

World Forum for Democracy 2017

Panel Discussion: What Responses to Anti-Migrant Populist Rhetoric and Action?

9 November 2017, 9.00 a.m., Palais de l'Europe, Room 5

Sponsored by the Network of Schools of Political Studies

Summary Report

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MODERATOR

Ms Despina SYRRI, Greece, Director of the Civic School of Political Studies, "Symbiosis"

PANELLISTS

Ms Barbara JOANNON, France, Independent Expert on Migrations

Mr Tomas JUNGWIRTH, Czech Republic, Policy Officer, Consortium of Organisations Assisting Migrants

Mr Takis PAPPAS, Greece, Recurrent Visiting Professor, Central European University of Budapest

DISCUSSANTS

Ms Teresa BUCZKOWSKA, Poland/Ireland, Integration Team Coordinator, Immigrant Council of Ireland

Ms Anja VAN DEN DURPEL, Belgium, City Manager's Office, International Relations and Networking, European Policy on Social Inclusion and Welfare, City of Ghent

RAPPORTEUR

Ms Galya HOVHANNISYAN, Armenia, Trainee, Directorate of Policy Planning, Council of Europe

Executive Summary

The panel discussion, sponsored by the Schools of Political Studies (SPS) addressed a set of approaches and strategies that could be drawn upon to develop a counter-narrative to the anti-immigrant rhetoric. It considered political figures, civic leaders and media professionals sharing responsibility for building effective and compassionate asylum and integration policies. The panellists and discussants shared their views on the role of civil society in influencing anti-migrant policies, including in countering anti-migrant rhetoric at the European level. Civil society organisations can also contribute to the integration of migrants and refugees and the protection of their rights against the increasingly hostile and populist environment in Europe.

In her presentation, **Barbara JOANNON** outlined three main narratives which can be effective in countering anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the target group among the civil society and public which is sensitive to the anti-migrant rhetoric. She brought in an example of a study conducted by “More in Common” - a non-profit organisation, which has made attempts to understand the perceptions of French and German public with regard to asylum and immigration policies in Europe. The study found that 53% of the public in France feels rather insecure or uncomfortable with immigration policies and the intake of refugees although they are not entirely against those policies. The study also identified that different segments of the population have distinct approaches and reactions. Older people, so-called ‘humanitarians’, often living in cities, are found to be more open-minded, however insecure. The overwhelming majority of people expressing fears and anxieties are the so-called ‘left behind’ or those economically insecure people, who are retirees with low pensions, people suffering from social inequalities or young people who are quite anxious about their future within French society. As a result of the aforementioned study, three core elements emerged as fears and anxieties around anti-migrant rhetoric within the French context:

- Terrorism
- Radical Islam and the fear that it will impact, in particular, on women’s rights
- Globalisation

Based upon the presentation of the first element, Ms Joannon concluded that it was the responsibility of civic leaders, political figures and media professionals to develop a more balanced public discourse - a discourse which highlights the values migration brings into societies in the form of enabling further economic development, fostering cultural enrichments and allowing social exchanges within the societies.

Secondly, a mechanism of sanctions should be introduced when anti-discriminatory speeches or anti-migrant discourse is promoted and spoken out loud in the media or by public figures. For example, there are independent authorities that have been established in France since 1989 with the aim of protecting audio-visual communication freedom, which within its vast array of responsibilities holds a mandate to fight discrimination in the media.

Thirdly, education is key to understanding the concept of migration. Migration education at large has not been introduced in France and it is merely addressed through the angle of geography but there is no link to the subjects such as history or sociology. Yet many initiatives have been taken to change this, which have to be supported more strongly at the political level. For example, the Museum of Immigration in Paris has developed an online toolbox for teachers and educators. In another example, various civil society organisations are being supported by government institutions to implement projects targeted at improving migration education. Moreover, she underlined the need for more concrete measures to be taken by governments and politicians to empower citizens to experience what it is like to live along with migrants and refugees. In this respect, the discussions in Europe are evolving around the concept of private sponsorship for refugees and migrants. An example is a pilot programme of sponsorship packages being implemented with a view to allowing citizens to get together and welcome the arrival and integration of refugees, in particular in rural areas and in small local municipalities.

Following the first presentation, **Tomas JUNGWIRTH** who is a practitioner in the Czech NGO sector seeking to influence policies at national, European, and global levels, put emphasis on the role of non-governmental organisations as agents for change. He stressed that the NGO sector used to be at the frontline of social progress, advocating for ever more rights. In recent years, however, NGOs have come to take on more of a defensive position, which requires an adaptation of both their content and their tactics.

He further identified key issues with regard to what populist policies and politics change in terms of migration patterns at the European level. Mr Jungwirth put forward a few practical responses from civil society organisations on how best to adapt to the present-day situation. Firstly, there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution and the current situation of migration policy is grave. Countries are introducing ceilings or quotas for asylum applications or refugee intakes, walls are being erected not only on the borders in Europe but also in other countries, especially in Africa. Countries are limiting the right to family reunion for recognised refugees; an increased political push is being exercised to return unsuccessful asylum seekers to their countries of origin or to third countries, where they are likely to face persecution and harm. European leaders are casting doubt upon the principle of *non-refoulement* as a very basic principle of international refugee law. Migration conditionality is being inserted into official development assistance policies, which are used in an instrumental manner to undermine good governance effectiveness. Mr Jungwirth stressed that this was not a question of individual European states pursuing such policies; this was becoming an EU wide agenda.

Secondly, while civil society actors praise and preach the rights-based and progressive policies, the political discourses can be completely detached from them. As a consequence this will not only strip the civil actors of their influence over specific policies but also will lead them to be excluded from political debate. Therefore, civil society actors have to choose their battles wisely by acknowledging the very difficult context and prioritising the core rights to fight for. It is becoming an imperative to build coalitions, so that CSOs are not alone against all the political sharks in the pond.

Thirdly, it is not sufficient to criticise official government policies without putting forward some workable alternatives. For this reason, activists are needed to denounce all wrongdoings, but there also need to be people who will speak to the political stakeholders regardless of their party affiliation without losing own values but making them relevant as experts in migration policies.

Takis PAPPAS compared populist parties and parties that are against immigration and migration politics, which he called “nativist” parties. According to him, the main distinction is that nativist parties support the institutions of liberal democracy but long for a liberal state exclusively for natives. Populist parties are democratic by nature but illiberal, thus populism can arguably be seen as a democratic illiberalism.

Mr Pappas characterises ‘illiberalism’ by three main ideas: Firstly, societies are seen to be divided by one single cleavage - namely a cleavage between ‘the people’ and some detached elites; secondly, adversity, polarisation and conflict are seen as key features of the political system and thirdly, the system becomes majoritarian in the sense that only majority views matter.

In contrast, liberalism is manifested by the existence of multiple, cross-cutting cleavages resulting in building bridges and creating consensual politics governed by such principles as the rule of law and the protection of minority rights.

The first discussant, **Teresa BUCZKOWSKA**, further endorsed the idea of building alliances because anti-migrant rhetoric can be seen as a signal of increasingly limited democratic processes in Europe. This phenomenon shows that democracy and all minority rights are at danger in Europe and that alliances and solidarity between countries must be reinforced in order to oppose such developments. She also supported the idea of providing workable solutions to the problems, of bringing governments with opposing discourses into the discussion and not allowing the populists to hijack that discussion. To make the debate with political stakeholders relevant and impactful, she concluded that

- Acknowledging the audience and their fears and concerns is crucial,
- Messages have to be tailored accordingly,

- The messenger has to be chosen wisely depending on who the audience is.

Given that the sector of migration activism in Europe is being predominantly occupied by people who are not migrants, there has also to be space for migrants to stand up for themselves. It is time for those vulnerable people to be given a platform to speak out and get their messages across.

According to the final discussant, **Anja VAN DEN DURPEL**, there is one answer which is applicable to all specific and different contexts: “You only see the things you are convinced you saw”. She shared an example from her work at the city of Ghent, when she was invited as an expert to the European Commission to give a briefing on the reality and the level of solidarity that exists between local people and migrants, where the European Commission had had a significantly more pessimistic outlook.

She further pointed to the gap that exists between the reality, the news circulated in newspapers and on TV, and the language used in official documents. Most literature that addresses or scrutinizes anti-immigrant feelings shows that those people who are afraid of migrants mostly do not have much, if any, experience with migrants. According to her experience, many people are against migrants except those with whom they are familiar. Thus, her conclusion is that the way migration is addressed, the words that are used and the experiences that are cumulated, create and shape the rhetoric that is present in society.

Conclusion

- Human migration is a natural phenomenon; it has always been there and always will remain there. Historically, there is a stable proportion of about 3% of people who live outside of their country of origin. What can be observed today is the discrepancy between the robust international legal system applicable to asylum seekers and people who have been displaced because of their race, conviction, nationality, religion or war and the very minor, if any, regulation that exists with respect to irregular migration.
- Nowadays the tendency is to talk about anti-migrant discourse rather than address the fundamental causes of why migration is happening. Those are two different discussions that are not necessarily connected but one should not be neglected for the other. The anti-migrant discourse has to be unlocked in Europe because the migrants are already living in European communities and these communities have to make sure that people are integrated rather than rejected or discriminated against.
- Primacy has to be given to the institutions of liberal and constitutional democracy to reinforce and protect minority rights. In their turn, minorities have to abide by and respect the laws and institutions of the host country. The institutions are safety nets against the dangers and challenges of populism and nativism.
- A stronger leadership is required from the European Union to cope with migration challenges. The European Council has renounced the idea of having a permanent reallocation mechanism for asylum seekers in Europe while the European Parliament – the direct representative of Europeans – adopted a more value-based stance and reiterated its position to support the creation of not just a crisis mechanism but a permanent reallocation mechanism.