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Immigration on the 'top of the agenda' for the Portuguese EU presidency

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The newspaper, *Público*, was recently granted an interview with the Director of the Migration Policy Institute, Demetrios Papademetriou, while visiting Portugal. He finds that 'Portugal is a good example in Europe of what immigrant integration policy should be'.

DEMETRIOS PAPADEMETRIOU

The Director of the Migration Policy Institute, located in Washington, D.C., is likely the most influential consultant on immigration in the world, working with policymakers and political parties in some 20 countries. Papademetriou was in Portugal for the preparation of the International Metropolis Conference that will be held in Lisbon in October of this year. He is certain that Portugal is a good example in Europe of what immigrant integration policy should be. After having spent the last few days meeting with Pedro Silva Pereira and others that are responsible for defining immigration policy in Portugal, Papademetriou, a researcher, is clear: the Portuguese government has put the issue at the top of the agenda and has people capable of putting together a benchmark integration model, based on the High Commissariat for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (ACIME). And the EU presidency in 2007 will be the prime moment to show off these competences.

PÚBLICO – Do you think that immigration is on politicians' agendas?

DEMETRIOS PAPADEMETRIOU – It's a far-reaching issue. The difference between 1995 and 2005, and not only in Portugal, is that ten years ago we needed to persuade people that the issue was important. Today when we speak of migration, people listen. Immediately. We just now had a meeting with the Mayor of the City of Lisbon. We didn't need to introduce the issue to him - he knew what we were talking about and it's already on his agenda.

Does it top the agenda or is it only a concern at times of crisis?

I would say that it is. It was clear to me that it is at the top of the Portuguese Prime-Minister's agenda. In early talks about the Portuguese EU presidency in the second half of 2007, it was evident that it was among the most important issues, at the top of the agenda.

With whom have you spoken in the government about these issues?

I spoke with Pedro Silva Pereira, the Minister of the Presiding Government, and it was an exceptional meeting. He was very well prepared; he's very sophisticated and confident. He knows what the Prime-Minister wants and speaks with authority on the subject.

And what are the government's goals? Did you understand in which direction Portugal wishes to go?

It's still too early, though it seems to me that there are two or three aspects that Portugal would like to emphasise during the EU presidency, such as the integration of immigrants within the EU, because it is the same issue topping the EU's internal agenda.

This concern has been around for the last five years and no one has been able to reach a consensus about common European policy.

Portugal has the opportunity to make a difference during its EU presidency. This issue is ready to be addressed.

Do you see any important differences in the way in which Portugal handles immigration compared with other European countries?

You may be surprised but I think that Portugal, due to its complex history, due to the fact that it received *retornados* from the former colonies, has opened itself up and accepted itself as a diverse society, even though it may not recognise itself as such. Portugal can serve as a good example for Europe.

Particularly in the case of France, which has hidden its head in the sand. 'We don't have a problem, they speak French and they were born here', they say. And, suddenly, they wake up and ... whoops. Some 30% are unemployed. Things have gotten out of hand. There is always a price to pay if you're arrogant when it comes to immigration.

And what has happened in Portugal is so different from this reality?

This is not happening in Portugal. The Portuguese people that I have met from NGOs and at the local level of government think in the following way: this is an issue that must be increasingly addressed.

Is the organisation of the International Metropolis Conference in Portugal proof of this effort?

It is. And Metropolis will be able to work as a motor for the EU presidency. The attention of the one thousand most important people working in the area of immigration will be focused here at the conference. And this includes policymakers, NGOs, etc. Around 70% of the world's best researchers in this area will come to Portugal.

What do you think about Portuguese researchers?

They are excellent. We're working with three research centres at the University of Coimbra, the New University of Lisbon and the University of Lisbon. This, along with a very strong civil society, provides real guarantees that Portugal will be able to make the best of this opportunity. The Luso-American Foundation and the Gulbenkian Foundation are also involved.

What do you think of the High Commissariat for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (ACIME)?

Rui Marques, the High Commissioner, is a medical doctor that has devoted himself to the cause. And he is heard by the Minister and the Prime-Minister. What Rui Marques does with five million euros a year is extraordinary. I'm going to take a hold of this model and go from country to country, seeking to show it off to other countries - and put them to shame.

WHEN IT COMES TO POLICY ON LEGALISATION, 'PERFECTION IS THE ENEMY OF ANY SYSTEM'

Do you think that the immigrant admission model based on quotas is the best?

What I do know is that one cannot put together an immigration system based upon denial. There are labour needs and immigrants can play a very important role. When the German government says, 'We don't need immigrants', but the society and the economy contradict the government, conditions are created that lead to illegal immigration. The economy will always find a way to employ these people.

So what is the solution?

It is necessary to have a flexible admission policy: initially, there is a target for a limited number of entries and then a mechanism is created to evaluate the way in which this number worked, to assess whether or not people, when their visas expire, do what they should and whether or not the majority leaves the country. I say 'the majority' because perfection is the enemy of any system. Perfection can never be attained. Experience and assessment of the programme will tell the government what it should do the following year.

Border control is unnecessary and inefficient?

It's inefficient if it aims for perfection. However, it is essential to the management of migration because it is geared towards two groups of people. Alert: 'Don't try to enter, we will intercept you and send you back'. And it puts the host society at ease.

Many Western governments regulate the admission of immigrants via temporary work visas that are valid for a year or, at times, less than a year. Is investing in the integration of these people worth it?

We shouldn't think that these people come for a year and then go back to their countries of origin. The mechanism should be flexible and create opportunities so that successful working immigrants may prolong their stay - it is in the interest of the host countries and societies. France understands this, the UK understands this, Germany and Greece understand this... but they think that they cannot say it and try to pacify society by saying: 'Don't worry, they're only going to stay for one year'.

VITORINO, ONE OF THE 'MOST SUCCESSFUL' PEOPLE IN THE COMMISSION

What do you think of António Vitorino's substitute for Justice and Internal Affairs at the EU Commission, Franco Frattini?

I would say one thing: with the exception of one or another commissioner linked to the economy, I think that in the last ten years there has not been a more successful commissioner than António Vitorino. He is a national treasure. António Vitorino, when he left his post as European commissioner, said that one of his biggest frustrations was not having been able to put forth a common policy among Member States on asylum and immigration.

He was there for five years. His colleagues at the Commission were powerful politicians from powerful countries. And they weren't interested in anything that António Vitorino was talking about. António Vitorino is modest. He thinks that passing 80% of the measures he proposed was not enough... In 1999, when he arrived, these measures were only aspirations, thoughts in the minds of some good people. And then António Vitorino arrived and, with very little bureaucracy, did all that he did.

You ended up working with him.

I didn't work with him but I worked alongside him. You can look at me as an American, which is correct, as a Greek, which is correct, as the director of an institution (Migration Policy Institute). But, in reality, you're looking at someone that has really been invested in European immigration policy issues.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES SHOULD BE RESOLVED 'BY THE COMMUNITIES THEMSELVES'

When it comes to 'friction' between immigrants and autochthones, between ethnic groups, the state should not interfere. The message is: get along.

You believe that the integration of immigrants is more effective if immigrants are encouraged to leave big cities for smaller ones. Can you explain why?

Many immigrants continue to settle in big cities, where they feel more comfortable but where there are less housing and employment opportunities. There are other places with better housing and employment conditions elsewhere, but they don't go to these places because no one from their community of origin lives there.

How can governments promote this switch towards less populated areas?

Once again you're speaking in a language I don't understand. In the US, the state is not in charge of promoting anything. In the US, the integration of immigrants is not explicitly funded.

Explicitly...

Explicitly. It invests in training programmes, educational programmes. And, by definition, the majority of the people that participate in these programmes, or many of them, are immigrants. Money is not channelled specifically towards immigrants. If it is necessary to rebuild some piece of infrastructure, if it is necessary to channel some money towards problematic areas, okay. Some of the beneficiaries, many of them, will be immigrants.

With cities, however, there is a different story. There is some investment specifically in relation to immigrants. There are, for example, translators and interpreters in schools, parent/teacher conferences, and hospital emergency rooms.

These types of mechanisms also exist in some European countries.

In the Netherlands, perhaps, because the country has invested a good deal in integration.

Today they are investing less.

Yes, this started to happen in 2000, 2001, when the government felt that it wasn't worth all the effort because immigrant communities continued to be marginalised.

And this wasn't in fact the case?

For the most part, yes. Particularly, as has occurred in much of Europe, with Muslim communities. And it resulted from the marginalisation that was promoted by the host society but also because of the self-isolation on behalf of the communities themselves. The Netherlands paid for their education, gave them funding to promote their cultures of origin and then woke up and noticed that some of these Muslims hated the Netherlands, that they were a separate society.

Wasn't this also what happened in the UK?

It's a little different. Since the early 1970s, the UK has had a commission on racial equality, a governmental body that has quasi-judicial and quasi-regulatory powers. It set up a quota that makes it so that, say, 5% of the police must be non-white. It also works with local authorities - so, it is a very original model. And, of course, there are many successful Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis there. The problems were mostly due to a lack of cohesive policy. They improved some social housing in abandoned neighbourhoods and stuck asylum seekers there - say, 300 Iranians together and so on. In Birmingham, which is not a small town, there are classic problems. But this is part of the friction that develops between communities and communities need to resolve them among themselves.

Even if it reaches a point of physical confrontation, like what recently happened in Birmingham?

I'm not talking about it reaching a point where people want to kill each other. But they reacted aggressively to the political, governmental and social atmosphere in which they interact with the host society. I think that is the best way to resolve the problem.

'INTEGRATION IS ACHIEVED ABOVEALL WITH THE WORK OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY'

Why has the EU not invested as much as the US, for example, in the integration of immigrants?

There are several reasons. The first is that this issue makes people take sides in Europe - and it is recent. The US has dealt with this issue for many years and has developed a certain attitude in relationship to it. Immigration continues to be discussed - and the discussions are more high-powered, perhaps dirtier, than they are in the EU, even in Washington - but there is an independent structure and people know that they cannot turn back.

But then how do you explain the working conditions of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the California vineyards?

The majority of Mexicans no longer work in the vineyards and their employment rate is as high as the mid-90 percent. Contrary to what Americans themselves think, most Mexicans are no longer at the base of the social and economic pyramid. They're moving toward the middle. Their former jobs have been taken up by Guatemalans and other immigrants from Central America and elsewhere.

The American immigration model has therefore been successful?

We can't say that when the number of undocumented immigrants is so high.

And what about their integration?

It's interesting and Europeans have a hard time understanding it. The majority of the 11 million undocumented immigrants are integrated. And, at the same time, if you take a look at the government programmes and the legislation, integration "policy" doesn't seem to exist. We spend several billions of dollars on education and special training programmes. It seems like a lot, but it's not: the US federal budget is nearly three trillion dollars. Integration is achieved above all with the work of the civil society, philanthropists, social services subsidised by private or public entities. Churches that organise English classes, help people get jobs... The other difference has to do with the role of the local governments, which have a lot of power.

Is it possible to import this model to Europe?

Parts of the model can be imported, but it is difficult to import the part that deals with the funding of civil society, NGOs, and municipal services because local government and the autonomy and taxing authority it has is generally not as strong in most of Europe.