

Immigration, integration and Islam

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There is a tendency to simplify the issue of ethnic and religious minorities in the political and academic discourses in EU member states and broader debates in civil society. The use of terminology, such as immigration and migrants and connecting this exclusively with Islam and associating Islam with terrorism, is very wide spread. The political elite who want to win cheap votes use the term immigration to cover all sorts of groups who enter Europe. Is this a deliberate effort on the part of European rulers to mislead public opinion or can this be attributed to a simple case of ignorance and arrogance?

Besides, this apparent misuse of terminology, another process can also be noticed in Europe. This is the lack of will to tackle racism and discrimination. Since 1997, when Europe officially talked of racism and designated that year as the European Year against Racism, the whole question of discrimination has been pushed in the background. Now, we have the year of mobility, equal opportunity, social cohesion and inter-cultural dialogue. The year of integration is not far behind. Not that there is anything wrong with these positive sounding concepts but the fact remains that unless racism is confronted, integration and social cohesion will not succeed.

In terms of terminology, there isn't a European country that has a well-organised and defined policy of immigration. This is due to the fact that since 1973, legal immigration has not been permitted, except in the case of a few very highly qualified experts in various fields who are allowed to move to some EU countries for a limited period.

But when it comes to third country nationals, they have to pass through the eye of the needle. They come as family reunion spouses, UN allocated refugees and in some cases as students. The present restrictive policies in most EU member states have drastically and effectively reduced the numbers of these groups. For example, in Denmark the reduction in numbers of third country nationals is as high as eighty percent. Then there are a sizeable number of undocumented and exploited seasonal workers who are used in many South European countries. No one knows their true numbers. In popular language, they are called illegal immigrants. They work in vegetable and fruit picking plantations, in the agricultural sector and on night shift cleaning services. They live in make-shift shanty houses, have no security and are often hounded by police.

In addition, there are a sizeable number of asylum seekers who come from war torn areas or flee from oppressive regimes like Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia and Sri Lanka. Most of them come as refugees but find EU doors closed shut. They are routinely rejected, many sent back against their will and some go underground.

Putting all these groups under the umbrella term migrants is not only misleading but also indirectly supporting the right wing political movements who want to frighten the European masses by raising the spectre of a flood of migrants swamping the EU. That is why, it is absolutely vital that anti-racist NGOs do not jump on the bandwagon.

When it comes to migration, there are several kinds of migrations going on in Europe. Internal migration consists of EU citizens, migrating to richer parts of the EU in search of a better life. This is happening in spite of the fact that most EU countries have raised barriers. But many East European workers are moving to the West because there is a demand for cheap employment and because they blend in well with the majority because of their appearance. Even people from non-EU countries like Ukraine, Moldova and other former Eastern block countries; have found jobs in the EU.

The construction industry in Portugal is entirely made of skilled and semiskilled workers from the Ukraine, Albanian labour is being used in Italy and Greece. Denmark which has tightened policies and curtailed refugees and family reunions to a trickle has officially started inviting skilled and unskilled labour from other countries. This is happening even when 50 percent of already settled ethnic minorities are without a job but are available for employment.

In this internal migration, there are few signs of non-European citizens who are settled in EU for many years, moving to other EU countries. In most cases, they stay where they originally settled. There is also migration from Latin America to Spain, Portugal and Italy. As well as English speaking people from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada, who have easy access to the UK labour market.

It is in this context that we need to be clear, precise and nuanced. If not, then the misuse of the word, migration or immigration scares most Europeans but also creates a gulf between settled ethnic and religious minorities from outside Europe and the European majority societies. It is thought provoking that in public debates and official data, children of first generation immigrants are often referred to as 2nd or even 3rd generation immigrants. In practice, it means that people who are born and bred in Europe are still considered foreigners.

To make this clear distinction between various groups does not mean that an inclusive policy is not desirable or focusing on a particular ethnic group is the aim. All it means is that decision-makers should have a better understanding of the reality at the ground and shape their policies accordingly.

And while, we are at the subject of policies, it is important to point out that authorities must make a distinction between ethnicity and faith when they talk of the integration of minorities. Here again, the word immigrants, integration and Muslims are very loosely used. The notion that integration has failed because of a lack of will among minorities and the use of the term Muslims rather than ethnic and religious minorities results in Islamophobia and an intense dislike of Islam.

Integration without religious colouring

There is no doubt that in these modern times, Muslim communities in Europe are going through a rough patch. They are not being accepted as equal human beings let alone appreciated as co-citizens. They are often regarded as "Outsiders".

But why mix integration, which is a socio-economic process, with Islam, which is a faith and private affair for an individual. In many years of work with diverse ethnic minorities in Europe, I have noticed that problems of integration are mutual among various groups irrespective of their religious belonging. It is not difficult to note that some wounds of non-acceptance are self inflicted while most problems are created by the society at large.

It goes without saying that while demanding that minorities should adopt and integrate societies must give place to individuals to participate in the process of their development – without discrimination or prejudice. In response, it is the obligation of an individual to avail themselves of the opportunities provided. It is important to emphasise that an individual needs to make an effort to fit in as much as possible without being a copy of the majority.

Having said that, I also wish to state that non-European ethnic and religious minorities have to face the reality that they came to the European continent at a time when their services were needed and thus their stay tolerated. This situation has changed. Now non-European minorities are not needed or desired. This can be noticed in the new pyramid of racism, which has appeared on the European horizon. In this new scheme of globalisation, non-European minorities and their children are being pushed down the ladder of labour market through the opening up of the EU towards East and Central Europe. Poles, Czech and Baltic workers are replacing Turks, Pakistanis and Middle Eastern workers. As one Danish politician put it to me; "Why should we give people like you a job, when we can have our cousins from East Europe who look like us and with whom, we share a common culture?"

Even if I do not like or accept this line of argument, I do understand it. It also makes sense to the wider European public and to future globalisation trends. Many young people with a non-European background who are born and bred in Europe really believe that they can get respect or attain equality in this part of the

world. It is a naive thought. Why would the children of yesterday's colonists give the children of their former subjects, equal rights or even a bit of respect?

And on top of this historical "hangover", European societies are now secular in their thinking and thus the argument of religion is like a red cloth being waved in front of a bull. In my numerous conversations with European politicians, academics and even grassroots activists, I am told that it is very difficult for them to relate to Muslims or take their concerns seriously, because they explain all their actions with reference to events and preaching which took place centuries ago, in an area of the world, Europe had to fight to survive.

Thus many Europeans are not happy that Muslims who were historical enemies are now living among them, demanding respect and acceptance of their religious rights. This situation becomes more complex, when some among these Muslim communities want to hold on to their traditions and values. On top of this, the media produced images of diverse Muslim groups as a generic and monolithic entity have made the concept of living together a near impossibility.

Is social cohesion possible?

It is of course important to say that an individual's cultural or religious values are not affected or put under pressure to change. Such attempts often fail and create a backlash. But seen from a European perspective, it is equally vital to stress that since the French revolution, European societies have been built or so it is claimed, on non-religious foundations. A century's long struggle against the established church helped to shape present day's norms, traditions and value systems in Europe. A hard battle was won against the hegemony of the Christian Church elite.

That is why; most Europeans are in no mood to give ground to demands from religious forces among Muslim communities in the name of mutual integration. There is no doubt that due consideration must be given to reasonable wishes from any minority, religious or ethnic. This is a part of the adaptation process. And since Muslim communities contribute to the welfare of the societies, they live in, they too rightfully can ask for justifiable concessions, like; Halal meals in educational institutions, separate swimming classes for girls, funding for the building of mosques and graveyards or the possibility of observing religious duties which do not interfere with majority norms.

It goes without saying that social cohesion can only be achieved when there is a room for diversity and a visible acceptance of non-European cultures and religions. But at the same time, it is vital to emphasize that a minority must not insist on having its way when some of its religious dogmas contradict or are in conflict with the majority thinking.

For example, some groups among Muslim communities in Europe insist on;

- Using Shariah guidelines with regard to family matters
- Prayer rooms in educational institutions or work places
- Wearing of Niqab or Burkas in public and institutional places
- Having Imams from their villages, tribes or countries of origins that have no knowledge of European cultures and often hinder integration by making bombastic statements. A few of these Imams even

glorify violence, justify the beating of women, physical punishment of children, and preach martyrdom, female circumcision and honour killing.

Since Imams are considered representatives of Islam, their extreme statements are taken as the opinions of all Muslims, but it is far from the empirical reality of all Muslims. To make matters worse, populist and nationalist politicians exploit such situations and create greater barriers to mutual integration. This is exactly why one should not assume that every thing Muslims do is due to their religion. It leaves very little room for valuing people's own efforts, common sense, human ethics and morals.

The British/Pakistani writer, journalist and broadcaster Ziauddin Sardar wrote very tellingly in the *New Internationalist* in May 2002;

" Muslims have to realise that Islam does not provide ready- made answers to all their problems. Rather, it provides an ethical and moral perspective within which Muslims must endeavour to find answers to all human problems. The way forward to a fresh, contemporary appreciation of Islam requires moving away from reduction to synthesis and from single literalist interpretation to a pluralistic understanding of Islam."

On a more personal level, Europe is my home. Here, I not only want to be respected and listened to, but most of all, wish to be left in peace, to find my own way in society. I shall participate, observe my duties and then demand my rights. Not because I am a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh, but because I am a decent human being and I contribute to society, on all levels.

I sincerely believe that the desire for integration will not succeed if it is imposed on by the majority or coloured by religious demands, rather than human rights. No European with a little bit of self respect would dare to argue against rights based on humanity but it would be easy to deny the same rights if asked in the name of religion. The choice is ours – humanity first or religion. I would go for humanity, because it also includes my beautiful religion, Islam.

Europe has slowly but steadily seen very disturbing progress towards nationalist movements and extreme right wing political parties. Today not only European countries with sizeable non-European minority populations like France, UK, Germany, Spain, Holland and Italy have strong nationalist and anti- immigrant electorates but so do countries like, Sweden, Poland, Norway, Switzerland, Belgium and Denmark. Nationalist movements play a very significant role in shaping local politics. This situation has even forced left wing parties to not sound or look minority friendly. The influence of nationalist parties is no more limited to just local politics.

On 15th January 2007, a new far right coalition was included in the European Parliament, as a recognised group. According to the BBC news web site (15 Jan 2006) most of the parties in this group are strongly anti-immigration. One should also remember that this group got almost 25% of the votes at the last European Parliament elections.

Another side effect of this strong political rhetoric is the debate concerning the dismantling of a multi-cultural society and its replacement with mono-cultural ideologies. Tony Blair has recently joined a long list of European politicians who are using very strong language in promoting Europeanness at the cost of inter-culturalism. In a recent interview in the *Daily Telegraph* (08-12.2006), he plainly said, " Adopt or leave". Interesting enough, he was evasive in naming; who he was addressing this message to. Commenting on Mr Blair's statement, conservative newspaper, *Daily Telegraph* could not hide its pleasure. In an editorial, called "as Blair seen the multi-culturalism light?" the newspaper asserts;" Multi-culturalism portrays itself as a means of celebration: in fact, it is an invitation to all minorities to complain, loudly and persistently, about their victim hood".

I am not a great fan of Francis Fukuyama, professor at Johns Hopkins School of International Studies. His super liberalistic approach to solving complex socio-economic problems of ethnic minorities amounts to blaming the victim. But in his latest essay about Identity and migration in the Journal of democracy (2006), he came close to admitting, why multi-culturalism has not succeeded in Europe. He writes; "Multi-culturalism, as it was originally conceived in Canada, the USA and Europe, was in some sense a 'ame at the end of history. That is, cultural diversity was seen as a kind of ornament to liberal pluralism that would provide ethnic food, colourful dress and traces of distinctive historical traditions to societies often seen as numbingly conformist and homogeneous."

Seen from an ethnic minority perspective, this mindset has not changed over the years. Many European still see non-European as exotic but inferior beings who can sing, dance, entertain and have the dirty, hard and dangerous jobs no self respecting European would ever do. So nothing has changed since the sixties.

The unfortunate development of structural racism is not only visible in political parties but it has also been slowly poisoning the institutions and the street for a long time. Talking of the European racist attacks, EU Commissioner for Justice, freedom and security, Mr Frattini recently voiced his concern during a visit to Germany. Speaking after a visit to Berlin's memorial to victims of the Holocaust, he mentioned EUMC's new report to be published in March 2007 which documents a significant increase in racist violence in many EU countries (Herald Tribune.21.02.2007).

But racist violence is not the only worry of ethnic minorities. Strict outer EU border control, visa restrictions, the lack of opportunity to seek asylum and ever diminishing opportunities to bring one's spouse to the EU have contributed to frustration among those to legally want to enter Europe. According to UNITED's documentation (Death by Policy- the Fatal Realities of "Fortress Europe" www.united.non-profit.nl), since 1993, 8107 asylum seekers and refugees have died at the shores of Europe. It has been monitoring the deadly results of the building of a 'Fortress Europe' by making a list of the refugees and migrants, who have died in their attempt to enter Europe as a result of Europe's immigration policies.

Commissioner Frattini wishes to change the situation by introducing limited time legal migration quotas where cheap labour from African countries can work in agriculture, tourism, and public works. But the condition is that after the seasonal work is over, African workers must return home. MEPs however, stress that the free movement of EU job seekers across the block should come prior to measures aiming to boost immigration from third countries.

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