



The EU's troubled attitude to its troubled communities

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Introduction

Most events, no matter how dramatic and attention-grabbing, sooner or later fade from memory. It is a normal process. However, from the viewpoint of policymaking, particularly when certain events have a tendency to repeat themselves, some lessons ought to be learned.

Recent ethnic riots in France have been one such dramatic event, and although public, media and political attention was entirely captured for a while, with the passage of a few weeks things seem to be settling down, or turning to the next hot theme, such as the Danish cartoons. Perhaps, in a few months few will remember that ethnic clashes in France took place. Just as probably few now recall that precisely one year before the French riots, serious anti-Muslim incidents took place in the Netherlands following the murder of a controversial filmmaker, Theo van Gogh. And probably fewer yet recall that just a few years before that, ethnic clashes took place in the sleepy provincial town of El Ejido, in southern Spain. There were others, too. Yet, despite the fact that violent ethnic clashes take place practically every year in one or another part of the European Union, policymakers seem to have learned few if any lessons for the future.

The recent events in France revealed much more than the existence of troubled minority communities in that country – this was an open secret. The ethnic clashes in France, like earlier ethnic clashes in the Netherlands, Spain, Britain, and elsewhere in Europe, once again revealed the incompetence of the EU and its members to make equality and non-discrimination more than rhetorical values. The result: vulnerable communities become a combustible material ready to explode at the first spark of a problem, or provocation.

Egalité ... but some are more French than others

There has been no shortage of media coverage of the events in France that started with a police chase costing the lives of two minority youths, and ended with hundreds of public buildings and over 10,000 cars torched¹, over three thousand arrests², and the declaration of a state of emergency at a time of peace.

Remarkably, judging by reported reactions, few policymakers either in France or abroad doubted the true causes of the clashes: the existence of deep inequality and the exclusion of African and Muslim minorities in France.³ "[T]he images of Muslim youth hauling (sic) gasoline bombs and bottles at advancing police officers in riot gear have become a powerful illustration of the failure by France to integrate its citizens of North African decent," wrote the International Herald Tribune.⁴ Even the French Prime Minister admitted that the effectiveness of the French integration model was challenged.⁵

However, what reaction followed? None other than the Minister of the Interior called the protesters "riff-raff", provoking even greater indignation by minority communities across France.⁶ He also announced that at least 120 immigrants would be deported after their arrest for their alleged role in the disorders⁷. Ultra-right politicians, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, were proclaimed "visionaries", as they had always suspected minorities would do some harm sooner or later, and voila!, they suddenly seemed so "right".⁸ Probably, the worst is not over yet: instead of prompting a genuine reassessment of what went wrong with the French-style

equality principle, ethnic tensions are likely to bring to power an even more restrictive government, as happened elsewhere, one eager to further tighten the screws on immigration and on the rights of minorities.

France still does not appear ready to rethink its traditional attitude towards notions of equality and – god forbid! – ethnic minorities, whose existence is denied in France as a matter of principle. Thus, conflicts such as those recently witnessed are bound to reoccur.

Going Dutch: who will pay for the failed integration?

As Parisian suburbs burned, hardly anyone on the official level or even in the media recalled the events that dominated international front pages just a year before. Then, ethnic tensions in the Netherlands followed the assassination of controversial filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, manifesting a host of minority problems very similar to problems in France, or elsewhere in the European Union.

Despite its stereotype as a tolerant, liberal state, the Netherlands is becoming an increasingly polarised society.⁹ The attitude towards minorities, particularly Muslims, in the Netherlands can almost be described as “just you wait, they will do something wrong.” When in 2002 Pim Fortuyn, a populist politician who built his career on anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant slogans, was murdered, all eyes were on Muslims, and there was an almost perceptible disappointment among his many supporters that it was not a Muslim but a fellow Dutchman who had committed the crime.¹⁰ By contrast, one could sense poorly concealed smugness when two years later another Dutch personality, also prone to score points by provoking Muslims, was assassinated – this time by a Muslim, a victory for the “told you so!” camp.

Anti-Muslim actions were unleashed across the country, resulting in scores of burned Muslim schools and mosques, and injuries and bitterness on both sides.¹¹ Police were actively cracking down on “Islamism,”¹² while reports of police activities on cracking down racism were much scarcer. Remarkably, there was barely any reaction from the EU, whose Presidency, ironically, the Netherlands held at that very time.

And as usual, repercussions were tougher on minorities than on the racist elements of Dutch society. Many rules on immigration were toughened. The political discourse that followed was along the lines of “we are paying for being so tolerant and open,” although one may question the value of tolerance when it coexists with pervasive de facto discrimination against minorities. Currently, the Netherlands is engrossed in a debate about banning the burqa (a type of a dress covering body and face worn by some Muslim women). Cited reasons vary from: “it is an insult to everyone who believes in equal rights”¹³ to “it scares children in the street”!¹⁴ And most recently, Minister of Integration Rita Verdonk made a proposal to oblige people to speak Dutch in the street and public places, a measure targeted primarily at (Muslim) immigrants.¹⁵ One can only wonder what goes on in the heads of some policymakers...

Perhaps, with the passage of time the Dutch will look back at this less than tolerant episode of their history with a smile of condescension, as some look now at certain outdated medieval norms and morals. However, as things stand now, the Netherlands is far from immune from future ethnic or religious tensions. On the contrary, it is heading towards more clashes, unless correct lessons are learned from its experiences.

“Something is rotten in the State of Denmark”

The proverbial ink has barely dried on the reports from France, but the European media and policymakers’ attention is already directed elsewhere: the Danish cartoons controversy is the most recent in a long chain of Europe’s ethnic confrontations.

The incident, which quickly acquired international dimensions, began with an editor of the Danish daily Jyllands-Posten purportedly deciding to “test” the limits of free speech by commissioning caricatures of the prophet Mohammed.¹⁶ Despite protests by Danish Muslims, twelve cartoons were published depicting the prophet, *inter alia* as a terrorist with a bomb in

his turban. According to the editors, they just tried to treat Muslims “equally”: “By publishing these cartoons, we are saying to the Muslim community in Denmark ‘we treat you as we treat everybody else.’”¹⁷ Of course, one may expect no less from a democratic state where free speech is highly valued. But how serious can one be speaking of “equal treatment” in mockery, when equal treatment in all other areas remains effectively out of reach for Denmark’s immigrants and minorities, including Muslims? It is puzzling, furthermore, that the same paper had previously refused to publish cartoons about Jesus – because the cartoons were, in the view of the editors, “not funny” and “offensive”.¹⁸

Seen in context, it is evident that this controversy has not really been all about free speech. Critics have long noted the tendency in Denmark to “problematise” the very presence in the country of people of foreign origin.¹⁹ According to the editor-in-chief of the Danish Politiken newspaper, the current dispute “reflects the general shape of the debate in Denmark which has been strongly xenophobic and Islamophobic”²⁰. As one Danish Muslim woman put it:

[H]aving lived in Denmark as a secular educated Muslim Arab woman, I was offended by these pictures not because they are blasphemous, but they are racist. Simple. To all the defenders of free speech etc., try living in Denmark as a non-European, then defend that society...²¹

However, Danish society seems to be in denial about the existence and scale of racism and discrimination against minorities, and particularly Muslims. The Danish Queen even lamented excessive tolerance towards Muslims, “these people for whom religion is their entire life”.²² While defending unmitigated free speech, not once did the authorities mention the need to apply equal treatment not just in satire but also in vital spheres like education and employment, where Muslims and immigrants in general remain a highly disadvantaged community.

The way the cartoon conflict was handled also showed short-sightedness on the part of politicians and policymakers, who permitted this conflict to escalate, rather than acting to prevent tensions, and who thus ended up throwing a bone to extremists on both sides. One may be left to sadly conclude that as far minority (and especially Muslims’) rights are concerned, something is rotten in the state of Denmark, the land of the Copenhagen criteria,²³ and that worse conflicts are yet to come.

EU’s mounting ethnic conflicts: lessons not learned?

All in all, the fact that minorities and immigrants, particularly Muslims, are targeted for harassment and discrimination in Europe should be quite widely known in the EU by now.

- In early 2002, following the events of September 11 in the USA, the EU’s own monitoring body, the EUMC, provided ample information on the topic, and stressed also that anti-Muslim sentiments clearly pre-date the terrorist attacks in the US.²⁴
- In late 2002, EUMAP presented comprehensive reports on the situation of Muslims in the three largest EU member states (France, Italy and the UK), outlining causes and consequences of discrimination and offering concrete recommendations to national as well as EU policy-makers.²⁵
- In 2004, the International Helsinki Federation published a report on the situation of Muslims in selected EU member states,²⁶ followed by another report in 2005.²⁷

However, it seems there is no will to take more proactive steps to counter discrimination and enforce equality, either in the member states (even those affected by riots), or on the EU level. Despite the EU’s rhetoric, member states were not overly committed to implementing the EU’s Race Directive (some states still managed not to have transposed it, more than two years after the deadline). Even in those states that did adopt anti-discrimination laws, implementation evidently lags behind (e.g. France had its anti-discrimination legislation in place since 2002, and the Netherlands even earlier!). The EU’s position seems passive and reactive rather than forward-looking and proactive. Thus, in the wake of the clashes in France, the EU handed out money to the French government for “integration,”²⁸ something that could and should have been done preventively, but was probably not very wise to do at

that particular moment. After all, what message ought a rational being to derive from this? Make riots to solve problems, of course!

With the recent enlargement, the EU should brace itself for yet more ethnic tensions. Their existence was well known across the EU, and in fact the so-called “political criteria” for accession have been inspired precisely by knowledge of the existence of potentially explosive conflicts in some of the aspiring countries. In fact, just a few months before the “E-day”, Roma riots erupted in Slovakia, bringing to culmination decades-long anti-Roma policies of the state.²⁹ But Slovakia entered the union as if nothing had happened – and brought its conflicts with it. In a familiar manner, the EU just closed their eyes on a very real prospect of continued tensions in this new member state, and very possibly a few others too.

Conclusion

It may seem like a strange conclusion, running counter to the EU’s self-endorsed image of a “Europe of Peoples,” committed to “equality and diversity,” but practically no year passes by without a violent ethnic clash somewhere in the EU. And even more inconceivably, policymakers, whether on the EU level or in its member states, even those directly affected, do not seem to learn the right lessons from such conflicts. They might have to, however, as conflicts grow more violent and costly.

Sooner or later, the most obvious conclusion is bound to be drawn: the reason for ethnic conflicts is not “too much tolerance”; on the contrary, the cause is not enough equality. Attempts to “tame” ethnic tensions by cracking down on minorities, deporting undesirable immigrants and other such measures bring the opposite result. There is no alternative to enforcing equality and protection from discrimination for all, if social stability and inter-communal peace are to be preserved, and violent explosions of “combustive vulnerability” are to be prevented.

¹ Molly Moore, "France Weighs Immigration Controls After Riots", Washington Post, 30 November 2005, available on: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/29/AR2005112900295.html>.

² "France deports African 'rioter' ", BBC News, 3 February 2006, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4676672.stm>.

³ See for example, "Ghettos Shackle French Muslims", BBC News online, 31 October 2005, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/4375910.stm>; "While Paris Burns", New York Times online, 8 November 2005; Peter Ford, "New French revolution: a less colourblind society", Christian Science Monitor, 14 November 2005, available on: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1114/p01s02-woeu.html>.

⁴ Katrin Bennhold, "Chirac urges calm as rioting spreads", International Herald Tribune, 3 November 2005, available on: <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2005/11/03/news/france.php>.

⁵ Peter Ford, "New French revolution: a less colourblind society", Christian Science Monitor, 14 November 2005, available on: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1114/p01s02-woeu.html>.

⁶ Bernhold, supra.

⁷ John Lichfield, "Sarkozy orders deportation of foreign rioters", The Independent, 10 November 2005, available on: <http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article326032.ece>. In reality, the first deportation took place in February 2006, when Sarkozy announced that six more expulsions would follow. "France deports African 'rioter' ", BBC News, 3 February 2006, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4676672.stm>.

⁸ Peter Ford, "French leaders tilt right", Christian Science Monitor, 16 November 2005, available on: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1116/p06s01-woeu.html>.

⁹ Angus Roxburgh, "Dutch are 'polarised' says report", BBC News online, 21 January 2004, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3417429.stm>.

¹⁰ "In 2002, the revelation that Pim Fortuyn's killer was a very Dutch environmental activist, and not a Muslim, had a sobering effect on the angry mobs that were ready to go on the rampage, torch in hand." See, Perro de Jong, "Dutch fear loss of tolerance", BBC News Online, 3 November 2004, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3980371.stm>.

¹¹ Isabel Conway, "Calls for end to violence at funeral of murdered filmmaker", The Independent, 10 November 2004, <http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/story.jsp?story=581270>.

¹² "Dutch pledge Islamist crackdown", BBC News online, 5 November 2004, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3987547.stm>.

¹³ Quoting Rita Verdonk, the Dutch Minister for Integration and Immigration, see "Netherlands considers burqa ban", BBC News online, 21 December 2005, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4549730.stm>.

¹⁴ Mark Mardell, "Europe diary: Banning the veil," BBC News online, 19 January 2006, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4624774.stm>.

¹⁵ Marijke van der Meer, Press review: from the Dutch dailies, 23 January 2006, available on: <http://www2.rnw.nl/rnw/en/pr/dutchnewspapers/pr060123?view=Standard>.

¹⁶ Teresa Kuchler, "Danish Muslim prophet cartoon quarrel goes to court", EU Observer, 9 January 2006, available on: <http://euobserver.com/9/20637#>http://euobserver.com/9/20637>.

¹⁷ "Annan urges calm in cartoon row", BBC News Online, 4 February 2006, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4680208.stm>.

¹⁸ Gwladys Fouche, "Danish paper rejected Jesus cartoons" *The Guardian*, 6 February 2006, available on: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,5392866-103681,00.html>.

¹⁹ Report by International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in Selected EU Member States, September 2004, p. 9, available on: http://www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewdocument.php?download=1&doc_id=6089.

²⁰ Stephen Castle, "Tranquil nation at the centre of the clash of cultures", The Independent, 4 February 2006, available on: <http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article343109.ece>.

²¹ From the BBC online forum exchange. On file with the author.

²² "Danish Queen raps radical Islam", BBC News Online, 14 April 2005, available on: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4445579.stm>.

²³ I.e., the political criteria for accession to the EU, adopted by the 1993 Copenhagen European Council. The criteria stipulate: "Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, human rights, the rule of law and respect for and protection of minorities."

²⁴ European Union Monitoring Centre, Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001, May 2002, available on: http://eumc.eu.int/eumc/material/pub/anti-islam/Synthesis-report_en.pdf.

²⁵ Op. cit, available on: www.eumap.org/reports.

²⁶ Report by International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in Selected EU Member States, op.cit. note 12.

²⁷ Report by International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU: Developments since September 2001, March 2005, available on: http://www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewdocument.php?download=1&doc_id=6237.

²⁸ Lucia Kubosova, "Brussels to hand out millions to France after riots", EU Observer, 14 November 2005, available on: <http://euobserver.com/9/20311>.

²⁹ Martin Banks, "Roma leaders warn protests are 'mere shadow' of what awaits EU", European Voice, November 2004 (on file with the author).