



## **INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE, DEMOCRACY & ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP in EUROPE**

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**“Undertaking intercultural exchange: Joint and innovative actions for  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Starting point**

In the Declaration at the concluding conference in Padova in March 2007 it was stated: *“full dialogue and commitment to shared values will lead to a new level of unity in diversity within the EU. Translating values into action through dialogue will strengthen and render irreversible citizenship-based partnerships in the pursuit of the common good, the realization of a common project for Europeans and their partners”*. One of the major policy suggestions of the research was the need to set up coherent local strategies, to develop innovative methods for intercultural dialogue and participation, to create new places for active citizenship and to learn from good practices. The objectives of the UNITE project seem to respond to these needs and REVES is very well placed to concretize such an approach.

My intervention attempts to present a broad framework of the relationship between intercultural dialogue, democracy and active citizenship.

**Assumption:** *“An intensification of intercultural dialogue and a reinforcement of its role in terms of participatory democracy might contribute to the development of a new European policy of greater and deeper inclusiveness and sense of belonging”; partnerships between social economy organisations and local authorities have a crucial role in strengthening such a dialogue”*.

## **Contextual setting**

The European Union faces numerous challenges: i) a democratic deficit, resulting from the great distance between the citizens and the decision-making institutions; and from the transfer of national competencies to the supra-national level; ii) the increasing flows of immigrants; iii) the ageing of populations; iv) the global dangers linked to terrorism, organised crime and increasing global inequalities. On the citizen's side one may observe a decreasing trend in civic activities offered by democratic systems, linked to the erosion of sense of belonging to community, local, regional, national or European.

The last decades have visibly increased the diversity of the EU in cultural, social and linguistic terms. The recognition of the constantly increasing cultural pluralism requires the development of an advanced democracy; which requires not only citizens' participation in the core of administration of institutional structures, but which is also a method for dialogue and consensus between groups with different interests, origins and backgrounds. This implies a true dialogue between immigrants, inhabitants with an immigration background and locals, citizens of the host society.

We argue that intercultural dialogue may significantly contribute to the improvement of democracy through greater legitimacy, through real empowerment of citizens and through the more active participation of citizens in public life. We believe that the role of intercultural dialogue can serve as a particular area for deeper understanding and innovative democratic practices.

I have divided my talk in three parts. In a first part I introduce the new momentum for intercultural dialogue in today's Europe; the second part deals with the major challenges and characteristics in the relation between intercultural dialogue and democracy; in the third part I suggest two structures for developing intercultural dialogue in democratic settings. I conclude with some recommendations

## **I. New momentum for intercultural dialogue**

### **1. Conceptual context**

The concept of intercultural dialogue is multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary by nature and affects many themes and issues in our European societies. The current decade has witnessed a growing enlargement of the European Union and an increasing diversity in an era of opportunities and challenges. The EU represents more than ever an immense richness of cultural, social and linguistic diversity. In such a context, the shared values that hold together our societies, such as freedom, fairness, democracy, human rights, rule of law, tolerance and solidarity, become crucial for Europe's future.

The redefinition of citizenship as a plural (pluralist) concept is an essential part of the intercultural discourse, in view of opening new horizons and ways for the practice of participatory democracy at local, national, European and international, from the city up to the European Union and to other international institutions. This is a road that provides opportunities to all to exercise the same citizenship rights in inclusive Europe. In this context new roles are offered to civil society organisations and movements and to local government institutions.

## 2. European context

Although the issue of intercultural dialogue is neither a new nor unexplored phenomenon it seems to have gained a new momentum in recent decade. The intensified debate on dialogue of cultures and peoples including European initiatives, research and discussion fora has been triggered by a number of recent developments. The 2004 and the 2007 enlargements have added pressure on the question of internal coherence and convergence of the EU not only in economic terms but also in socio-cultural terms, by intensifying the hitherto existing cultural, social and linguistic diversity within the EU. All those events call for the intensification of dialogue into institutionalised forms of policy-making, not only on the global scale but also within the EU and local level. The future of the EU very much depends on the building up of a sustainable democratic public sphere based on increased civic participation, solidarity and inclusiveness and is to be achieved through increased openness and transparency of EU action and by civil society dialogue and debate.

All these mutually reinforcing trends together imply that intercultural dialogue is much an internal and external issue of the EU. It calls not only for upholding the democratic principles enshrined in the Treaties but also for new efforts that could make the present and future EU better adjusted to the current and new challenges. Thus the strategy for the Union is not only that of reinforcing existing initiatives related to the issues interlinked with multifaceted cultural diversity, but also developing new instruments and places for securing better the basic democratic principles of the EU.

In such a context, the recognition of shared values such as freedom, democracy and tolerance, respect for diversity, etc. appears more and more important in the conduct of internal relations between various societies and communities within the EU context. Intercultural dialogue therefore becomes a necessary tool to avoid negative results of cultural pluralism the Europeans are encountering within and beyond the EU borders.

While assuming that intercultural dialogue is a major instrument in developing local and European society, let us round up this point with recommending some preliminary steps of comprehension:

1) First of all, we must make a perhaps trivial statement: intercultural dialogue is a very complex issue, comprising political, anthropological and psychological aspects. Geography must be also taken into consideration, because it makes us to distinguish between intra-European dialogue (i.e. the relation between different cultures and their compatibility) from dialogue Europe run within its foreign policy vis-à-vis different cultures and political systems. Accepting such a wide interpretation we will avoid any ready-made solutions and simple prescriptions. It implies an extended knowledge and analysis of intercultural dialogue with an internal and external dimension and enables the EU to be a civil actor endowed with soft power within the world system.

2) Secondly, it is beyond of doubt the concept of intercultural dialogue must be situated within a political context that introduces it as a major issue in the contemporary debate taking place in Europe. A clarification of the context can help us

to approach the essence of intercultural dialogue and define its opportunities and challenges.

3) Thirdly, intercultural dialogue is strongly linked with both the practical use of such terms as identity, citizenship and democracy and their implementation in structures such as the dialogues' framework and the inclusive city. They are both the fundamental values and conditions for effective and sustainable intercultural dialogue.

## **II. Intercultural Dialogue and Democracy: major challenges and participatory characteristics**

The challenge to current politics is a search for a coherent combination of all dimensions of democracy and, at the same time, an extension of democratic practices up to the international institutions. It is assumed that an intensification of intercultural dialogue and a reinforcement of participatory democracy might contribute to the development of a new European policy of greater inclusiveness, rejecting a distinction between insiders and outsiders, and increasing a sense of belonging. Such a dialogue should constitute a solid basis for the European active citizenship, strengthen empowerment and contribute to the deepening of the European identity.

It is argued that intercultural dialogue may contribute to an intercultural society that brings a new and advanced type of democracy within the growing diversity of the European political, social and cultural space.

1. Preconditions for such an intercultural dialogue are:

- Acceptance of the human rights paradigm as a solid basis for mutual respect
- An intensification of intercultural communication and exchanges
- Recognition of cultural pluralism
- Greater citizens' participation
- Inclusive policies at all levels and within all sectors
- Development of a culture of dialogue and an education to intercultural dialogue.

Democracy needs intercultural dialogue for exploitation of its full potential as much as intercultural dialogue needs democratic practices. In accepting this mutually influencing interrelation between both phenomena, democracy can only benefit from the full potential of society if people are able to build a real inclusive community and if it is not limited to mere constitutional division of powers and majority rule. This implies some wide-ranging action-orientation and sound reflection to favour a common environment for true and open intercultural dialogue.

2. How can such an intercultural dialogue be implemented and stimulate democracy?

- The creation of fora for debating the fundamental constitutive elements of democracy acceptable for all;
- A critical reflection on Europe's lengthy history of introducing and practicing democracy by focussing on its building stones;
- The recognition of various interpretations, trends and faces of cultures and civilisations

- The recognition that institutions alone cannot ensure justice and equality in the absence of generally shared values in the society;
- The policy conviction that common values are the minimum minimumorum agreed for intercultural dialogue.
- Learning by doing and by practising intercultural exchanges

In short, intercultural dialogue contributes to making European citizens a reality through encouraging direct involvement of European citizens in the integration process. It is helpful in developing the feeling of belonging to the Union and to make citizens able to identify with it. So the ability to dialogue should be developed and the places for such a dialogue need to be available.

### **III. The Structural Setting for Intercultural Dialogue and Democracy**

Important for its policy implementation are the structures for effective and sustainable intercultural dialogue. We propose two venues:

#### **1. The European Dialogues' framework: content and indicators**

##### a) Content:

A relevant question concerns the EU policy for political dialogues, discussions, cooperation, and the human rights clause in treaties with third countries. We should wonder whether the EU would be more credible and convincing by discussing and sharing with its interlocutors a clear and coherent vision of world order as the platform on which to develop dialogues and discussions. Dialogues provide a clear framework for EU policy-making and would increase the democratic legitimacy that is needed to gain the vital support of the European civil society and public opinion.

Although intercultural dialogue has (still) not formally entered in the EU dialogues' agenda, it should unquestionably be included in the ongoing human rights dialogue and in the amplest political dialogue as an emergent issue. Needless to stress that democratic principles and the rule of law are part of the EU package for dialogues, discussions and partnerships with its neighbours as wells with countries and regions across the globe.

##### b) Indicators of the "inclusive Europe", taking into account the principle of subsidiarity, should include:

- a revision of the EU citizenship, in accordance with the EU Charter of fundamental rights;
- a human security approach for the Chapter 'Justice and Home Affairs';
- a legislation on asylum and immigration in accordance with the international law of human rights;
- welfare policies for economic and social rights;
- a real and consistent commitment to contribute to build up a world order based on the UN Charter and the international law of human rights;

- larger and more substantive space for the role of civil society organisations and local institutions in various forms of dialogue and communication

## 2. The Inclusive City: content and indicators

### a) Content:

Since the common good is the full realisation of the human personality and dignity the ‘inclusive city’ (inclusive region) should provide the ground for the achievement of this goal for all those living in its territory. Cities may provide a favourable, attractive and creative environment for citizens’ participation in (formal and informal) democratic processes of active citizenship. Furthermore, roads of dialogue interconnect cities through the creation of occasions and areas of interchange and encounters. Interconnecting cities can, as history has proven, create the environment for intercultural practice between people.

As a living laboratory for intercultural dialogue, the city is fully eligible to pretend a world order that embraces the inclusion of all its residents in integrative urban policies. In other words, the promotion of universal citizenship does strengthen the eligibility of cities and local governments to have a more visible place in the architecture and functioning of the world political system.

### b) Indicators:

Significant indicators of the variable ‘inclusion’ in cities should refer to:

- the adoption by the City Council of the European Charter of human rights in the city;
- the inclusion in the city statutes of a norm dealing with human rights, peace, development cooperation, with reference to the international law of human rights and the EU charter of fundamental rights;
- the establishment of a specialising ‘human rights infrastructure’ such as the ombudsperson;
- strategies to pursue “human security” objectives
- policies and organised services for economic and social rights (e.g. housing, occupation, health, school, etc.)
- educational projects with schools, universities, NGOs, etc.
- ‘round-tables’ for intercultural and interreligious dialogues
- the right to vote to immigrants and infrastructures for participatory democracy
- permanent intercultural tables to promote and guarantee laicality in (of) the city
- ad hoc structures relating to gender issues
- incentives for civil society projects
- participation in international organisations and transnational networks
- artistic (music, theatre, cinema, etc.) festivals.

## Recommendations

True intercultural dialogue should be considered both a policy aim and a method of participatory democracy. However, appropriate answers are needed to create linkage between democratisation-oriented action and widely understood promotion of intercultural dialogue, and to build a new, inclusive local and European public sphere. More efforts are needed locally and regionally.

With a dialogues' framework the EU can move to be a leading promoter and generator of “intercultural dialogue” involving governments and civil society in the building of a new inclusive and democratic European polity. This implies a number of general guidelines in the relation between intercultural dialogue and democracy:

- Intercultural dialogue may provide real opportunities at all levels for citizens, not only to better know each other, but also to do together in the same political and local community
- Institutions have the task to create a suitable ground for doing together, i.e. providing the same citizenship rights to all. This is linked to the international recognition of human rights and the concept of (active) citizenship.
- The concept of (active) citizenship is strictly linked to democracy and to the different dimensions of the practice of democracy from the local level up to the international institutions
- For a fertile dialogue of cultures, EU is faced with the challenge to make the European space a real space of interculturality.
- The natural environment for intercultural dialogue is the city and an inclusive city should provide the ground for its achievement.
- It should be clear that the prior goal of intercultural dialogue is to motivate individuals and groups of different cultures to share universal values by doing together in the city, the region and in the EU.
- Political participation is a fundamental feature of both inclusive city and inclusive Europe.
- Education action oriented is therefore necessary to achieve civil and political awareness on the road to peace.
- Intercultural dialogue is assumed as a prerequisite for social cohesion and peace at internal and international level
- Partnerships between social economy associations and local authorities are vehicles for true dialogue, participation and democracy

These applied reflections have concrete implications at two levels, i.e. the European level and the city/regional level:

### 1. European level

- Concerning identity-building/identification and shaping European identity:
  - Focus on practices that can stimulate identity-shaping as a historical process of self-definition:
    - Respecting own roots and traditions (respect for cultural diversity)
    - Listening to the self expression of people
    - Recognizing the dynamic and open dimension of identities
- Concerning pluralism and (European) identity:

- Recognition that Europe's identity is defined as a multi layered historical mix: no European identity is possible without taking into account the historical and cultural roots of Europe (Greek, Roman and Christian heritage)
- Concerning communication:
  - intercultural dialogue is a hermeneutic process with a focus on formal and informal communication
  - Intercultural dialogue is experienced in daily and local practices within multicultural Europe
  - role of schools, family, (street) encounters in intercultural dialogue
  - verbal and non-verbal communication: face-to-face dialogue, importance of perception, willingness to dialogue:
  - (Physical) places for encounter meeting places (market, square, public spaces; etc.)
- Concerning integration, inclusion and dialogue
  - A two way process based on a framework of basic values (i.e. a shared community of values in which equal opportunity, cultural diversity and mutual tolerance are respected.
- Concerning context
  - Creation of the pre-conditions for intercultural dialogue: self-government (principle of subsidiarity); administrative competences; economic factors; financing, transport, accessibility and mobility, built and non-built environment, cultural offer, etc.)
- Concerning Education:
  - Importance of formal and non-formal learning (i.e. story telling, collective memory, literature and travel) in order to get to know the Other.
  - Intercultural dialogue is "learning to live together", a vehicle for conviviality in which cultures meet and influence each other without destroying each other
- Concerning responsibility of all actors involved
  - Attention to partnerships between public, private and civil society sector and citizens at all levels

## 2. City-level

- Concerning (European) identity/identification
  - Recognize the importance of cities as sources for the European dimension of multi-faced identity, imagination and integration; the role of European cities in reconstructing Europe's identity ("*genius loci*").
  - Recognize the cities as meaningful resources for intercultural dialogue
- Concerning democracy
  - Recognize cities as laboratories and breeding places for innovative democratic processes and citizens' participation
- Concerning urban context of intercultural dialogue and plural citizenship
  - Importance of the city as learning place/environment for education to intercultural dialogue, active citizenship and civic education;
  - they are meeting places for daily experiencing intercultural dialogue
- Concerning practical suggestions and locally based initiatives:

- Creation of workshops, meetings and encounters (at intercultural cross roads) how (young) people/students imagine Europe, intercultural dialogue and citizenship.
- Exchange of experiences and intercultural practices

So far the road of intercultural dialogue towards (innovative) democracy, based among others on partnerships between social economy organisations and local authorities, as far as I conceive it. This should lead to a strengthening of Europe's future and role in the rapidly changing global landscape,

Many thanks for your attention!