

Migration & cultural Identity, Zaragoza (στα αγγλικά)

Round Table "Migration and cultural identity"	Zaragoza, 16-17.02.2001
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This Round Table on "Migration and Cultural Identity" is very timely, considering the distressing incidents at the coasts of Spain and elsewhere, where so often, the bodies of desperate people who dared to dream of a place under the sun, are washed out. Similar incidents also occur in the Aegean Sea, almost on a daily basis. Immigrants of all ages, pregnant women and small children disembark on the Greek islands, hoping for human solidarity, in order to practice their right to live.

Until the 1970s, Greece, like Spain and Portugal, were traditionally emigrating countries, exporting labour. But, with the end of the cold war and during the 90's, as our countries became richer, we became too, a destination for immigrants, the Eden of the dreams of thousands of people who knock on our door and appeal to our humanism. In the first part of European history, the phenomenon was directed from the North to the South. Now, the opposite is happening.

Nowadays, 20% of the world immigrant population lives in Europe. As Commissioner Vitorino said in a speech last July in Rome:

"Immigrants to European countries have traditionally had a positive influence on economic growth and have contributed significantly to the renewal and revitalisation of our societies. This was particularly the case after the World Wars that devastated Europe in the 20th century". As it is known, in the 1950s and 1960s, immigrants from southern Europe, Spain, Greece, Italy, greatly contributed to the reconstruction of Europe and the economic prosperity that ensued.

In my country, Greece, it is certain that many small and medium-sized enterprises have been saved from bankruptcy, thanks to the labour of migrants. As it is known, immigrants usually take up jobs that Europeans have turned their backs to, such as menial jobs in farming, domestic service and construction. We talk about the so-called 3D jobs: Demanding, Dangerous, Dirty. Despite unemployment, there are some jobs that only immigrants now accept, as I guess the situation is in Spain, as well.

A few days ago, *"Le Monde Diplomatique"* had a very interesting article on immigration and, among others, dealt with the situation in Greece, where farmers, angry with the mass arrests of illegal immigrants by the police, asked the government to stop these mass "sweep" operations and promised cynically, to lead these migrant workers to the borders themselves, after harvest. Apparently, farmers declared that they could not do without migrant workers, cheap labour, but they were not bothered with the humanistic side of immigration.

Unfortunately, there has not been any research or campaign on the positive effects of immigrants in Europe, or on their contribution to the enrichment of our civilisation, with different languages and cultures, which can also encourage co-operation and exchanges with countries of origin. On the contrary, the increase

in immigration flows in Europe, was accompanied by reappearance of theories and ideologies that caused the death of millions under fascist regimes.

It seems that certain circles are trying to create a climate of intolerance, hate and hostility towards immigrants, causing a serious threat, not only to social cohesion but also to democracy and peace. The experience of Europe, and especially the Balkans, gained by the terrible wars and disputes of the 20th century, clearly demonstrated the dangers of racism, xenophobia and nationalism, for peace and human dignity. This is why, the EU has strengthened its legal mechanisms against racism. It is evident that the ideological and political battle of the 21st century will be between conservatism (fundamentalism) and the humanitarian, cosmopolitan approach to contemporary problems. While humanitarian politics accept multiculturalism, conservative politics look at it with fear and hostility, refusing dialogue in a world whose continuity and peaceful cohabitation is based on dialogue and respect of diversity.

Europe's longstanding "zero immigration " policy was premised on the hope that the problem would go away; that if we built a "Fortress Europe", immigrants would not come. But, of course, they do. Using the asylum channel or entering illegally, often paying huge amounts of money to traffickers, immigrants never stopped arriving. It has become clear that as long as the gap in prosperity, quality of life and democracy between Europe and its neighbours remains and increases, immigrants will arrive, in the hope of a better future.

As Umberto Eco said in an interview he gave to a Greek journalist: *"Whether we like it or not, Europe will become a multiracial and multicoloured continent. Without being a*

prophet, I can foresee that in the third millennium, the Eurocentric model will stop being dominant. No nostalgic of the past and no racist can stop the great cross-breeding and intermixing of populations".

The problem is that public opinion, sometimes guided by the media, often blames immigrants for unemployment and high criminality. In Greece, we actually had a raise of criminality with the massive influx of Albanian immigrants. Fortunately, there has been a considerable decrease during the last 3 years, according to a report that came out this week. For example, while in 1998 54% of car thieves caught were Greek and 29% Albanian, in 2000, the analogy became 76% Greek and 17% Albanian. According to the Greek Minister Mr Chrysochoides, this change is partly due to the integration of Albanians into Greek society.

The responsibility for positive initiatives for combating discrimination certainly lies with governments and democratic institutions. Respect for diversity, the acknowledgement of the right to diversity, is a characteristic of developed societies and functioning democracies. This is why, the combating of racism, the upholding of human rights and democratic freedoms, all form an integral part of the European identity.

However, it seems that economic interests, combined with demographic changes, will make Europe open its gates. Last November, the European Commission, via Commissioner Vitorino, declared that there is growing recognition that the "zero" immigration policies of the last 30 years are no longer appropriate. Germany announced last March to admit 20.000 foreign computer experts over the next three years and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder is pushing to expand this green-card initiative to workers in other sectors. Ireland has loosened

immigration requirements for non-EU workers in technology, nursing and construction. Greece is soon to introduce new legislation on immigration, which will provide for legalisation and Italy's government has introduced measures to admit 63.000 industrial labourers a year. Even the infamous French Charles Pasqua made a declaration favoring legalisation of immigrants! Today's ideological coincidence demonstrates, once again, the opportunism that characterises immigration policies. These policies are always pursuing selfish gains and are rarely consistent, let alone respectful to immigrants. Europe may resist the idea that it is a continent of immigrants but in order to thrive, it has no choice but to become one!

Thus, we urgently need a common European policy for asylum and migration and this is what the EU has been trying to achieve in the last years. The Amsterdam Treaty, in force since the 1st of May 1999, provides that a common "Area of Freedom, Security and Justice" should be in place in the following 5 years. This entails the harmonisation of national legislation in areas that include citizens' everyday life, as well as the adoption of a common EU policy on asylum and migration.

The Extraordinary European Summit that took place at Tampere, Finland, made some very important decisions regarding immigration, in the framework of a five-year working programme. Its main points are:

- • Absolute respect for the right of asylum
- • Fair treatment to third country nationals
- • Co-operation with countries of origin
- • Management of migration flows

It is a fact that the issue of legal immigration channels is called for by the European

Parliament, particularly the Socialist group, as well as Commissioner Antonio Vitorino. At this point I would like to pay tribute to the Commissioner Vitorino for all the wonderful work he has done, as well as to Anna Terron i Cusi, for the hard work and the excellent co-ordination, in the framework of the European Parliament's Committee on Citizens' Freedoms and Rights, Justice and Home Affairs work programme. We need an open and transparent policy, with clear rules, laws and procedures. This entails that all member states will agree on a legal and flexible immigration system, taking into account each other's experiences. Unfortunately, progress has been slow. So, far, apart from the European Refugee Fund, no legislation has been adopted by the Council on immigration.

At the same time, it is equally important that all citizens, NGOs, political parties, local authorities and, especially women's' organisations are mobilised. Women, who have historically been subjects of racial-like discrimination, could have a special contribution to the combating of all kinds of prejudice. After all, it is not by chance that women's' presence in far-right organisations and violent incidents is rare.

As long as we remain silent to racist ideologies and practices, we all have a share of responsibility. Social life is not possible without respect for diversity, a necessary condition for the peaceful co-existence of people.

In the Paris Forum on immigration, a few months ago, Ariel Dorfman, the Chilean writer who was a friend of president Allende and then emigrated to the US, made a hopeful intervention: *"Possessing a language, knowing it well, knowing how to use it, is a victory of man against death. As long as you talk, you are alive. Possessing two or three languages, as is the case of our children, is an even stronger resistance to death. It is a guarantee for life".*

It is worth looking at multiculturalism of modern societies from a view that will bring to notice its positive and creative aspects. In the framework of the Swedish presidency, I would like to conclude with something that Anna Lind, Swedish Foreign Affairs Minister said: We have to find ways to harmonise our local, national and European identity. We have to be open to different national cultures. Will we manage to obliterate xenophobia that covers European political progress like a black cloud or will our common values collapse under the weight of debates on economics and migration? Our common plans should be based on ideologies that European citizens consider common ground, such as employment, the environment, and respect for human rights, on the traces of Jean Monnet.