

Pierre-Yves Le Borgn'
Conference on the linguistic integration of adult migrants
Council of Europe
Strasbourg, 3 June 2014

Madam Chairman, Mrs Thalgott,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to say that it is a great honour to address you on the occasion of this important conference. My presence here this morning is due to a contribution I made to a debate before the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in January. The debate concerned the reports by my colleagues Athina Kyriakidou and Tineke Strik on migrants and linguistic integration. You, Madam Chairman, were in the public gallery and you apparently appreciated my comments about the contribution that migrants make to European societies. Following an initial exchange of letters and a meeting in Strasbourg, you invited me to open this conference and I was very pleased to accept. Please receive my heartfelt thanks.

I am a migrant. And also a member of parliament. Before becoming a member of parliament in 2012, I, who am French, spent 20 years working abroad, in the United States, Luxembourg, Belgium and Germany. The story of my family is one of migration: I have a Spanish wife, whom I met in Belgium at Portuguese evening classes – and here languages already come into my story! – and we have two little boys, who have the nationality of both our countries. I was born in Brittany almost 50 years ago. At a young age I wanted to know more about the world, probably because there were no borders anywhere near Quimper, my home town, and because I suspected from the books I read and the films I watched that further away there was another world that it would be exciting to discover.

I dreamt of travelling, just travelling, and I did not imagine then that other countries would become my whole life. I left Quimper in September 1988 to become a student at the Collège d'Europe in Bruges, and I did not return until June 2012, when I was elected as a member of the National Assembly by the French Constituency of Central Europe. Just because I left France did not mean that I, a campaigner for Europe, was going to give up my interest in French public debate. On the contrary, living far from France in geographical terms strengthened my interest in its history, its values and the message it sends out to others. France is a country of migrants but does not always like to acknowledge this, particularly in times of economic difficulties such as those in which we now find ourselves, or at election time – and we have just had the European elections. The disastrous results of these elections, in which a xenophobic party won the largest number of votes in my country unfortunately bear witness to this.

Living abroad with the nagging fear that I could not become fully integrated and that I might lose all contact with my own past led me through all these years to be a member of associations of people in the same situation. One of them was called “Français du Monde” (French people of the world). It was my salvation for it provided help, advice, friendship, and the human contact that I sought. International solidarity also led me to forge contacts with associations of other migrants: Italians, Greeks, Swedes and Moroccans. For several years I sat on the governing board of the “Citizens for Europe” confederation and I can still remember its exciting meetings. To make a long story short, leaving home to live far away may be a risk but life abroad is also an opportunity: for migrants themselves, for the country they leave and which they never cease to honour and love, and for the host country.

And it is precisely because I see migration as an opportunity that I am concerned at the emergence over the past few years of a form of discourse that is deliberately hostile to migrants, who are presented as a burden for the public authorities and a threat to social cohesion. I was appalled when the previous French government introduced a Ministry of Immigration and National Identity, as if one threatened the other through a necessary causal relationship. How can anyone ignore and distort the history of migration, in France and in Europe, to the extent that it culminates in such folly? I find the exploitation of fears for political ends outrageous and contrary to the European values on which the Council of Europe was founded. We should not foster but combat xenophobia.

Immigration is not a burden, a threat, or a danger. I can remember the prefabricated buildings that were used to accommodate North African workers and their families in Quimper in the nineteen sixties. I passed in front of them on my way to school. Those men did not pose a threat to France. On the contrary, they contributed to its economic growth and we owe them so much. Without migrant workers, what would happen to the sectors of our economies where there is a shortage of skilled labour? Without migrants, what would be the future of an ageing Europe with its shrinking populations? What would happen to creativity if there is less coming together of ideas, arts, and diversity because there were no longer any migrants? What would France have become without Marie Curie, who was Polish, Pablo Picasso, who was Spanish, Lino Ventura, who was Italian, and Mohamed Dib, who was Algerian?

And, if I may be a little mischievous, what would France be without Manuel Valls, who is Catalan?

Ladies and Gentlemen, let us speak plainly: we live in open economies and societies which need immigration. To challenge foreigners, put obstacles in their way, reject them, assault them, and insult them because of their accent, their language, the colour of their skin, their culture or their religion is completely intolerable. Let us not beat about the bush. The rights and duties of migrants must be made perfectly clear. All obstacles to their employment must be lifted. Discrimination must be eliminated in all sectors of life by drawing on the work carried out by institutions such as the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human

Rights, of course, but also the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. And above all, a start needs to be made to ensuring their linguistic integration.

That is the theme of your conference and it is a prerequisite for the success of migration. The problems migrants face are not only purely linguistic problems such as unaccustomed grammar and unknown vocabulary but also, and perhaps even more importantly, the behaviour, attitudes and social values that are communicated in a veiled but insistent manner by language. It is already difficult to learn a language when you are an adult, but it is even more difficult to decipher, understand and assimilate the complexity of another culture. That is why, although I am one hundred per cent behind the idea of helping migrants to learn the language of the host country, I cannot endorse the idea of compulsory language tests, which for many narrow-minded and less than well-meaning people are the equivalent of relatively strict and necessarily biased entrance exams.

In the history of our societies, there have always been people who have tried to divide the human race into two groups: "us" and "you". With the emergence of nationalist movements, language has increasingly become the main cause of division and sometimes a pretext for unequal treatment. I see language as an instrument of integration and progress, not of segregation and relegation. Several member states of the Council of Europe have set up institutes to promote and teach their language, for example the French Institute, the Cervantes Institute in Spain, the Goethe Institute in Germany, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Poland, and the Camões Institute in Portugal. I am also aware of the wonderful local initiatives launched by many municipalities and associations, which your conference will highlight over the next two days.

Migrants who have a good command of the language of the host country do not come up against the language barrier but that does not mean that their integration is guaranteed. Integration is often not achieved within a single generation but over several generations. I also believe very much in the emancipating role of schools. Schools pave the way for open-minds, tolerance and cultural diversity. Our teachers are facilitators of intelligence, particularly for this second generation. However, this requires resources and they are often in short supply in priority education areas. We no doubt need to move towards a form of positive support with regard to access to universities and what we in France call "grandes écoles". Whatever the case, we need to step up our efforts to create a situation that is beneficial for the second generation and for the society of the host country by introducing a win-win system.

Allow me to change to German to clarify this point. The tragedy of the second generation is summed up in a famous quotation from Goethe. In his work "Faust", the leading character uses the following words to describe his inner conflict: "*Two souls, alas, dwell in my breast*". Although Faust's troubles bear no resemblance to those of the second generation of migrants, the quotation is nevertheless very appropriate. All too often, migrants are obliged to choose between their two identities. They must adopt either the values and traditions of their parents or the social norms of the country in which they are born. In a modern society,

and in particular in a very diverse Europe, it must be possible to have a plural identity. The norm should not be “either or” but “both and”. To make this possible, it is very important that the second generation should be able to speak the language of their parents and of their country of birth equally well.

That is the point with which I wish to end my contribution. We should never forget our roots; we should always be aware of our background and never reject that part of ourselves that has distant origins. I often think about this in relation to my sons. I thought about it in relation to myself when, last January, overcome with emotion, I addressed the National Assembly in support of ratifying the European Charter of Regional or Minority languages. When I spoke in the Assembly Chamber, I was overwhelmed by the loving memory of my four grand-parents, whose mother tongue was not French but Breton. If I am here today, it is also for them and thanks to them. It is also why I have undertaken, as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, to draft a report on voluntary and cultural networks of the 47 member states that exist in other countries, which I will present next year.

In short, the central theme of your conference is close to my heart. I will follow your discussions closely and I wish you much success. Let us not forget that such exchanges do far more than we realise to foster the debate, humanism, progress and, last but not least, peace, which is the very reason why the Council of Europe exists, n'est-ce pas? Thank you for your invitation and for your attention.