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The portrayal of migrants and refugees during election campaigns

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
Rapporteur: Mr Miltiadis VARVITSIOTIS, Greece, Group of the European People's Party

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy congratulates the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons and its rapporteur, Ms Dumery, for the report on portrayal of migrants and refugees during election campaigns. The report aptly discusses the way in which some candidates and political parties in the Council of Europe member States present migrants and refugees during election campaigns as a threat and a burden on society. It rightly warns against the risks of extremism and xenophobia and the challenges these represent for democracy and human rights.

2. The report would nevertheless benefit from the addition of a clear and explicit appeal to political parties to commit themselves to the Charter of European Political Parties for a Non-Racist Society, signed by the President of the Parliamentary Assembly and the President of the European Parliament in 2003.

3. The committee takes the view that, during election campaigns, it is particularly important to deal responsibly and fairly with sensitive topics relating to fears and tensions between groups from different ethnic, national, religious or social backgrounds. Furthermore, immigration issues should be tackled not only from an economic angle but also from a cultural one, making the case for the benefits of diversity in Europe.

4. The European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), notably through its Council for Democratic Elections, could also bring a useful contribution to the discussion. This is the purpose of the amendments proposed by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, paragraph 5, after the words "the fear of differences", insert the words "and concerns for cultural identity".

1. Reference to committee: Doc.12373, Reference 3719 of 8 October 2010. Reporting committee: Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons. See Doc. 12953. Opinion approved by the committee on 25 June 2012.

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 6, insert the following new paragraph:

> *"7. The Assembly, referring to its Resolution 1754 (2010) and Recommendation 1933 (2010) on the fight against extremism: achievements, deficiencies and failures, condemns those groups and political leaders who, inspired by racist or xenophobic ideologies, promote or are prepared to condone violence and calls for enhanced ethics in politics to help reduce racist tendencies in society. It reiterates that politicians have a special responsibility to eliminate negative stereotyping or stigmatising of any minority or migrant group from political discourse, including during election campaigns; it considers that the international election observation missions should pay attention to the issue of racist or xenophobic tendencies during election campaigns and reflect any concerns in their reports."*

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 10.8, add the following new sub-paragraph:

> *"urge all political parties to adhere to and actively implement and promote the principles contained in the Charter of European Political Parties for a Non-Racist Society, signed by the President of the Parliamentary Assembly and the President of the European Parliament in 2003;"*

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 10.8, add the following new sub-paragraph:

> *"disseminate to the electoral authorities in member States, prior to election campaigns, the 2005 Declaration by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance on the use of racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic elements in political discourse."*

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 10, add the following new paragraph:

> *"11. Furthermore, the Assembly invites the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), notably its Council for Democratic Elections, to carry out a study on the portrayal of migrants and refugees during election campaigns, with a view to possibly amending the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters."*

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Varvitsiotis, rapporteur for opinion

1. Ms Daphné Dumery's report (Doc. 12953) paints a well-balanced picture of the way migrants and refugees are portrayed during election campaigns. It is the purpose of the present opinion and of the five amendments tabled on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy to complete this picture by adding further political considerations with a view to enhancing the democratic spirit of election campaigns in the Council of Europe member States and the commitment of all political forces to fair, democratic and tolerant election campaigns.

2. The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), in its 2011 annual report, stressed that welfare cuts, diminished job opportunities and a rise in intolerance both towards immigrant groups and older historical minorities are worrying trends in several Council of Europe member States. It noted that xenophobic rhetoric is now part of the mainstream political debate and that extremist views are increasingly channelled through social media, whilst discrimination against Muslims and the Roma continues to get worse.

3. Anxiety about immigration is not solely rooted in economic grievances, in particular high unemployment and a deteriorating social welfare. Support for extremist parties and public hostility to immigration are also driven by fears of cultural threat. The decisive motive is the feeling that immigration and increasing diversity threaten national culture, the unity of the national community and way of life.[2] This aspect would be further clarified in the resolution by Amendment A.

2. Goodwin M. (2011), Right response – understanding and countering populist extremism in Europe, London, Chatman House.

4. In 2010, the Assembly discussed a report by Mr Pedro Agramunt on the fight against extremism: achievements, deficiencies and failures.[3] The rapporteur, *inter alia*, pointed to the dangers of stigmatising immigration. While acknowledging that calling for restrictive immigration policies is a legitimate political stance, the rapporteur stressed that these calls become unacceptable when they rely on racist arguments. I agree with the rapporteur's conclusions that stigmatising immigration is a problem for society. Linking immigration to insecurity, criminality, poverty and social problems represents a trend which leads to the erosion of the human rights of migrants and refugees, and which must be curbed.

5. In 2003, the Assembly had already analysed the threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe. In Resolution 1344 (2003), it recommended the introduction of legislation of effective penalties where cases of proven damage caused by an extremist party were established; proportionate and dissuasive penalties against public incitement to violence, racial discrimination and intolerance; suspension or withdrawal of public funding for organisations promoting extremism; and dissolution of parties, as an exceptional measure. The Assembly encouraged political parties to devise a new code of ethics, basing their programmes and activities on respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, excluding political alliances with extremist parties, reinforcing the rules on the transparency of political party finances if necessary, and proposing plausible solutions to the social and economic problems which cause public concern.

6. More recently, the Assembly was concerned about the recent rise in national security discourse in Europe, referring in particular to the case of Roma. In Resolution 1760 (2010),[4] the Assembly stressed that a clear distinction must be made in political discourse between individuals who have committed crimes and entire groups of people, such as Roma or any other minority or migrant group. Politicians have a special responsibility to eliminate negative stereotyping or stigmatising of any minority or migrant group from political discourse. They should promote a message of non-discrimination, tolerance and respect for people from different backgrounds. These are the reasons for Amendment B.

7. It is also useful to recall that in 2003, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly and the President of the European Parliament signed the Charter of European Political Parties for a Non-Racist Society. This text was a civil society initiative which had received the support of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), the precursor to the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency; the charter called on political parties to act responsibly when dealing with issues related to race, ethnic and national origin and religion. Although the establishment of a steering committee to monitor the implementation of the charter was initially envisaged, there was no follow-up. As also stressed by my colleague, Mr Agramunt, the charter is more than ever a valuable basis for introducing more ethics in politics, especially during election campaigns, and I strongly encourage the political groups and individual members of the Assembly to further promote it at national level. These are the reasons for Amendment C.

8. For similar reasons, I think that the 2005 Declaration of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) on the use of racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic elements in political discourse, including by mainstream political parties, should also be better disseminated amongst political parties. ECRI is deeply concerned that the use of racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic political discourse is no longer confined to extremist political parties, but is increasingly infecting mainstream political parties, at the risk of legitimising this type of discourse. This type of discourse often conveys a distorted image of Islam, intended to portray this religion as a threat, and anti-Semitism continues to be encouraged, either overtly or covertly, by certain political leaders and parties.

9. ECRI suggested that self-regulatory measures should be introduced by political parties or national parliaments aimed at sanctioning party members and parliamentarians who promote racism and xenophobia. It also called for the establishment of an obligation to suppress public financing of organisations that promote racism, including public financing of political parties, and called on political parties to formulate a clear political message in favour of diversity in European societies. The Venice Commission supported this view in its Code of Good Practices in the Field of Political Parties, adopted in 2009. These are the reasons for Amendment D.

10. I would also like to underline the critically important role that the Venice Commission plays in helping member States improve their electoral legislation, including through its Council for Democratic Elections, in which our Assembly participates. The Venice Commission could further analyse the way in which political parties portray migrants and refugees during election campaigns in the Council of Europe member States with a view to possibly amending the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters. These are the reasons for Amendment E.

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3. Resolution 1754 (2010) and Recommendation 1933 (2010) on fight against extremism: achievements, deficiencies and failures.
4. Resolution 1760 (2010) on the recent rise in national security discourse in Europe: the case of Roma.

11. Finally, the committee is currently discussing a report by Mr Jean-Charles Gardetto on measures to improve the democratic character of election campaigns and will have the opportunity to further analyse this matter.