Policies of Migrants' Integration in Europe: Backlash, Not Backslide

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Abstract

This chapter argues that past political options regarding the integration of immigrants in Europe have been disconnected from a postnational understanding of citizenship, that is, from helping to build a sense of belonging for individuals based on their humanity and where the right to access fundamental rights (social, economic, and political rights included) would not be limited by their national status. Political options revealed instead that the acceptance of immigrants' presence was limited to their economic utility and often to the idea that such economic utility would soon be over. The idea of a temporary need for immigrants would hinder not only the already problematic universalistic models of integration (e.g., the French model) and the ethnic models (e.g., the German model), but also the multiculturalist models. While not denying that the multiculturalist approaches had flaws to be addressed, this chapter argues that the main flaw does not derive from multiculturalism itself, as the new anti-immigration rhetoric prefers to underline, but from the way it was used in the context of European societies still struggling with colonialist images about themselves in the world and about Otherness. Ironically, though, instead of recognising the original sin underneath the conception of past models of integration of immigrants, most European political decision makers prefer to blame multiculturalist models for today's social unrest. I argue that European societies must stop debating how to replace multiculturalism with new versions of universalist or ethnic models. Instead, they must confront themselves with their historic inability to engage with Otherness, particularly when the Other is perceived as culturally distant, socially disruptive, and economically disposable.

Keywords

multiculturalism, integration, migration, Europe, Otherness

Introduction

Why use the term "backlash" rather than backslide in reference to current policies of integration of migrants in Europe? According to the argument presented here, what European societies are witnessing is not simply a regression or a deterioration of past integration policies. Rather, it resembles the retaliative outcome shaped by political choices made decades ago.

To suggest backsliding would imply that at some point in the past, a genuinely inclusive postnational model of integration existed — one that increasingly prioritised residence and humanity over ethnic or national identity as fundamental criteria in granting citizenship rights.

Retaliation, on the other hand, means that past political options regarding integration were disconnected from postnational values. Consequently, today's negative results are inevitable and come at a high cost to social cohesion. Ironically, though, instead of recognising the original sin underneath the conception of past models of integration, most European political decision makers prefer to blame multiculturalist models directly as the major root of present social unrest.

This chapter argues that European societies must stop debating how to replace multiculturalism with new versions of universalist or ethnic models. Instead, they must confront themselves with their historic inability to engage with Otherness, particularly when the Other is perceived as culturally distant, socially disruptive, and economically disposable.

Another term that may raise questions is "integration". This term has not been spared from criticism, due to its susceptibility to being mistaken with a unilateral process of bringing migrants and refugees into the cultural premises of the host society. This can make integration ambiguous, too close to interpretations of the meaning of assimilation. In an interview published in 2017, a former senior policy expert of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Tamim Nashed, summarised quite well the problem embedded in the use of integration:

> whether refugees are perceived or described as eternal victims to be assisted or aliens to be feared they seize to be individuals with diverse backgrounds, personalities, educations and skill sets. Rather, refugees are a category of people that one can form a universal opinion about without knowing a single individual with a refugee background. This is reflected, of course, in the approach to integration. Study after study identifies general problems preventing the integration of refugees. Policies, programmes and projects of integration are designed to overcome these general problems. It's a one size fits all approach ultimately confirming the segregation of refugees and ignoring any creative or positive contribution they might have to offer their new societies. (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2017, para. 2)

In parallel, the term "inclusion", which could be seen as a viable alternative to "integration", has not been spared from criticism either. Although less prone to trigger the idea of a unilateral process that ignores the complexity of migrants' and refugees' identities, inclusion seems to suffer from what I here call the "syndrome of neutral apathy", where people are gathered without any clear idea of what guides and stimulates such gathering. In other words, the word "inclusion" does not, in itself, guarantee that migrants and refugees will be fully valued and respected in their singularity and positive contributions to the societies they live in.

Ultimately, words are dependent on the conceptual meaning formally granted by political choices. Thus, both integration and inclusion may be "good" or "bad" words depending quite on the experiences and practices they invoke, which, in return, are very much related to social, cultural and political pre-conceptions that societies have about Otherness and about how to deal with its presence.

In the absence of a solid term that has escaped criticism, this chapter chooses "integration" simply because it is the most common term still used in research and public policy materials (see the migrant integration policy index as an example).

The Scapegoat of Multiculturalism

For the past quarter of a century (basically after 9/11), multiculturalism has been the scapegoat of Europe's difficulties in integrating migrant populations (Amiraux, 2010; Angeliki & Arvanitis, 2019), leading to changes in the policy options of countries that had traditionally adhered to multiculturalist models (Vink, 2007). As Tamar de Waal (2018) puts it:

> the Netherlands presents a paradigmatic case. Since 1998, the country has changed its CIP [citizenship integration policies] policies for newcomers more than 20 times (…). And these policies gradually shifted from emancipating and improving the position of certain immigrant groups addressed as a public responsibility to forming a selective political tool to measure the eligibility of individual immigrants to be deemed "worthy" of obtaining secure residency rights or citizenship. (p. 5)

I argue that if multiculturalist models were meant to fail, that was not determined by their multicultural nature; instead, they failed because they were never meant to endure. This is a strong statement, but I consider it valid by looking at how multiculturalist models were designed in the first place. European multiculturalist models were designed as mechanisms of *temporary* coexistence to accommodate the *temporary* presence of migrants expected to stay in European host countries during the postwar reconstruction effort in the 1950s and 1960s. At no point were those models seriously intended to foster postnational belonging of new migrant communities, that is, to promote migrants' full participation as citizens in host societies, beyond the traditional criteria based on national identity.

In fact, whether universalist, ethnic, or multiculturalist approaches, all models shared the same foundational flaw: the assumption that migrants would remain only temporarily. An assumption that soon would prove to be wrong.

The 1970s began submerged in an economic crisis. The 1973 oil crisis was, perhaps, the most visible sign of an economic and social malaise which went far beyond. In Europe, public investment was falling, negatively impacting the employment rates. In parallel, the demographic renewal resulting from the 1950s' baby boom was now turning into millions of young people entering the labour market. The need for an external labour force was thus decreasing (Messina, 2007). Soon, Western and Northern European countries would begin to close their doors to newcomers[1] while waiting for the remaining migrants to return home, as they were no longer needed in the same numbers. However, rather than accepting the status of Gastarbeiter[2] and returning home, migrant populations had been reluctant to do so from the start. Not only did migrants stand beyond the length of their legal labour contracts, but they also began to call their families under the principle of family reunification. In democratic regimes, family reunification is a fundamental right that cannot be denied without a sound justification. In parallel, mass deportation of migrants on the basis of mere economic or demographic rationality is simply not an option. Thus, the only way for European States that had depended heavily on labour migration in the aftermath of the Second World War to deal with the increased complexity of their societies was to begin implementing policies of integration to secure social peace.

As Europe entered the last three decades of the 20th century, a variety of integration models had already been set in motion, with the multiculturalist models appearing to be the best. After all, they were neither based on ethnic exclusivism and difficult access to nationality (as in the German model case), nor based on universalistic arguments designed to veil a sense of cultural superiority and assimilationist logic (as in the French model case). Instead, multiculturalist models were founded on the premise that cultural diversity should be respected and duly taken into account in the design of integration policies, with the Rule of Law as the common umbrella under which all communities could live and which would foster peaceful dialogue among them.

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1 Suppliers of emigrant labour force, such as Portugal, were particularly affected by the changing scenario in European countries such as France, for instance, where many Portuguese were still arriving but were now facing the condition of *sans papiers*, that is, of having no legal documentation to sustain their stay.

2 Literally, it means "guest worker". The use of the German word became very much normalized in academic works since Germany was the paradigmatic example of a country that began receiving migrants in the 1950s and the 1960s, under bilateral agreements with countries such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, or former Yugoslavia. Under those agreements, migrants were welcome in Germany with non-renewable labour contracts. This meant that after a small period of time, migrants were supposed to return to their home countries. By the beginning of the 21st century, and although the migrant population living in Germany was demographically expressive, with long and steady roots in the country, Germany was still officially reluctant to abandon the gastarbeiter policy tradition and refused to see itself as a country of immigrants. A statement forged in 1983 by the liberal-conservative governmental coalition became the epitome of the German denial: "the Federal Republic of Germany is not a country of immigration" (Zuber, n.d.).

Multiculturalism and the End of Its Golden Age?

But, as ideal as it may look, multiculturalism was never fully implemented. Instead, various public options fostered the atomisation of communities, leading to ghettoisation, nourishing ambiguous feelings of (non)belonging, suspicion and distrust among populations due to their isolation and lack of real cultural exchanges that could lead to mutual enrichment. More worrisome, this atavistic (that is, narrow-minded) understanding of multiculturalist models as models designed to preserve cultural essentialism and folkloric versions of the Other (Alibhay-Brown, 2000) would also serve on many occasions to empower conservative patriarchic gatekeepers within communities, legitimising the continuity of oppression of feminist voices and other minorities.

One may argue that this was never what multiculturalism intended. Indeed, conceptually, it is meant to represent a society that respects cultural identity while ensuring political and economic equality. Will Kymlicka (2012, 2016), one strong defender of multiculturalism, stresses that multiculturalism has never been about celebrating difference as a crystallised thing, nor about tolerating everything in the name of cultural authenticity. It is about expanding democratic participation, guaranteeing rights, and preventing cultural essentialism. In this regard, if public policies came out with something different from this, that is not multiculturalism's fault.

For the sake of truth, neither have all multiculturalist experiments been contrary to the virtuous definition that Kymlicka (2012, 2016) presents. There were also public policies at national, regional, and local levels that approached multiculturalism not as a temporary lens but as an enduring response to the challenges of long-term relationships among communities. And in fact, the multiculturalism policy index (http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/) that follows the evolution of multiculturalist policies and practices in 21 Western democracies, shows that there has been a continued and consistent expansion of these policies in Europe between 1980 and 2010, with the trend becoming even stronger from 2010 to 2020. Thus, the evolution over the past four decades clearly contradicts the idea that multiculturalism has declined as a political choice.

But, in parallel, it became quite evident, especially in the last two decades, that a new lexicon was preferred, with "interculturalism" becoming the buzzword of integration policies. Interculturalism seemed to be the golden key to preserving everything positive about multiculturalism. Instead of relying solely on peaceful coexistence among communities, it stood for daily social and cultural exchange, mutual learning, and mutual respect among all resident communities. For some authors, interculturalism is more than multiculturalism in its best version; it stands actually for a model with self-identity and one that can claim a place of its own in a post-multicultural Europe (Meer, Modood & Zapata-Barrero, 2016; Modood, 2014, 2016; Zapata-Barrero, 2017).

It seems contradictory that "multiculturalism" has become a word to avoid, while empirical data reveal that public policies have not actually abandoned multiculturalist

approaches. The contradiction, though, is easy to explain. On the one hand, there was a new reality that public authorities had to face following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on European soil. The terrorist attacks from the beginning of the century (the 9/11 in 2001, New York; the 3/11 in 2004, Madrid; the 7/7 in 2005, London) brought momentum to anti-immigrant discourses that pointed the finger at multiculturalism and supported the idea of recovering pro-assimilationist models. In this context, it became much harder to defend multiculturalism boldly as a model of integration. At the same time, neither could it be set aside, considering the complexity of societies and the need to assure social peace. In a sense, politicians knew it was not possible to simply cast away multiculturalism, though it could be called something different… In any case, this was good news for multiculturalism, because it meant multiculturalism was not over after all. However, for that to be completely true, multiculturalism would need to evolve, and that would certainly imply much more than a matter of words to use or to avoid.

Multiculturalism could not go back to being the expression of patchy and folkloric approaches to diversity. It would have to prove to be a model capable of promoting individual agency, gender equality, and human rights over narrow-minded communal and patriarchal traditions. If done, that would have been a decisive leap for multiculturalism. Regrettably, though, that did not happen. The momentum had been lost. The opportunity had been grabbed instead by the nationalistic and anti-immigration discourses embedded in far-right ideologies. So, while experts and practitioners could assess public policies and measures as multiculturalist, the world itself was no longer worth the political effort to stand for it.

In the meantime, three main events helped consolidate this path. The first was undoubtedly the financial crisis that hit the European economy and most dramatically southern European countries, causing a tremendous breach in solidarity and trust among member-States, and placing migrant populations in the spotlight since it is always easier to blame vulnerable strangers for the social problems such as unemployment and access to public resources.

The second was the so-called Syrian refugee "crisis", which exposed the failure of the European mechanisms of asylum. Most importantly, it exposed again the lack of solidarity among member-States, which worsened the humanitarian crisis of thousands of people, including children and unaccompanied minors, and deepened a sense (despite erroneous) of vulnerability, distrust and fear, among European citizens against refugees and migrants, in particular Islamic or coming from sub-Saharan geographies.

The third event was the COVID-19 pandemic. Still not fully understood, this was definitely one of the most disruptive events in everyday life across the world. Among the various aspects subject to analysis, the (re)surge of new ecofascist interpretations is particularly interesting[3]. From arguments blaming the Global South for spreading

3 The resistance and adaptive capacity of ecofascist ideas is not a new phenomenon though, as Olsen (1999) and Mix (2009) have demonstrated.

the virus and for overpopulating the globe, to arguments blaming migrants for the destruction of natural landscapes as they crossed borders and invaded European countries, there was a whole variety of nonsensical and conspirative theories running fast in the social media, that simply dehumanised migrants, presenting them as indistinguishable subjects meant to bring terror, replace native populations, spread diseases and destroy the natural wealth of European territories (Blasetti & Garzonio, 2022; McNeil-Willson, 2020; Moore & Roberts, 2022). In parallel, the faces that remained present in people's daily lives during the pandemic and in its aftermath were migrant faces (Leichsenring et al., 2022). Those who were still cleaning the streets, collecting urban garbage, distributing food, working in the back offices of retail companies, and collecting vegetables and fruits in the fields were mainly immigrants. And those still living outside, due to homelessness situations, were also mainly immigrants (Stewart & Sanders, 2022). This should be enough to generate a wave of solidarity. Instead, it triggered the opposite effect. Immigrants became the (in)visible faces, out of people's domestic cocoons, exposed to the virus, hence, a threat.

These three complex events reinforced the European malaise felt against the Other, the stranger, whether migrant or refugee, rendering very difficult any attempt to keep multiculturalism as a viable language of mutual respect, mutual acknowledgement and mutual enrichment.

The European Mirror: Blaming the Other

The complex relation with Otherness (being the migrant one of its embodiments) is ingrained in European liberal democracies. It mirrors the divide of Europe between the need to compensate the damages of its imperialistic and colonial rule over other cultures, the need to be up to the self-imposed ethic challenge of living in complete accordance with human rights as the moral flagship it tries to promote worldwide, and its historic difficulty in overcoming a general sense of civilisational superiority regarding non-Western cultures (a tremendously biased term that only acknowledges cultures in reference to western ones).

This tense relationship with migrant populations and ethnic minorities, that is, with the Other, did not begin in Europe with the terrorist acts perpetrated in some cases by second-generation migrants. However, those terrorist acts helped to legitimise nativist theories and Islamophobic rhetoric, and arrived as the perfect excuse to announce the death of multiculturalism, and to fuel the return of assimilationism in the making of integration measures.

Ironically, though, as already stated in this chapter, there could not be a failure of multiculturalism, since there was no previous success, at least not of multiculturalism as defined by Kymlicka. Instead, multiculturalist models had been designed to help accommodate the temporary coexistence of migrants who were meant to return to their home countries. In a sense, how could these models be held responsible for the behaviour of "second generation" migrants when these were not even meant to exist?

The problem, thus, is not that immigrant communities failed to meet multiculturalist models in Europe, as often affirmed over the last 20 years or so by conservative and anti-immigrant sectors across Europe. The problem is that those models were poorly conceived, relying on public policies that oscillated between the need to maintain economic rationality in the face of the continuous demands for a migrant labour force and a permanent sense of superiority, fear, and suspicion about migrants and their cultural identities.

Also disturbed by an ambivalent moral position regarding human rights and Otherness is the *rationale* underneath the management of migratory flows by the European Union (EU), as the next section will argue.

Fortress Europe Is Not a Fate but a Political Choice

Europe's difficult relationship with the Other is also visible through the externalisation of its responsibilities regarding the management of migrant flows to countries with poor human rights records.

Concepts such as "buffer states"[4], "safe havens"[5], "voluntary returns", "regular" and "irregular migrants", which have been extensively used in European official documents for decades, say more about European politics and policies than about migrants and refugees — whether they are Syrians, Afghans, or Sub-Saharan Africans. The Europe that struggled with the arrival of Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2017 is the same Europe that swiftly received over 4 million refugees fleeing from Ukraine in less than eight weeks in 2022, with no signs of imminent internal collapse.

On 4 March 2022, the European Commission activated the Temporary Protection Directive to facilitate the arrival of Ukrainian refugees and their access to basic rights (healthcare, legal residency, and work) following the Council's unanimous decision to support its proposal (European Commission, 2025a). It did well. However, this same directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC; Council of the European Union, 2001) had never been activated in two decades of existence. It did not attend to the Syrian refugees in 2015, and it did not attend to the Afghan refugees in 2021 who fled the reestablishment of the Taliban regime. These contrasting political decisions are quite revealing about the European difficulties in dealing with Otherness.

The new European Pact on Migration and Asylum might be considered as a legitimate attempt to overcome the existing conundrums and move towards a new kind of

4 Buffer states stand for countries that function as first line containers of migration flows, protecting the European Union from the direct impact of migrant arrivals. Traditionally, the European Union has done so by celebrating bilateral agreements with countries such as Morocco whose role is to prevent Sub-Saharan migrants from accessing European shores. Other buffer states have been Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, as well as countries under negotiation process of adhesion to the European Union such as the Balkan states.

5 The European Commission calls "safe havens" to countries of origin of migrants or any other third country that the Commission considers to gather the conditions to safely welcome people who have been denied the status of refugee. In April 2025, the European Commission stated that Kosovo, Bangladesh, Colombia, Egypt, India, Morocco and Tunisia should be considered "safe countries of origin" (Kassam & Rankin, 2025).

relationship with Otherness. But the final argument of this chapter goes precisely in the opposite direction, as it considers the new pact a lost opportunity.

The European Pact on Migration and Asylum

The new pact fails to break the paradigm of distrust, fear, disdain, and utilitarianism towards culturally distant migrants. It does not change in substance how the EU approaches non-White, non-Christian, and poor migrants. In other words, the new pact is not really new.

From a political perspective, there are reasonable explanations for why 52% of the members of the European Parliament voted in favour of a new pact on migration and asylum rights before the European Parliament's elections in June 2024. It was important to show some progress after years of negotiations, trying to come out with something better than the failed Dublin System. But this was more than a matter of reaffirming the European Parliament's institutional relevance. The pact's approval was particularly relevant for centre-left and centre-right political groups who knew there was little they could do to assure a better outcome after the 2024 elections.

In other words, given the political shifts anticipated both in the European Parliament and in the Council, it was quite unlikely that a more progressive, inclusive, humanist and pro-solidarity pact on migration and asylum could be achieved. So, as far as at least 322 members of the European Parliament were concerned, it was preferable to have a pact than none at all[6].

While one may be quite critical of the pact regarding its capacity (and real political willingness) to change the paradigm of migration management in Europe, the electoral results of June 2024 and the clear reinforcement of far-right political groups in the European Parliament[7], came to confirm the emergence of an unfriendly global political environment that could result in the making of an even bitter pact for migration and asylum.

Recent governmental decisions in France, Denmark, Slovenia, Italy, Sweden, and Austria have reinstated border controls. Poland's suspension of asylum rights at the Belarus border; the Italy-Albania "return hub" agreement; and the Commission's intention to sign more buffer-state deals show how difficult it would have been to achieve a better pact.

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6 Results: 619 members of the European Parliament voted; 86 members did not vote. Of the 619 votes, 322 voted in favor, 266 voted against and 81 abstained (HowTheyVote.eu., 2024). One must be careful when analyzing the results, especially the reasons underneath 43% of votes against. The 266 members who voted against the pact were from quite opposite groups and sustained their decision on quite different justifications.

7 In the aftermath of the 2024 elections, the European Parliament now with 720 seats met a new composition, with a clear reinforcement of the far-right which gathers three distinct political groups in a total of 187 members: the European Conservatives and Reformists with 78 members, the Europe of Sovereign Nations with 25 members and the Patriots for Europe with 84 members being therefore the third largest political group in the European Parliament (European People's Party is first with 188 members and Socialists and Democrats second with 136).

In the meantime, on 11 June 2025, the Commission published a report about the state of play on the implementation of the pact (European Commission, 2025b). Underneath its globally positive balance and behind a mildly optimistic language (e.g., "considerable progress has been made at both national and EU level" (para. 4); "work is well underway" (para. 2); "while progress is being made at technical level…" (para. 5), there is clearly contention, caution, and even fear that the plan may not be implemented as smoothly and effectively as envisaged:

> further efforts are however needed to ensure the full and timely application of the new rules. Some of these challenges are linked to current deficiencies. Other challenges are linked to preparing the ground for the application of the new rules introduced by the Pact, notably the operationalisation of the upgraded Eurodac, the implementation of screening and the mandatory border procedure, as well as the new fundamental rights safeguards. Remaining challenges will need to be addressed in time for a full implementation of the Pact. (European Commission, 2025b, para. 4)

A lot of pressure (and critique) is thus being put on the member-States:

> work is well underway to translate the large and complex set of legislative acts into operational reality. Getting the EU and national systems ready by June 2026 is a joint endeavour that requires the Member States, the Commission and EU agencies to work closely together. (European Commission, 2025b, para. 2)

At this stage, no one knows exactly how the pact's implementation will be by June 2026. But, more worrying, Europe does not know how much the difficulties and obstacles already spotted will impact "the new fundamental rights safeguards" (European Commission, 2025b, para. 4). In other words, the Commission's constant advertencies made in the report, with a special focus on the member-States' actions, are not just mirroring the fears of those who may be engaged in the successful implementation of the pact, but are also anticipating the scenario most likely to happen: "in particular, it is key that there are no major deficiencies in applying the current rules because this may have an impact on the overall assessment of pressure and access to the Solidarity Pool" (European Commission, 2025b, para. 5).

In a sense, the Commission is diplomatically pointing at member-States as the ones to blame if the pact fails, while subtly acknowledging it as a strong possibility. In parallel, it also provides the kind of arguments that any member-State might use to justify the failure, since ultimately, if the pact fails, it can always be said to be the result of the EU's incapacity to create a more robust legal framework to help the States or to provide more funding for the States to act accordingly. "The Commission, together with the EU agencies, will continue working with and supporting Member States, including through funding, with a strong focus on action to overcome the challenges identified" (European Commission, 2025b, para. 5).

The political *rationale* underneath the ongoing European policymaking, including the new pact on migration and asylum, does not in any case contradict the paradigm

of securitisation, where migrants are admitted only if they comply with certain utilitarian (economic but also cultural) criteria.

In parallel, data evidence shows Europe suffers from a strong demographic decline (Marchais, 2022; Newsham & Rowe, 2025; Potančoková et al., 2021), which makes it deeply dependent on a migrant labour force. This poses an obvious conundrum, which nevertheless is far from disturbing the growing strength of ultranationalist discourses, as made clear by the successive electoral victories that far-right parties are reaping across Europe, including in the European Parliament.

Conclusion

Our liberal democracies are under siege, but much of their erosion derives from political options and paths taken in the past. To acknowledge their own responsibilities is thus essential if they want to reverse the course of history.

When autocratic ideology comes into power within the framework of liberal democracy (with the conquering of parliamentary seats, formation of governments, presence in governmental deals through formal coalitions or informal back-up alliances), the signs of democratic erosion begin to be undeniable. Signs may be visible, for instance, through the appropriation and inversion of the language used to defend democracy. Far-right parties often assume a victimisation role, denouncing all sorts of criticism of their ideas, discourses and actions, as acts of censorship meant to attack their freedom of speech.

Signs may also be visible through subtle restrictions on freedom of expression, which may take the form of discrediting media outlets and, especially, cutting public financial support, as a way to control the media, intellectual and academic circles, and to insidiously impose a scientific agenda that suits the ideological purposes of autocratic thought. Through the instrumentalisation of judicial and political institutions against democracy.

The use of institutions to restrict democratic rights and citizen participation is among the most insidious and difficult forms of perverting democracy, according to Rachel B. Riedl (2024). Talking about the American case, she underlines: "globally and in the United States, we see a new pattern of democratic erosion using institutions to restrict democratic rights and participation" (Dean, 2024, para. 4). In the same line of thought, it is also worth reading Kenneth Roberts on this issue:

> even where backsliding does not cause democracy to break down or be replaced by some form of dictatorship, it involves a significant erosion in the quality and stability of democratic governance… It degrades democratic citizenship and undermines the ability of citizens to use democratic institutions to hold rulers accountable. (Dean, 2024, para. 4)

Europe's challenges to the integration of migrants are not due to the failure of multiculturalism. They stem from a deep-seated unwillingness to imagine the Other as fully human, a person, a citizen, an equal. Liberal democracies are not crumbling under external threats — they are undermining themselves through exclusionary policies, selective humanitarianism, and fear-driven governance.

If Europe wants to reclaim the ethical ground of defending human rights and democratic values, it must critically revisit its models of integration. It must move beyond cultural paternalism, racial hierarchy, and utilitarianism. It must build a political and moral community where belonging is not conditional, and where diversity is not feared but integrated into the very definition of democracy.

The crisis of liberal democracies originates within themselves and involves questions of identity and belonging. Europe's historical tensions with the Other have hindered its post-colonial maturity, the development of postnational citizenship inclusion models, and ultimately have threatened to undermine Europe's moral legitimacy in promoting human rights worldwide.

The New European Pact on Migration and Asylum, intended to create a more unified approach to migration and asylum, has sparked debates around its potential to strengthen solidarity and trust within the EU while maintaining rigorous control over borders and migration flows. However, its focus on stricter border enforcement and continuous externalisation of responsibilities to third countries leads us again to the same critical questions about its ambivalent relationship with Otherness.

It is worth emphasising, as a final note, that the objective of the type of reflection this text proposes is not to discredit the EU's project for the construction of a space of greater freedom, justice, and democracy. On the contrary, for those who believe in the virtues and potentialities of the European project, it is crucial to identify the flaws and the potential breaches that may affect its democratic integrity, its compatibility with human rights, and its alignment with a more inclusive vision of citizenship.

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