not yet entered into the active life in Russia (Malakhov, 2014a). In the current situation, the future of intercultural relations in Russia highly depends on the *educational actions* that will be taken today in order to overcome xenophobia and prevent potential intercultural conflicts.

According to the experts’ assessment, an appropriate response to the xenophobia and tension in multicultural society should include measures aimed at promoting tolerance and creating a climate of mutual trust in the Russian society (Mukomel, 2014; Verkhovskij, 2016). The ALLMEET project “Actions of Lifelong Learning addressing Multicultural Education and Tolerance in Russia” grounded on the idea that these aims could be achieved promoting the concepts of intercultural education in a life-long learning perspective. In this article, we raise the following questions: *Whether and to what extent can education prevent xenophobia, stigmatisation and intolerance toward the “others” in Russia today? Moreover, what role can University play in this process?*

In the attempt to answer the above questions, we *first* give a brief overview of the experience the Russian Federation has accumulated in the field of managing its multicultural complexity. We study the positive as well as negative sides of this experience and focus on the problem of xenophobia in contemporary Russian society. *Second*, we present goals, concepts and main actions of the project ALLMEET, aimed at increasing the level of tolerance in the Russian society promoting the concepts of intercultural education. *Third*, in a concluding section we discuss how *capacity-building* projects as ALLMET can enhance the potential and role of the Higher Educational Institutions as pivotal actors in overcoming the problem of xenophobia in Russia.

1 Introduction and conclusion has been joint written by the three authors. Irina Tiurikova wrote paragraph 1. Federico Zannoni wrote 2. and 2.1. while Morena Cuconato wrote 2.2, 2.2.1, 2.2.3.

1. The state of the art: between peaceful coexistence and xenophobia

The multifaceted ethnic, cultural and religious composition of its population has always represented a challenge for Russia's national identity and stability. According to the data of the 2010 census 80% of the population declared themselves to be (ethnic) Russian, 3.9% Tatar, 1.41% Ukrainian, 1.16% Bashkir, 1.05% Chuvash, and 1.04% Chechen, while the rest of the population belong to over 100 smaller minorities groups. While Russian is the official language of the country and it is spoken by almost everyone, there are also 27 other official languages in Russia, and more than a hundred other languages that do not have official recognition. Some are close to extinction. Considering religion, while ethnic Russians follow mainly the Russian Orthodoxy, there are also 16.4 million Muslims living in the country together with believers of many other faiths (Russian Population Census, 2010).

The Russian governments have adopted different approaches of managing the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity during the country's history in order to handle with its multicultural complexity and maintain a peaceful coexistence between different groups. According to Tishkov (2013), in the second half of the XX century, the former Soviet Union and its area of influence were implementing a policy of "prosperity and rapprochement of the socialist nations, internationalism and friendship of people" (Tishkov, 2013, p. 146). In the 1970s, this policy was supplemented by the concept of a unified Soviet people, "community, whose identity was built on shared history, culture and ideological indoctrination of the country inhabitants" (Ibid.).

After the collapse of the USSR the concept of "multinational people", the principle of equality of nationalities and the support of their cultural identities have also been at the centre of building a new democratic state. They formed the basis of the Constitution of the Russian Federation in 1993. Since that time, certain administrative and legal mechanisms, aimed at the harmonization of country's interethnic relations, have been developed and implemented. One of these mechanisms is the *territorialization* and *institutionalization* of the ethnicity. This means that some regions of the Russian Federation are organized as "self-determined" territories, where the law guarantees the language and cultural rights of particular ethnic groups (Malakhov, 2016). In twenty-two republics and four autonomous districts (such as Tatarstan, Udmurtia, Chechnya, Nenets Autonomous District, etc.) ethnicities live in an organized co-existence where the national and ethnic minorities are guaranteed the rights to support their traditional languages, cultures and economic activities.

However, providing minority rights to certain ethnic and national groups does not eliminate the problem of xenophobia that has always characterized the Russian society showing oscillatory dynamics. Some scholars (Mukomel, 2014; Malakhov, 2014a; Poltaradneva, 2011) assume that today xenophobia in Russia has several dimensions, of which the most important are: ethnic (ethnophobia), migration (migration phobia), religious and confessional (Islamophobia, in the first place). This multi-dimensionality of xenophobia is the consequences of economic, social and political changes and turmoil taking place in the country throughout the history of the modern Russian Federation and the former USSR. In general, there might be distinguished at least two explicit waves of xenophobia that took place from 1991 to the present time (Verkhovskij, 2016; Malakhov, 2014b; Mukomel, 2009, 2014). These waves have aimed at different social groups and different factors have caused them.

The first wave of xenophobia took place in the 1990s. It was originated main-

ly by socio-political and economic changes: the collapse of the USSR, the economic crisis, the lack of law enforcement restrains, the situation of moral and intellectual depression, the social and national resentment in the society, the mythologisation of the Russian culture's superiority and the legitimation of the majority's claims on certain privileges (Mukomel 2009, 2014; Gudkov, 2005). All these factors, in addition to the ubiquitous fear of possible expansion of military operations and terrorists' attacks, paved the way for xenophobia and hostility towards immigrants and some inner minorities as ethnically "others", regardless of their ethnicity and nationality (Verkhovskij, 2016; Kozlova, 2016, pp. 349-352). Generally speaking, xenophobia focuses on individuals who come from "other countries" and toward whom native individuals have "an intense dislike or fear" (Crowther, 1995, p. 1385), but at that time in Russia it addressed not only foreigners, but also Russian citizens, specifically the inner ethnic groups living in the armed conflict zones of the "non Slavic" North Caucasus, such as Chechen (Pain, 2005, pp. 51-52; Verkhovskij, 2016).

At the beginning of the new century, the rise of the Russian nationalistic idea that had started to develop in the 1990s reached its top in 2000s and caused a new different wave of xenophobia towards non-Russian groups (Tinguy, 2010; Pain, 2005). The idea of Russia to be 'a nation state' followed by a new phobia - cultural distraction and loss of cultural identity - come to the fore and become the main reason for the rise of xenophobia and racism in the country (Verkhovskij, 2016; Mukomel, 2014).

Nowadays the idea of cultural distraction, erosion of "cultural core", "cultural matrix", "cultural code" are getting popular in the Russian society due to a significant change within migration flows (Mukomel, 2014). Until the 2000s immigrants coming to Russia were mostly Soviet people, who had the same history and cultural basis of the local population. Instead, since then the main stream of labour immigrants has been represented by young people who grew up in newly formed independent states, who do not share common Soviet past with the host community, and often do not know Russian language and culture (Verkhovskij, 2016; Mukomel, 2014; Bydanov, 2015; Poltaradneva, 2011). In this sense, the situation of modern Russia is getting closer to the realities of the European countries, where the differences between immigrants and the receiving populations is one of the major factors causing the growth of xenophobic attitudes in the society.

However, the specificity of the Russian situation and the standing growth of xenophobia could be explained by the overlap of such factors as the dual position of the government, the absence of other political actors articulating a pro-immigrant position, and the lack of institutional mechanisms to counteract migrant-phobia (Committee of Civil Initiatives, 2015; Abashin, 2016; Malakhov, 2016). On the one hand, the government behaves quite pragmatically recognising the need of immigrant for the labour market due to the Russian demographic decrease, however, at the same time it does not endorse institutional mechanisms aiming at counteracting xenophobia against immigrants and promoting the idea of tolerance in the society (Antonova and Karpova, 2011; Verkhovskij, 2016; Novyj Kompanon, 2016). On the other hand, in the public discourses the political elites spread a negative image of immigrants as scapegoats for social problems, associating them with the increased violence, depleted social resources (i.e., medical and educational), erosion of cultural values, and terrorism (Mukomel, 2014; Verkhovskij, 2016; Tinguy, 2010; Alexseev, 2015; Pain, 2014; Malakhov, 2016). The damages brought to their image through the stigmatization in media discourses put into question the future perspective of intercultural relations as immigrants are often portrayed as criminal, poor, violent, and uneducated.

Some authors (Mukomel, 2014; Verkhovskij, 2016; Iontsev and Ivakhnyuk, 2013; Malakhov, 2014ab; Ivakhnyuk, 2011) underline the need of spreading the ideas of tolerance about national, religious, ethnic, inter-class, gender and political tolerance, learning to accept people with different worldviews. Tolerance should not be intended in term of putting up with the existence of different cultural communities in a neighborhood, but it should move towards appreciation and the mutual trust between the representatives of different social and cultural groups. In this regard, the current state of the art requires: a robust and transparent policy that would counteract intolerance, scientific monitoring of the situation in the field of intercultural relations, implementation of an anti-discrimination legislation, the endorsement of integration policy towards migrants, and the development of tolerance and intercultural competences of both, newcomers and host society.

2. Actions of Lifelong Learning addressing Multicultural Education and Tolerance in Russia: the ALLMEET project

The initial idea leading us to the planning and implementation of the ALLMEET project was based on the strong belief that education can play a crucial role in the process of tolerance development and dissemination of intercultural competences, as students and school staff should be made aware of the xenophobia and their role as facilitators in the multicultural society. The challenge was how to equip them with the skills needed to deal with multi-ethnic diversity, to raise the level of tolerance in the society in order to prevent and overcome intercultural conflicts and negative attitudes to certain ethnic, cultural and religious groups.

In our view, research and educational projects, implemented by the Universities, might be considered as helpful tools in the realisation of some of the above mentioned tasks. For example, educational projects applying to the concept of lifelong learning in the field of tolerance, and projects aimed at the development of intercultural competences of both migrants and the host society might enhance intercultural communication processes between representatives of different cultural groups within the country. Through scientific research, implying monitoring of the situation in the field of intercultural relations, the Universities can provide an analysis of the current state of the art and a better understanding of further perspectives, specifically tailored to the local priorities.

The ALLMEET project has been developed in the framework of Tempus IV, the European Union's programme, which supports the modernisation of higher education in the neighbour countries. It aims at enhancing the capacity building and participation of Russian Higher Education Institutions in planning, establishing and reinforcing positive actions on issues related to migration and minority groups through the establishment and the implementation of six Intercultural Education Platforms in five different regions.

In our vision, the cooperation of experts from European (University of Bologna, Glasgow and Lisbon), and Russian HEIs (Moscow City Pedagogical University, Russian Academy of Education of Kazan, Kazan Federal University, Northern Arctic Federal University, Siberian Federal University) could contribute to raise the awareness on these topics and to identify good practices for the problems facing Russian institution and society as a whole. The added value of this international academic network was due to its heterogeneous composition, in which European and Russian HEIs of different disciplinary fields cooperate together with European (the Dutch "Foundation European Centre for Valuation of Prior Learning") and Russian non-academic partners (the Charitable Organisa-

tion “Volunteers”, Elabuga city). Many other associate partners from public administrations and civil society supported and participated to the project actions, increasing and guaranteeing their impact on the social tissue and strengthening the link between academia and society, between research and concrete, tangible actions addressed to different target groups².

2.1. The concepts to be promoted: intercultural competence and intercultural education

The first phase of the joint work involved the partners in building a common theoretical background for developing conceptual framework that would correspond to the ideas and principles of intercultural education. It included also the mapping of the existing knowledge, practices and policies on migration and ethnic conflict resolution at local, regional and national levels in Russia. The conclusions made upon the first phase of the project allowed us to justify and develop the core activity of the ALLMEET project: the implementation of six Intercultural Education Platforms (IEP) in six cities of five different Russian regions, covering wide and culturally heterogeneous areas of the country. The actions of the IEPs were thought to develop new concepts and practices of intercultural education, to work towards integrative strategies for intercultural dialogue, to empower migrants and minority groups, to contribute to regional policy analysis and development, to influence cultural policy-making at regional level. The topics, contents, information, data and skills to be disseminated within the IEPs are strictly linked to the cultural, social, ethnic, historical and religious peculiarities of each region, but at the same time grounded on a joint theoretical background focusing on the development of *intercultural competence* through an approach of *intercultural education* and *Community Organizing Model*. The above three conceptions are used as IEPs’ theoretical basis and need to be explained.

According to Deardorff (2006), the *intercultural competence* represents the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. It is supported by specific attitudes and affective features, (inter)cultural knowledge, skills and reflection. It implies

a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action which enables one, either singly or together with others, to: understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself; respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people; establish positive and constructive relationships with such people; understand oneself and one’s own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural difference.” (Barrett *et al.*, 2014, p. 7).

- 2 Among them, the Ministry of Education and Science of Arkhangelsk region, the Labor and Employment Agency of Krasnoyarsk region, the Krasnoyarsk regional youth public organization Center for Community Partnerships, the League of Mediators of Volga river region, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tatarstan, the Kazan City Fund of students’ social and cultural projects support “Azamat”, the Council of Deputies of the Yoshkar-Ola City, the Department of Social Welfare and Labor of the city of Yoshkar-Ola, the Mari Regional Branch of All-Russian Public Organization “Children and Youth Social Initiatives”.

In 1992 UNESCO stated that *intercultural education* has to focus on issues such as language, religion, cultural diversity, cultural heritage, minority and majority groups to deeply reflect and govern the multicultural character of society. Intercultural education aims to go beyond passive coexistence and faces the challenge to achieve new ways of living together through the strengthening of understanding, respect and dialogue between the different cultural groups. According to the UNESCO *Guidelines on Intercultural Education* (2006, p. 32), the international actions in the field of intercultural education should be based on the *respect* for the cultural identity of the learners through the provision of a culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all, addressing a full participation in society, contributing to the understanding and solidarity among individuals from different ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups.

In the ALLMEET IEPs theoretical background, the UNESCO's approach of intercultural education is also intertwined with the *Community Organizing Model*, that is defined as "a process through which communities are helped to identify common problems or goals, mobilise resources, and in other ways develop and implement strategies for reaching their goals they have collectively set" (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2005, p. 26). The challenge facing the IEPs was to produce positive effects on the community intercultural relationships and trends, enhancing the intercultural competence of the people that are attending their trainings and activities and mobilising their energy towards common goals.

2.2. From theory to praxis: the implementation of the six Intercultural Education Platforms

The implementation of the Intercultural Education Platform has been inspired by the experience of the intercultural centres in Italy, started in the '90 in correspondence with the increase in the immigrants' number populating the Italian cities. The concept of intercultural centre takes upon itself a set of heterogeneous realities, connected by the attempt to be seen as "resource places", located at the crossroads of different institutions, for building processes of integration and inclusion, promoting exchanges between people with different cultural backgrounds, and supporting the operators of the services dealing with new emergencies and needs (Favaro, 2002).

As intercultural centres are intended those places, organizations and institutions responsible for providing training, information and advice on intercultural issues to teachers, educators and social workers, preserving and making accessible documentation and scientific production, processing and disseminating information and teaching materials, organizing cultural activities, and especially promoting and coordinating the intercultural actions in the territory, with particular synergy with the schools (Favaro, 2002).

The intercultural centres enrich the territory of new spaces for reflection and mediation, in which positive interaction between natives and migrants can be experienced, characterized by respect and mutual recognition. Placing *relations* as the core of their daily actions, the intercultural centres can involve the widest variety of subjects that embody the social capital of their area, addressing in particular the new citizens, trying to stimulate their active participation and strengthening their social position (Bonora and Giardini, 2004). With their specific characteristics, even the IEPs are located on this wake of intentions.

The challenge was to adapt the idea of the intercultural centers to the specific need of the Russian partners involved in the project and to their specific tar-

get groups. Therefore, while we adopted a unique Platform Agenda, with common goals and coordinative criteria, each IEP was free to propose aims and activities integrating in the most suitable way the three educational spaces/approaches, we had developed during the theoretical planning phase of the project. The coordinative criteria regarded only question concerning the general and operational management of these three interactive spaces: *physical*, *virtual* and *out-reach*. As already mentioned, form and extent of their adoption vary in the different IEPs due to the national-cultural and socio-economic features of the region in which they have been implemented, as well as physical conformation of the territory and people settlement.

2.2.1. *The physical space: Research, Training and Learning Centres*

Before implementing the centres, we conducted a preliminary monitoring among young people and potential trainees in order to identify inter-ethnic socialisation's problems and the state of the local intercultural relations and values. These research findings have been used to tailor and prepare the teaching materials for the training and the educational activities offered to the target groups identified by the local working teams of each IEP. We were well aware of the fact that Universities and educational institutions work as part of a much broader social and political ecology of actors (policy makers, association, churches, work-placements). Therefore, we aimed at building a network of civic capital in order to implement a trusting interaction between academia and society as a whole. To achieve this goal the local teams held joint meetings with the leadership of the Federal Migration Services, Youth Committees and regional volunteer organisations, creating a database of all institutions and state authorities interested in the cooperation process. Seminars and symposia on practice and methods of cultural mediation, cross-cultural communication and conflict management have been held in order to raise awareness among public officers, students, educational practitioners and public opinion on these topics that are seldom discussed in the Russian society. Some training courses were especially targeted to migrants aiming at developing pro-active skills for solving problems connected to unemployment, social tension and inclusion in society, as well as free counselling services on legal, linguistic, social, psychological and cultural issues.

2.2.2. *The virtual space: Intercultural Education web Platform*

Each IEP developed, built, and implemented a virtual platform equipped with practical tools, relevant contents, and communication rooms, with the aim of facilitating users' self-management of intercultural education. In order to reach a wide number of users, the virtual platforms had to be easy to use and all their services out of charges, thus overcoming three possible obstacles to the attendance of physical platforms: the cost, the free time and the distance.

The criteria according to which the virtual IEPs had been implemented follow the principles developed by Anderson and McCormick (2005). First of all, we paid our attention on the *goals*, trying to explain them as clear as possible and to develop the related *contents* and *activities* keeping in mind their adequacy and relevance for the different social and ethnic target groups, who need to be engaged and motivated through a variety of innovative approaches (inclusive practices). After that, we proposed formative and summative assessment for each on-line

activity, taking into account very different levels of learning achievement. In sum, in our vision coherence, consistency and transparency had to characterise the objectives, the content, the activities and the tools for assessment.

In this way, we wanted to grant free open access to educational resources, taking into account the specific features of potential users of different nationalities and socio-cultural background. The website demonstrated their efficacy in reaching, involving and informing the representatives of the target groups on the activities offered by each IEP, permitting at the same time of disseminating *anytime* and *anywhere* both teaching and research materials and personalised learning modules. The on-line moderated forums had hosted and continue to host a vast range of discussions and debates, developing further issues to be debated and taken into account for granting the sustainability of the IEPs after the end of the ALLMEET project.

2.2.3. The outreach space: actions in community spaces, to reach the target groups in their social and cultural environments.

We adopted also the outreach approach as a tool to expand access to services or practices, to increase knowledge, skills or provide information to help in the process of different target groups' interaction and connection. Following the concept of the *Community Organising Model*, through the outreach approach we wanted to promote the cohesiveness in diverse communities by reaching out to them in their own environment. According to the territorial structure in which the IEPs are located, outreach was either in a physical facility located where the communities are or moved to different locations as needed. Reaching the community in this way has shown to be useful in meeting needs particularly of those people who are unable to access other available physical or virtual spaces. This approach has especially benefited those communities who are not computer confident or live far from the IEPs location, offering them another option to access services and information within their own environment.

In particular, the selection and actions of community engagement "ambassadors" was a way of engaging with the community through identified individuals who are part of the community or closely linked with it. The role of the ambassadors, who represented our first point of contact with the target groups, was to advocate for the needs and interests of their communities and to support them particularly where there might be needs not easily identified or hidden. Therefore, we have involved them from the very beginning in the planning and implementation of several projects and activities. The activities we proposed involve regular door-to-door visits, events that could include counselling services such as health information, social events that are relevant to that community's background and encourage other communication routes such as social media or newsletters.

Discussion and conclusion

The dual position of the government towards the growing migration flows and the lack of institutional mechanisms to counteract xenophobia contribute to the high level of intolerance towards "visible minorities", and particularly immigrants that characterizes the nowadays-Russian. Furthermore, blaming media discourses on migration damages the representation of the ethnically "others" and reinforce their stigmatization in the public opinion.

One of the main issues discussed by the experts, and the first question we raise within this article was: *Whether and to what extent can education prevent xenophobia, stigmatisation and intolerance toward the “others” in Russia today?*

Planning the ALLMEET project, we assumed the role of education as crucial for promoting tolerance, monitoring the existing situation of the interethnic relationship relations in order to find a scientific grounded way to promote a mutual trust in the multicultural Russian Federation. Therefore, the overall aim of our project was to support the modernization of higher education in Russia, enabling Universities to play a key-actors' role in promoting actions of lifelong learning addressed to intercultural education in order to increase the level of tolerance toward people with migrant background and representatives of minority ethnic groups. In our approach, tolerance went beyond passive multicultural and – ethnic coexistence, but achieved its complete meaning producing new ways of living together through the strengthening of mutual understanding, respect and dialogue between the different cultural groups.

We were however well aware that the success of the actions depended on the strength of the network that the Universities would have been able to build together with regional/local authorities and civil society. Without their cooperation, it would have been impossible to transform any new achieved intercultural sensitivity in a concrete support to the need expressed by the Russian scholars for anti-discrimination legislation and integration policy for migrants.

In our vision, we are now back to the second question regarding the role that University can play in the process of tolerance development, the six Intercultural Education Platforms (IEPs) in five Russian regions (Moscow city, Republic of Tatarstan, Republic of Mari El, Arkhangelsk Oblast, Krasnoyarsk Krai) could represent a possible answer.

On the one side, some university teachers were (and still are) trainers of the IEPs and some others were trained in this framework. In the six Universities involved in the project, the teaching staff has got now more competence, knowledge and skills on intercultural education and this help both in term of teaching contents and the necessary intercultural social competences for handling with the Russian students' multicultural environment. It could be not a case that during the three years of the project, the Russian partner universities have seen a standing growth in the enrolment of foreign students.

On the other side, the IEPs are now established bodies inside the universities, with their own location, rules and staff, working according to the local universities' policies, agendas and aims in close synergy with and as reference points both for regional and local governments and for Third sector, migrant associations and educational institutions on questions connected to migration, interethnic relationship and xenophobia. Each IEP is part of the wide national network of the six ALLMEET IEPs, but also the core of the local stakeholders' network. Official agreements with local (public and private) institutions, cooperation and counseling with administrative committees, joint organization of events, some of them outside the IEPs activities, have been clear signs of this trend.

The main idea of the IEPs is that innovative developments can be originated only by the mutual cooperation of local, national and international actors. The network perspective invites to consider the situations in more complex terms, to promote the dissemination of information, collaboration and synergies, leveraging on the expertise of actors who are no longer considered as individuals, but rather as active parts of a system in which the resources of each person are enhanced by the presence of the others (Folgheraiter, 1995).

Considering the above arguments and the results of our project, we assume

that education is the first and most important step in tolerance development and struggle against xenophobia in Russia and that the HEIs can be the key actors in this process. We strongly believe that a healthy engagement between academics and policymakers is essential to the provision of informed, evidence-based policymaking aimed at solving or at least reduce conflict in multicultural society.

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