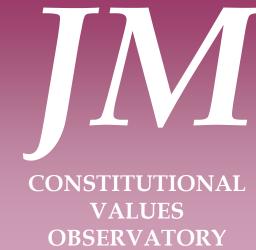# What is the nest step for intercultural dialogue in Europe?

It is not only about the outsiders anymore. It is about European Citizens as well.

Opinion No 1

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue as a means of eradicating radicalization and terrorist ideology: the need for a common (European) approach.

The concept of intercultural dialogue has been a prominent feature of European and international discourse as a tool and solution for the peaceful and tolerant coexistence of persons with diverse cultural, ethnic or religious background. European institutions, for example the Council of Europe and the European Union, promoted intercultural dialogue, as a means and sometimes as a nostrum/panacea that contributes to the core objective of the European institutions, namely preserving and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Until recently, intercultural and interreligious dialogue has been regarded as a channel favoring the successful integration of third country nationals to European societies. A remarkable reference can be found in the Common Basic Principles of Integration.

Since 1995, the Commission has undertaken and supported a variety of initiatives to support intercultural dialogue, including through the

Platform for Intercultural Europe and the Culture programme.

In the post-9/11 period, following the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London as well as the murder of the director Theo Van Gogh by radical muslins in the Netherlands, another dimension has been added in the European discourse regarding the intercultural and interreligious dialogue: the security dimension. In this context, the first views on the usability of intercultural dialogue as a tool against the religious radicalization as well as against violence, extremism and extreme phenomena of alienation and discrimination.

In this respect, the EU *Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, 2005, reinforced the main points of the *EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism*. Targeting inequalities and discrimination where they exist and promote intercultural dialogue and long-term integration where emphasized under the "prevent" section of the *Counter-Terrorism Strategy*. Indeed, "cross-cultural understanding" had now become a central part of the EU counter terrorism response. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue is the context of security was perceived as a "cure" to combat polarization and tensions between the mainstream populations and marginalized cultural groups. The *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy*, 2008, further promoted this line of thought that inter-cultural dialogue, through international fora has an important role "to play in addressing extremist ideology and tackling discrimination". This is an assertion repeated in *The Stockholm Programme*, 2009, where the EU stated that in relation to its overall counter-terrorism work it must ensure that "all the parties concerned should avoid stigmatising any particular group of people, and should develop intercultural dialogue in order to promote mutual awareness and understanding". In the report issued by the EU entitled the *EU Action Plan on Combating Terrorism*, 2009, an argument was made that because "religion can very easily be hijacked for political or violent purposes", intercultural dialogue fora are essential of great value as they constitute a clear rebuttal of the propaganda of extremists.

It should be noted that radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism has been considered at this stage as a threat to Europe coming from the "outside" and

the potential perpetrators are mainly third country nationals that have not been successfully integrated in European societies. The European Agenda on Security, 2005, stated that extremist propaganda has been shown to lead foreign terrorist fighters from Europe to travel abroad to train, fight and commit atrocities in combat zones, and to threaten the internal security of the EU on their return.

However, the latest terrorist attacks in Europe have added another variable in the urgent need to tackle the radicalization leading to violent extremism and terrorism. The majority of the terrorist suspects implicated in those attacks were European citizens, born and raised in Member States, who were radicalized and turned against their fellow citizens to commit atrocities. It has become clear in the EU that the drivers of the recent terrorist acts in Europe are different from, and more complex than, previous radicalization phenomena. Radicalization today has different root causes, operates on the basis of different recruitment and communication techniques, and is marked by globalised and moving targets inside and outside Europe.

According to the European Commission the drivers conducive to radicalization may include a strong sense of personal or cultural alienation, perceived injustice or humiliation reinforced by social marginalization, xenophobia and discrimination, limited education or employment possibilities, criminality, political factors as well as an ideological and religious dimension, unstructured family ties, personal trauma and other psychological problems. These factors can be exploited by recruiters who prey on vulnerabilities and grievances through manipulation or be reinforced on the contrary, by self-isolation. Social media provide connectivity and virtual participation and moreover, practitioners and academics have noted that the process of radicalization can in certain circumstances take place in increasingly short time frames. Some 4000 EU nationals are estimated to have joined terrorist organizations in countries of conflict such as Syria and Iraq.

Under those circumstances it is evident that intercultural and interfaith dialogue schemes and actions should be adapted in order to accommodate the latest developments. It should be noted that until today, the role of European

institutions has only been supporting of Member States' work in this area. The design and implementation of measures countering radicalization takes place mainly on the ground, at local but also regional or national level, and falls primarily within the competence of the Member States. Local actors are usually considered best placed to prevent and detect radicalization both in the short-term and the long-term and to hosts actions of intercultural dialogue. However, the similar nature of the challenges as well as the interconnection of the problem demands for a more coherent role of European institutions as well as transnational and multiparty approaches to intercultural dialogue.

In this respect, the role of the EU should not remain only in the sphere of the "support" of national initiatives regarding the intercultural and interfaith dialogue. The fact that terrorist suspects of the latest attacks were European citizens indicates that a large number of EU citizens have lost confidence on Europe as a community of values and have been alienated by the fundamental principles of human dignity, protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Thus, the need for a more coherent common

European approach to intercultural dialogue is claimed on the basis of the conceptual link of intercultural dialogue with the promotion of the common fundamental values of Europe, not only to confront cultural tensions and clashes but also in order to restore citizens' allegiance on the values of the rule of law, equality, dignity and human rights.

More specifically, the focus on the European dimension of intercultural dialogue and on the humanitarian aspects of the European societies will affect positively the efforts to reduce the radicalization of European citizens and terrorist ideology as it will attribute to the intercultural dialogue the conceptual and ideological direction and objective that today's national and transnational initiatives lack. Thus, intercultural dialogue will move beyond the limited deliberation which focuses on the accommodation of cultural and religious differences and will evolve in the dialogue and the quest of common values, ideologies, history and philosophies that promote peaceful coexistence. In this respect, the confrontation of radical sentiments and motives of extremism lies in their compensation by the development of a Habermasian European "Constitutional

Patriotism" based on common societal and political values. Furthermore, the reckless expenditure of human and material resources in "light" entertaining events will be reduced. Finally, efforts will be made to counteract the destructive messages of extremists with counter narratives. In this context, the consolidation of European fundamental values is not perceived as condition of intercultural dialogue but as its final objective.

Nikolaos Gaitenidis

Research Associate

nikgait@yahoo.com

JM