Living together in our Europe

**EN**

Civil society days 2016

31 May - 1 June 2016

EESC Brussels

**Europe and migrants.**

**The role of civil society**

Mauro Magatti

Università Cattolica

Milan

1. The migrants issue should be seen in structural terms, as a direct and indirect consequence of the huge leap forward involved in the historical process referred to as ‘globalisation’, which began in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. A wide range of factors (political, religious, economic and demographic) have now come together and triggered the movement of hundreds of thousands of people across the world. The impact of these factors is not likely to diminish in the short-term. It would therefore be completely unrealistic to fail to grasp that without a clear understanding of its historical context, a phenomenon like this cannot be controlled. My speech sets out to show why, together with the issue of the economic crisis, the migrants issue is, to put it quite plainly, one of the two great challenges which will determine whether the European project moves forward or falls apart.

2. To try to explain my viewpoint, I would like to start with the ideas of French philosopher Rémi Brague. He defines European identity in terms of what he calls ‘the Roman Way’, characterised by ‘secondarity’ and thus ‘rebirth’. In contrast with the American model, which is based, for better or for worse, on the idea of a new beginning, Europe’s model is one of layers. According to Brague, Europe’s history is characterised by its attitude to ‘rebirth’, deriving from its ‘eccentric’ identity. The French author uses this term to refer to the typically European ability to exist as if suspended between nostalgia for a classical age that is now lost and, at the same time, the willingness, albeit a resigned willingness, to come to terms with what is new - and sometimes even ‘barbaric’. The new is seen as a provocation that must be integrated without being annihilated; if anything, transforming it into a source of enrichment.

3. Thus Brague’s view is that over the course of its history, Europe has set itself apart through this very specific mode of moving forward, which, while it may be tortuous and problematic, has nonetheless enabled it to survive for millennia. Long periods of stagnation and darkness are followed by phases of ‘rebirth’, with the construction of new, more advanced forms of balance. This occurs through original combinations which marry together the return to a traditional approach with an opening up to difference, so as to produce a unique form of historical continuity. In this sense, according to Brague, Europe’s strength - unlike that of many other cultures, such as American culture - is precisely that it has always been capable of ‘rebirth’. In other words, it can start again, changing itself in relation to the otherness that appears before it. It does this without losing either its relationship with what lies behind it - its classical roots - or its own history and its own future.

From this viewpoint, Europe is like a millefeuille, it is good precisely because it has so many layers, one placed on top of another.

4. Allow me to say, as a sociologist, that the ‘foreigner’ is always a problematic figure for any group. The foreigner always call into question the established order, the normal course of events, traditions and ways of doing things.

Our culture has long been conscious of this difficulty, which is always a challenge to change. The foreigner is problematic in that he is always, despite himself, a disturbing agent, who gives rise to a process of transformation. Sometimes this is necessary, but it is usually unwanted. By calling forth a change to the status quo - which may later prove either positive or negative - the foreigner is always an agent of innovation. As we know, this is never an easy or painless process. Therefore, when this process is not well-managed, foreigners can easily become scapegoats upon whom static societies unload their shortcomings and their fears.

5. With regard to Europe, the strong pressure that has been felt for several years now at its borders comes at a particularly critical time, where a mixture of factors have come together in a way that is liable to become explosive:

Firstly: many European countries are still suffering from the social consequences of a crisis. These consequences, which hit the poorest sections of society hardest, give rise to widespread insecurity which should certainly not be underestimated.

Secondly: the issue of Islamist terrorism - a significant phenomenon that goes hand-in-hand with globalisation - has profoundly affected our perception of foreigners, feeding a widespread and understandable sense of fear in public opinion.

Thirdly: the EU’s institutional bodies and the way they work together are still being developed, leaving the link between national and continental solidarity unresolved. It is this institutional weakness that leaves room for political machinations reminiscent of the NIMBY (*Not In My Back Yard*) syndrome, with a tendency to unload the problems and costs of processes, even when there are systemic benefits, on neighbours.

Under these circumstances, it is not hard to understand the contradictions that have been seen in recent years in European policy on migrants, or the reasons behind the strong negative feelings in public opinion in many countries.

Chapter 6. Dealing with this issue in a way that is wholly focused on the short-term - on the erroneous assumption that we are managing an emergency - is not the right approach. Instead, such an approach is liable to make the problem unsustainable. It will accentuate the social resistance that arises when we reinforce the perception that the migrant issue is just a cost to us, or that we are facing an out-and-out invasion.

Realistically, migration is set to endure, although there will be periods when it is more intense and periods when it declines. This is because it is the result of considerable demographic and economic imbalances between different areas of the planet, which have combined to create very serious political, environmental and religious instability in large parts of Africa and the Middle East.

Rightly or wrongly, for many years to come, Europe will continue to be seen as a promised land.

The challenge, then, is to create the conditions for turning this phenomenon into something positive, not negative.

7. Given the institutional rules of play that currently exist in Europe, it is not surprising that politics has become embroiled in short-term electoral considerations, revealing all its limitations. We can and should hope to have political leaders who are enlightened and forward-thinking. However, it is useless, if not counter-productive, to place the responsibilities that actually belong to us, as civil society, on their shoulders.

What we do know is that the stalemate within our institutions is creating serious risks. As is becoming obvious more or less everywhere, the issue of migration is one of the fundamental factors behind the current restructuring of political systems. Over the course of just a few years, the nature of the political struggle has been turned on its head. In many countries, the parties in government (whether they are right-wing or left-wing) - which seek to maintain the status quo, but are increasingly perceived as out of touch with everyday life - are facing movements that are building their own consensus. These movements are giving a voice to widespread fears, even though it is often not easy to understand the solutions being proposed.

The very real problem which we all face is how to build a bridge between a difficult present and a future which we would like to reach, but does not yet exist.

The question, to get right down to it, is who will do this, and how.

8. It seems to me that there is room here for civil society stakeholders. At this precise moment in time, they have been given the task of working on both the rationale (emphasising the potential positives, without concealing the problems) and the practical steps (i.e. organisational solutions, as well as cross-cutting and transnational alliances) we need in order to come through this period successfully.

Meanwhile, we should be aware that, as history teaches us, institutions are not always only born through a domestic process of creation, but are also brought about by external drivers and requests.

It is particularly important, in my view, to stress, in an authoritative forum such as this one, that civil society has ‘creative capacity’. In other words, it has the capacity to contribute, from a cultural, social and economic viewpoint, to the creation of new institutional structures. This has happened many times in our history, and, more specifically, whenever civil society has been able to become a forum for real experimentation with solutions and models. After a (long or short) stage during which these are metabolised, they become drivers for new institutional bodies.

9. There are a number of good reasons, which are very practical and not at all ideological, which can and should be cited as grounds for civil society working in this direction:

- European demographic trends are alarming. In the coming decades, the forecast drop in the population and its ageing will be the most significant risk factor for our prosperity. We urgently need to regain a better balance, and this will happen, at least in part, through the correct management of migration. Not to mention the fact that history teaches us that open communities are also the richest and most prosperous.

- The long and difficult process of integrating migrants, which is a real task that for many, requires years, generates work. That is something we are sorely in need of in Europe. In the 1930s, to explain the need for the New Deal, Keynes said that recovering from the crisis required an anti-cyclical role on the part of public spending. This led him to say, provocatively, that if necessary, holes should be dug in the ground and then filled up again, as a way of giving people work. Obviously, this requires resources. However, as has become clear over recent years of conventional monetary policy, financial resources can be created out of nothing, provided there is the will and a public authority to justify and support this decision before the markets.

10. Having said that, it is clear that the task of integrating migrants cannot be reduced merely to the economic dimension. An issue like this cannot be resolved just with more money and more services. The process that needs to be set in motion, in order to get this phenomenon under control, must be a wider one, and, above all, must involve communities of citizens living in Europe as well as the migrants’ countries of origin, as far as that is possible.

11. With regard to the former point, ‘rebirth’ can take place if civil society is able to carry out the required mediation between the local and social situations that actually exist and the institutional and legislative plan that we are so urgently in need of today. It is in this mediation that civil society, made up as it is of a very large number of bodies that are extremely diverse, is key.

This mediation will consist of concrete solutions, good practice and reproducible experiences of mutual knowledge and reciprocal benefit.

Here, more than ever, it is worth reiterating that what we call ‘civil society’ is that plural, porous membrane which exists between each isolated individual and the public institutional structures (both political and economic) of our societies. Without the work of this membrane, the actions of which range from the informal sphere of volunteering to the more formal sphere of major organisations, and from the level of advocacy to crisis management, it will not be possible to manage a phenomenon such as the one we are discussing.

12. It is widely known that a few weeks ago the Italian Government presented a proposal for a ‘migration compact’, which will be discussed in the coming weeks. I refer to this document here because it seems to introduce a significant change, in stating that the ongoing nature of the migration issue requires various plans of action, including work to be done in the countries of origin. Although difficult and delicate, such action is crucial, and must confer an active and proactive role on civil society and its organisations, which are able to operate in ways and forms that go beyond purely institutional dimensions.

13. At home, in recent years the spotlight has been on managing the emergency. The role of civil society, however, although crucial in this phase, must cover the whole process that helps a person arriving in Europe from another land to become a European citizen, not only in legal terms but also in practice.

As we well know, there are many areas of intervention: education, training, language, the law, associations and employment. Essentially, it is a question of further strengthening, and better integrating, the network of those bodies that facilitate the entry of a new citizen into the European socio-cultural context, and overcoming the idea that this process happens in a spontaneous, ‘natural’ way. In fact, this is a delicate and complex process which needs not just stakeholders, but also collective knowledge. It can be achieved by encouraging the exchange of experiences; too often, partly because of a lack of time, there is a tendency to overlook these. On this point, I believe that we can and must do more, particularly by strengthening the sharing of experience and the development of European programmes, or, in any event, supranational or international programmes. The management of migrants and refugees can even be an opportunity for forging new links, something that Europe sorely needs.

14. Ultimately, what I am arguing is that for Europe, the migration crisis constitutes the arena in which its future identity will be forged.

There are many reasons to think that an over-concentration by politics on migrants, as well as being unlikely, would in any case be insufficient. Instead, strong action by experts among civil society is an essential element in supporting and making adequate action at European level possible.

In recent years, there has been a lot of talk of our identity, which has often descended into empty rhetoric. But identity is constructed, in both cultural and institutional terms, only in relation to experience, and in relation to life.

When we bear this in mind, we can see that the experience of migrants is a vast testing ground to help us put into words what Europe is, and what type of political society it wants to build. At the same time, we must be aware that any political unit needs a myth in order to survive, and that this myth cannot just be artificially created, but must come to life in practice and in decisions.

Improved institutional architecture is certainly a precondition for achieving this aim. But it is not enough. Just as important is shared acceptance of the myth.

15. If we adopt a global view, it may perhaps be clearer that the European myth is the dignity of the human being. Every single human being. This is something that sets us apart from the United States (which has the myth of the new frontier and the self-made man) and China (which has the myth of harmony).

This can be seen, first and foremost, from one thing that sets us apart from all others: the existence of a welfare state which, beyond national differences, translates this idea of the dignity of the human being into an institutional concept.

This is where I see the role of civil society. It lies in those bodies which work on the ground to make this myth of the dignity of every human being setting foot on our continent a reality. Not only does this make European society as a whole more mature, but it also brings about that new rebirth that the present-day demands of us too.

While individual Member States have the right to decide on the conditions for entering and staying in their territory, they also have a duty to respect, protect and guarantee the human rights of all individuals under their jurisdiction, irrespective of their nationality, origin or migration status.

All this should be monitored, with shortcomings denounced where necessary. As, for example, the Guardian did last Sunday, revealing the conditions in which thousands of refugees have found themselves following the closure of the Idomeni camp. Little by little, the myth should be made a reality.

Increasing the work that has already been going on in recent years means bringing the many good solutions that have been adopted in various countries out of the shadows, linking them up and helping them to grow. And to integrate with each other. In order to achieve this, what we now need is a benchmark of the actual and legal situation of the various types of migrants and types of action being taken in various countries, so that we can achieve, within a few months, better collaboration between all those operating on the ground in Europe. This will also help with the tricky issue of mobility within Europe.

16. If we try to consider these diverse aspects, and above all if we try to understand the way they are linked, we will perhaps start to see the migrants issue in a different light.

Instead of being a problem, it becomes, and this is no exaggeration, a real asset for building the future.

The question then becomes: how can we translate this European identity of ours in an intelligent way, without making it into an abstract ideology?

With a sense of proportion, winning the battle of integration without giving up on the underlying idea: the way in which we are able to manage (or cope with) the migrants issue will be key for Europe’s future identity.

17. One very short final observation. It would be an excellent result if, faced with an issue such as the one we are working on, in the end a true European civil society were to be born; without this it will not be possible for a true political union to be born either.

A European civil society that is able to share a vision and ways of working that cut across national borders, and can thus weave that European fabric we all know we need.

A civil society that is able to be the main author of that new rebirth that Europe needs, in order to look with confidence towards its future.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_