# Unity and diversity in future of Europe: the challenge of multiculturalism

Lorenzo Flamini, Nina Horakova, Eliza Papaki, Mehmet Saygin, and Maja Wallenger
with Ewa Krzaklewska

## 1. Introduction

This article aim is at presenting the main results of the work of the debates of one of the student forums of the UNICA Student conference in September 2010 in Rome.  During the debates we developed a vision of a multicultural society, characterised by tolerance and respect to all human beings, to equally guarantee rights to all citizens. This bears a potential which may lead to development of both national and other cultures and that allows individuals to profit from its diversity.

 In this article, we will first reflect on the concept of multiculturalism as such, and will then reconsider the situation of a multicultural Europe. The main part of our article will focus on the three ways in which we can realise our vision of a multicultural society characterised by respect, potential, and equality of rights.

Together with the globalisation process which opened the borders among the European states and which allowed an easier mobility for workers and students from among the member states of the EU, the word multiculturalism is becoming more and more common in our vocabulary. This word in fact has been used in the context of a duty (something that the one should work on, or achieve) or as a not yet consolidated issue, but if we pay more attention to the current European social-institutional situation, we may noticed that multiculturalism is already a part of our lives, whether we want it or not. Many of us work and study with foreign colleagues every day, tackling with the problems coming from our different cultural backgrounds and habits. We are not able - nor required- to say whether multiculturalism is something good or bad, right or wrong, answering the old debate that is going on since centuries, but rather it is simply a reality with which we have to try to cohabit in the best way possible. That is why we stress the benefits of a multicultural society and the importance of reinforcing it: because we see Europe through students' eyes, multiculturalism means opportunities, experiences, future.

We can define multiculturalism, using the terminology of the World Health Organisation, as "a coexistence of several cultures living in the same area without any assimilation of the minor culture to the dominant one". This definition implies that both minority and majority cultural identities are

equally important. Both should respect each other and try to learn more about the other culture, trying to overcome prejudice and fear that their own culture could lose its uniqueness. An example of a problem can be the fact that a multicultural coexistence can lead to such degree of fusion to overshadow the peculiarity of the culture of the hosting country.

Still, there are problems and challenges that multiculturalism poses on us - integration, intolerance, racism, indifference, immigration. This is seen for example in the discussions concerning immigration laws. We are, in fact, in front of a huge topic, as the enforcement of the rules regulating the entrance of immigrants are becoming more restrictive, so most of the times immigrants coming from poorer countries are forced to accept backdoor activities instead of being able to look for a regular job.

## 2. Europe's multiculturalism

Each and every one of us recognises the fact that Europe today is undoubtedly a multicultural society. We are already living in this multicultural environment, it has become our reality. This new reality has been formed during the last decades when each European country, according to EU treaties and agreements, opened their borders to foreign citizens, accepted and embraced diversity, and substantially reduced limitations to travelling, working and studying across the European continent.

However, this ideal description of our society does not reveal the real situation in Europe concerning multiculturalism. It is assumed that we share a common heritage by focusing on our geographical background as well as our common historical and cultural elements. Nevertheless, a greater emphasis is still given to the national culture of each country, which dominates people's thoughts and ideologies. Education could be the answer to this problem and the fundamental aspect for changing this fact. Yet, it can be clearly seen that education is mainly formed on national elements and it excludes from educational curricula general characteristics of other nations. Therefore, a nation-centred education does not teach us to approach humanity as a whole, but instead it gives emphasis on specific characteristics of the dominant nationality and ethnic background. Each individual is introduced mainly by his or her national origin and not as a human being with much other distinctive information.

Another significant aspect of the situation in Europe concerning multiculturalism is the way each nation understands its own culture. More specifically, the trend to keep our culture in its current form does not allow a critical view of the existing concepts. As a result the majority of European citizens tend to consider their dominant culture stable by preventing the interaction and

assimilation with new cultural elements. Adding to this, not only do they not permit the communication of diverse cultures but they also perceive them as a threat rather than a chance of development and enrichment of their history. This is due to the fact that each nation has different ideals and cultural values which may be misinterpreted and treated with fear or curiosity.

Regarding foreigners, there is a lot of prejudice and anxiety towards them. On the one hand, Europeans claim to be in favour of a multicultural society, but on the other hand many complain about the high immigration rate. Immigrants are considered to be a burden placed on locals and a threat to national economy. Being driven by stereotypes, Europeans usually accuse non-European immigrants of high unemployment, for the decreasing levels of knowledge acquired in education, as well as the increase of criminality. Apart from that, Europeans also tend to divide immigrants based on their attitude towards the dominant culture. In particular, they show their preference to those immigrants that adapt to the culture of the host country without trying to dispute it and on the other hand they are biased against those who question it.

The legal system, according to its principles, should treat all people equally and is assumed to protect human rights of foreigners and local people alike. Even if such legislation already exists in all European countries unfortunately it is often not observed. This is owing to the lack of consistency, considering the implementation of several laws, which finally leads to legalisation of several discriminations against "new" or other Europeans. There should be no doubt on how to treat people from different ethnic backgrounds as "all people are equal before the law"; however, social intolerance and fear against diversity are also reflected in the enforcement of legislation.

The labour market is another field in which multiculturalism is treated as a negative social aspect. This can be clearly seen during the employment process. The preference for home-based workers is obvious and it is even legally regulated. Therefore, this approach reveals the fact that employers usually do not take into consideration the essential skills, which are required on the labour market. Instead, they give greater emphasis on the national origin of the employee. This is undoubtedly a distinct example of discrimination and inequality against immigrants who are treated according to their nationality and not as equal human beings.

The fact that European society is indeed multicultural does not imply a positive attitude towards multiculturalism. Conversely, the situation today concerning multiculturalism is far from ideal and rather negative in aspects of education, labour market, ideology, and legislation. European countries usually aim at presenting the current coexistence of diverse cultures, religions, beliefs and skin colours as harmonious. However we, young citizens of Europe, know that this is not the reality and therefore facing, instead of prettifying, this significant problem will be the only solution.

This is why we discussed and proposed solutions in three aspects of the society that can help to achieve multicultural society of our dreams.

## 3. Responses to multiculturalism

### 3.1. 1st way: Multicultural education

The first means of dealing with multiculturalism in a positive way is through education. In the two days of discussions in the Forum we were trying to answer questions of how, what, to whom and by whom to educate towards a better functioning of multicultural Europe.

For the past decades, the research and evaluation in education have focused on the phenomenon of Multicultural Education. As is often stated in studies on this topic[1], the goal of multicultural education is to guide students to reach 'intercultural competency'. This is achieved through the knowledge and understanding they have of ethnic, religious and racial identities and histories, as well as their tolerance towards these cultural differences and their attitudes towards multiculturalism.

*How do we educate?*

"Multicultural teaching" means different things according to one's course goals and one's discipline. We are not trying to achieve a recommendation regarding various teaching methods and strategies, but instead to we wish to put forth the idea that the most important factor is the positive and tolerant environment we are taught in, as well as the questions related to who educates and with whom we are educated. Learning towards multiculturalism is not considered a regular school subject such as Mathematics or Literature. Moreover, concerning school education, it should be included in all the subjects, through teaching towards positive attitudes of respect rather than specific knowledge and skills.

*Who educates?*

This idea emphasises the role of a teacher, tutor or instructor (we will summarise all the professions in education with the term "educator") as one of the most important elements in the learning process, as well as all the other participants in our educational processes. We recommend

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1   Prucha , J. Multikulturní výchova; problémy spojené s její realizací. 2004. Available on: http://clanky.rvp.cz/clanek/c/Z/32/multikulturni-vychova-problemy-spojene-s-jeji-realizaci.html/. Last viewed on October, 10.

the educators be well trained to efficiently work and educate in a multicultural environment, be a role model and successfully guide their students towards tolerance and respect for others. They should know how to appreciate and utilise the different ways of thinking and learning which they may come across during their work.

This shall be provided by efficient and targeted training to educators during and after their years of university studies. Educators must have practical experience with other cultures. The best way to gain that is through exchanges and intercultural course activities. We suggest, for example, a mandatory training with minority groups for students of education to gain the real hands-on experience to fight prejudice. Another useful tool is the educators' mobility through which members of different nationalities can learn from and interact with each other. For all the reasons above a sufficient funding is to be provided to let every educator have the possibilities for continuous development of their multicultural understanding.

*What do we teach?*

The main topic to be taught and practiced is to foster the similarities and differences there are amongst each other in order to establish an international understanding and community responsibility, especially between young people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Non-formal education, as the learning and training which takes place outside recognised educational institutions, is also one of the major tools in the multicultural education and it is highly recommended to recognise and acknowledge the importance of this form of education as another means of achieving a multicultural society. The various programmes of non-formal education promote the unity and cooperation of people regardless of the culture and background of the participants. This is especially vital in an early age through playing and learning in a diverse environment. As already stated earlier, teaching towards multiculturalism is mostly about teaching towards the positive attitudes and fighting out prejudice. This can be done through an exposure to other cultures, especially those of the minorities in our local environment. Students of different backgrounds should be integrated to learn from and get to know each other to be able to live in the same community.

*Who do we educate?*

Education towards international and multicultural understanding shall be a part of all the levels of education and should be included in all the subjects. Intercultural learning should have a life-long learning focus, starting in the earliest ages of learning and should be available to everyone. We

should also to include the family of the pupils and students in this process.

## 3.2    2nd way: Open Communication

An efficient communication is a key issue in the modern multicultural societies. Therefore, it is important that all the means of transferring information are well prepared to do it at different levels and in proper ways according to the diversified society. We think it is highly important that the information we dedicate to others is well formulated and clear to them and possibly in their own language. No other language than a mother language will be more specific and best able to express the information, emotions and opinions. It is natural that what we hear in our own language seems more truthful and clearer. That is also why we are able to express ourselves and explain our thoughts in our own languages better. There are a lot of problems in our contemporary societies concerning immigrants, who have difficulties because of their ignorance of the culture or the language. Therefore we highly recommend that the campaigns, which take place in order to encourage the foreigners to learn the language of the country they live in, should be in the language of the minority. The campaigns should help to show that the effort of attending the free courses is worth it. The free courses also prevent us from risking an increase of ghettos and a growing group of uneducated young people, who cannot follow the school programme not knowing the language.

People should know that the governments are not against immigrants and the politicians should work on relations on the line: government-people-immigrants and government-immigrants. Usually, the lack of communication leads to misunderstanding and fear of what is hard to explain, of what is different from everything that we know. How we communicate is very important. Sometimes it is a question of a first impression and so on the one hand the government should avoid using stereotypes, and on the other hand it should show that there may be several ways of doing the same thing and that they are all equal, that there are all good (such as greeting by shaking hands, by giving a kiss or by making a bow). We should succeed in a more culturally sensitive society. Another good way of improving communication is helping the citizens to get to know the differences between them, so they would not feel fear against each other. What is also important is that media should collaborate in increasing the social awareness of the fact that we have minorities, and that they participate in the life of our society.

## 3.3    3rd way: New and innovative public policies

As it has already been stated, Europe is already multicultural and we can only live with this fact. The challenge of multiculturalism today is to assure equal rights and opportunities to every

European citizen, whatever his cultural, religious or ethnic background may be, and to improve the way we fight against discrimination. In fact, succeeding in this challenge will by itself bring unity among the Europeans, "old" ones as well as "new" ones. Of course, mentalities are a key matter in this topic. But both national and European public authorities must take initiatives as well to strengthen their legal system in order to implement new and innovative policies

During our collective reflection, we have listed three kinds of legal tools which could enormously contribute to reduce a form of discrimination which currently affects people with foreign origins or with different beliefs in particular.

Firstly, "positive discrimination" -measures (or to be more precise ways to assure equal opportunities) must be taken. By that, we mean that pilot programmes should be built in order to guarantee a wider participation of people with foreign origins in fields such as the media and the educational system. This category of persons is more vulnerable than the average when it comes to discrimination. Consequently, public authorities must take action to protect migrants from unequal treatments. Pilot programmes implementing quotas must be conceived, which means that a certain percentage of people with foreign origins should have professional access to the media and to the educational systems. In the field of the media, we should strength the participation of people with foreign origins or ethnic backgrounds both as professional and as amateurs. Professional media, and public TV channels in particular, should recruit a certain percentage of people with foreign origins in order to normalise their visibility as successful examples of info-making individuals. In amateur media, for instance, there is a pilot project which has been implemented by the Brussels French-speaking TV channel Télé Bruxelles in 2009. The concept was to let each day the presentation of the news to an average non-professional citizen on the street. At this occasion, we saw an extraordinarily various list of different profiles presenting the news. All colours, all ethnic backgrounds, all beliefs found a place in this project. At first, many complaints from citizens were addressed to the public authorities to denounce this as "inappropriate". But finally, people got used to it and this is precisely what we call "normalisation".

In the field of educational system, equalisation of opportunities would also consist in strengthening the presence of people with foreign origins or ethnic backgrounds as teachers in public schools. This will have two positive effects. Firstly, it will contribute to reducing the inequalities that many people with foreign origins or ethnic backgrounds are suffering from. Let us not forget that, as it was stated in a research made by the International Labor Office in 1997, in case of equivalent diploma, a citizen with foreign origins will have much less chances to get a job than another citizen. Secondly, it will motivate pupils and students with foreign origins to see that people coming from the same background as them can actually be recognised and succeed in society.

Secondly, we highly recommend the creation (in countries where that does not exist) or the improvement (in countries where that does exist, such as Belgium, France, Great Britain, and Portugal) of public institutions that can take legal action in order to protect individuals affected by discrimination. This recommendation seems to us as an essential measure to be taken in order to fight efficiently against discrimination. Indeed, discriminated victims, who are often issued from precarious backgrounds, often end up suffering from discrimination with some kind of resignation. The costs induced by legal actions are a major obstacle for these people, and this may lead to their giving up. This contributes to the creation of a status quo, and of a situation where discrimination can be perpetuated because it is not fought effectively. It is possible to break this vicious circle.Considering that these institutions are or would be public, they must work objectively and transparently. It means that criteria must be determined. If a case meets the legally established criteria, those institutions should automatically go to court. Being public, they are financed by the tax-payer, and therefore it is only normal that they represent all citizens. The other assignment of those public institutions would be to monitor the well implementation of all anti-discrimination public policies and to present annual reports based on which concrete recommendations should be addressed to the public authorities as well.

Thirdly, beyond the particular case of teachers, relevant measures to integrate people with foreign origins to the labour market should be taken. One concrete way to do that is to normalise the use of anonymous CVs by job appliers. This recommendation may seem difficult to implement in practice in the private sector, because relations between employers and employees are mostly interpersonal (or *intuitu personae*) relations, which means that the employer selects and has the right to select the job applier he "likes" the most. On the contrary, in the public sector, which is once again financed by the tax-payer (i.e. by all citizens), the employer does not have the right to choose the job applicant he "likes" the most. There is no margin of appreciation based on opportunity. The employer (in other words the State) must select the most competent job applicant. The idea of using anonymous CVs is therefore highly relevant here.Nevertheless, the only use of anonymous CVs is not enough. Indeed, an employer will be obliged to receive the job applicant for an interview, but afterwards he can still reject the application based on prejudice. Consequently, measures to control the reasons why there has been a rejection must be taken into consideration as well. The employer, the State in particular, will have to expose the legal reasons of the rejection and to prove that the rejection is motivated by competence criteria and nothing else.

## 4. Conclusion

Many books, theses and studies have been written and many projects have been implemented to make multicultural Europe a desired reality by all and a good place to live in. At the same time,

multiculturalism has been used as a scapegoat being blamed for unemployment or violence and crime. We believe that multiculturalism is a potential that we need to appreciate and respect, and that it should be seen as a great chance for development. It is a potential for science and education, as the critical potential coming from meeting other cultural perspectives can allow us to go beyond existing knowledge and can bear innovation. Also, it is a potential for development lays in the personal enrichment coming from the fact of meeting people of different background. And it is through education, communication and policy that we believe to create better Europe for all.