

# THE EUROPEAN UNION – A NEW HOMETLAND FOR ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS?<sup>1</sup> A STUDY OF IMAGINARIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## ABSTRACT

### **The European Union – A New Homeland for Illegal Immigrants? A Study of Imaginaries of the European Union**

Several studies deal with representation of the European Union (EU), but none of them analyzes the views of the contemporary Others of the EU. This study tries to fill this gap and to expand the post-nationalist approach to studying the EU with data gained from in-depth interviews with illegal immigrants from Africa. The results show that before leaving Africa, illegal immigrants associated the EU with economic success based on the media, members of organized crime groups, and false images of immigrant life in the EU. On the basis of their experiences, their image of the EU changed: Europe is a land of repression, modern slavery, and racism.

KEYWORDS: European Union, representation, illegal immigrants, media, in-depth interviews

## IZVLEČEK

### **Evropska unija – nova domovina za ilegalne imigrante? Študija imaginarijev Evropske unije**

Mnoge študije proučujejo reprezentacijo Evropske unije (EU), toda nobena ne analizira pogledov sodobnih Drugih na EU. Ta študija skuša zapolniti to vrzel, obenem pa s podatki, pridobljenimi s poglobljenimi intervjuji z ilegalnimi imigranti iz Afrike, razširiti postnacionalni pristop k proučevanju EU. Rezultati kažejo, da so ilegalni imigranti pred odhodom povezovali EU z ekonomskim uspehom na podlagi medijev, pripadnikov organiziranega kriminala in lažnih podob imigrantskega življenja v EU. Na podlagi izkušenj se je njihova podoba EU spremenila: Evropa je dežela represije, sodobnega suženjstva in rasizma.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Evropska unija, reprezentacija, ilegalni imigranti, mediji, poglobljeni intervjuji

<sup>1</sup> In the field of research of migrations and migrants, there are certain terminological issues (for more, see Milohnič 2001: 10–12). The authors of this article use the term “illegal immigrants”; however, we want to point out to our readers that our intention is not to impose value judgements connoting the criminalization of immigrants. Instead, we use the term only to characterize the people who have immigrated to another state where their status is not formally regulated.

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At the turn of the century, competing images emerged of what constitutes the European Union (EU) identity, who belongs to it, and what are its internal and external boundaries. Questions such as “What is the EU?” and “What is its identity?” have frequently been asked, starting at times from its physical geography, at times from human/cultural/political aspects. Morley and Robins (1995) reminded us that cultural identities should be understood only in and through their relations to the Other(s). Today, the Others of the EU, such as illegal immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, are the contemporary subjects of history (Mastnak 2001; Milohnić 2001; Amin 2004; Balibar 2004). Studies of imaginaries of the EU have so far researched mostly the mainstream view of the EU, such as media representations (e.g. Machill et al. 2006), politicians’ views (e.g. Trenz 2002), and public opinion (e.g. Della Porta 2003). The views of “demos” have only been rarely researched (Licata et al. 2003; Kritzinger 2005; Antonsich 2008), while the views of those who have wanted to enter the EU so much that they have done it illegally have been totally ignored. This paper tries to fill this gap by presenting the discourses on the EU among illegal immigrants. We want to address the question of what representations of the EU illegal immigrants from Africa have and where these images come from.

This study tries to overcome the normative orientation of the post-national thesis of the EU with the ethnographic study the Other of the EU, in our case, North-African illegal immigrants in Trieste. The first chapter represents two crucial approaches to researching the imaginaries of Europe, i.e. the national and the post-national concept, and points to their deficiencies. The second chapter deals with the political and social context of the North-African illegal immigrants on one side and Italian policies regarding the immigrants on the other. The methodology chapter is followed by a chapter presenting results, i.e. different representations of the EU, which are placed within the wider social and theoretical context in the last chapter.

## **IMAGINARIES OF THE EU**

The concept of the EU identity, introduced in 1973 at the Copenhagen EC summit and further elaborated in the 1980s through the ad hoc Committee for a People’s EU (Shore 2000), remains today a contested notion, particularly as far as its content and meaning are concerned (Stråth 2002). Along with the efforts of the European Commission to endow the EU with symbols (e.g. a flag, an anthem, a passport), aimed at consolidating the EU identity in the people’s everyday lives (Cram 2001), scholars have also contributed to searching for those values and principles that could give the EU a cultural identity with which EU citizens can identify themselves (Antonsich 2008).

There are authors who adopt a so-called “national” perspective (Beck 2003), i.e. a perspective that looks at the EU through the prism of the nation state and emphasizes that the sense of a feeling of “us” cannot be generated as long as the EU fails to move forward in the integration process. From this perspective, the EU lacks all the features (a common language, a history, traditions, media, etc.) that traditionally characterize the

nation state and which therefore prevent its transformation into a viable polity (Mann 1998; Smith 1992).

Less concerned with the (lack of) common cultural and ethnic factors, the “post-national” view stresses the civic and political values that alone can build a stable democracy (Balibar 2004; Bauman 2004; Beck and Grande 2007; Habermas 1998). In this view, a post-national EU is a territorially vague and governmentally multiple space, filled with universal, cosmopolitan values, beyond the particularism of the nation state. In their search for a new conceptual ground in which to place the EU, many post-national authors have espoused a cosmopolitan view. For Beck and Grande (2007), a cosmopolitan EU is the only “way out” of the present institutional, economic, and political crisis. Their EU is one which does not confuse unity with uniformity, as it relies on the principle of tolerance. A similar position is also shared by Amin (2004), whose cosmopolitan idea of EU relies on the empathy/engagement with the stranger in the forms of hospitality and mutuality. Bauman argues that we should not consider the EU, “but rather a practice of Europeanism” (2004: 7), not as a “container” or “sum” of differences but rather a practice of the “continuous negotiation of difference”. More precisely, for him, Europeanism is an ideal of the ability “to live with the others, to live as the other of the other”, the capacity and necessity of “learning to live with the others even if the others were not like that” (ibid.). Emphasis on tolerance, inclusion, intellectual openness, dialogue, equality, and protection of human rights are characteristics that post-national authors see as being specific to the EU (Nicolaidis and Howse 2002; Soysal 2002; Stråth 2002; Etzioni 2007).

Whether critical or supportive of the post-national thesis, the majority of these authors rarely sustain their arguments with any evidence regarding people’s views. Licata and his colleagues (2003), Kritzinger (2005) and Antonsich (2008), have been asking people about what the EU and its identity are. However, none of these studies has been asking questions about the image of the EU held by the contemporary Other(s), i.e. illegal immigrants. According to Neumann and Welsh (1991: 329), the figure of the Other, historically embodied by the Turks (Islam) and by the Slavic populations (the East), has played a decisive role in the construction of EU as a universal, modern, civilized, harmonic, progressive, and united space. Yet, today the Other is not only the East; it is predominately represented by “America” (i.e. the USA) as a rich EU competitor and by the barbarian and dangerous illegal immigrants (Milohnić 2001; Zavrtnik Zimic 2001; Balibar 2004; Diken 2004; Huysmans 2006; Šabec 2006; Antonish 2008; Banjac 2009).

African migration to the EU is commonly seen as a tidal wave of desperate people fleeing poverty and warfare at home, trying to enter the elusive European “el Dorado”. Typical solutions proposed by politicians include increasing border controls or boosting African “stay-at-home” development (de Haas 2008: 1305). However, such apocalyptic views are based on fundamentally flawed assumptions about the (limited) magnitude, historicity, nature, and causes of this migration (for more see de Haas 2008). Dominant discourses obscure the fact that African migration to the EU and Libya is fuelled by a structural demand for cheap migrant labour in informal sectors (ibid.). This explains why

restrictive immigration policies have invariably failed to stop migration and have had various perverse effects.

Even more, the dominant immigrant discourse of the EU is also a key element of the identity of the EU and the construction of EU authority. The prevailing EU discourse about the illegal African immigrants is a discourse of threat. Illegal immigrants are characterized as Others, a risk group and an object of fear, a threat to the political system and to the cultural environment of the state where they came to, and as a social and economic problem (Huysmans 2006: 45–47). According to Banjac (2009: 95), the perception of immigrants as a danger and threat is immanent to authorities; therefore, the threat of immigrants is actually a threat to authority. The authorities do not make direct threats, but construct an atmosphere where they demonstrate their power, while they do not wield their power directly and totally, as in this way they would expose their weakness, and their power would diminish. The key element of EU immigration policies is a concern for the EU members' security, and it puts immigrants into an exclusive situation, into the state of being an exception, outside the order of the EU (legal order, value system etc.). However, this does not mean that they are outside the authorities which have excluded them, as the authorities and the power of law are preserved precisely in relation to them (Diken 2004). Discourse about the threat personalized in illegal immigrants has another crucial ideological element: it (co-)constructs harmony in the EU. That is, if harmony in the EU does not exist, then the existence of a threat also has no meaning (Banjac 2009: 96).

## **ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION IN ITALY**

Various studies (e.g. Brady 2009; Carrera and Merlino 2009; Finotelelli and Sciortino 2009) have shown that among EU members, Italians are the most suspicious of immigrants. A majority believes that immigrants have too many rights, that they represent a threat, and that immigration has brought only crime. In the summer of 2008, amid public alarm over an immigrant influx, the Italian government declared a state of emergency in Rome, Milan, and Naples, and in 2009 they deployed troops in the streets as part of a crackdown on illegal immigration. It also sent soldiers into the streets, fingerprinted Roma communities, and encouraged rapid expulsions and repatriations. In April 2009, an emergency decree designed to tackle rape – which the mainstream media and government have blamed on immigrants – gave official legitimatisation to the formation of citizens' street patrols, authorised to exercise police functions. A security bill approved in the Italian parliament in the summer of 2009 contains several controversial provisions, including procedures for medical staff to report illegal immigrants, making illegal immigration a criminal offence punishable by a fine of 5,000 to 10,000 euros and terms of up to four years for those who defy expulsion orders.

According to the Italian government, the majority of illegal trespassing takes place by sea; Italy is in the leading position among EU members with regard to seizure of illegal immigrants (mostly Eritreans, Somalis and Nigerians), i.e. 37,000 illegal immigrants in 2008,

and their route is through the Sahara desert to Tripoli (Libya) and across the Mediterranean Sea (Frontex 2009). In May 2009, Libya and Italy announced the beginning of joint naval patrols in Libyan territorial waters, initially intended to last three years. The first week after the interdiction program began, about 500 boat migrants were returned to Libya.

The Human Rights Watch, in its report for 2009 (*Pushed Back, Pushed Around 2009*), holds the Italian government, the EU, and its external borders migration control agency, Frontex, accountable for any harm that befalls people who are returned to Libya without an assessment of their protection needs. It demands that EU institutions and member states stop Italy and Frontex from forcibly returning migrants to Libya, where they are routinely subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment, and where potential refugees are not effectively protected, until Libya has formally ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, adopted a national asylum law, formally recognized the UNHCR, and its treatment of migrants and conditions of migrant detention are in conformity with international standards.

Many organizations, such as Human Rights Watch (*ibid.*) and Doctors Without Borders (see for example Accardi 2009), as well as some Italian media (e.g. the weekly *L'Espresso*), regularly point out that many illegal immigrants in Italy work under slavish conditions and fall sick because of poor living conditions. According to Human Rights Watch (*ibid.*), the main reasons for illegal trespassing of borders are unemployment, the weak economic situation, lack of trust that political, economic, and social circumstances will improve, and the hope for a better life. According to the European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey Report (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2009), looking at a breakdown of results for specific groups in member states in the EU, the highest average number of discrimination incidents over a 12-month period was experienced by North Africans in Italy: an average of 9.29 incidents for every North African person interviewed in Italy.

Intolerance of illegal immigrants is especially present in “border” cities like Trieste, which mirrors the principal European tragedies of the long twentieth century – from the disintegration of the European (Habsburg) Empires to the rise of nationalism, to the emergence of competing totalitarianisms (Fascism and Communism) – and today transfers its otherness onto the new Others (Bialasiewicz 2009). Researchers of the identity of Trieste (Colombino 2009; Minca 2009; Waley 2009) found out that the Italian population in Trieste includes only the privileged people (the German, Hungarian, and Greek communities) in Trieste’s markedly multicultural image, while they exclude other groups, such as historical Other(s) (the Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian and Jewish communities), as well as the recent Other(s) (African, Chinese, Albanian, and South American communities), and especially the illegal immigrants, who are generally labelled as “criminals”.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative data used in this study come from fieldwork which the authors conducted between September and December 2009 in Trieste and the surrounding area with the help of the Slovenian editorial office of the Italian public radio (RAI) in Trieste. We conducted 17 individual interviews with illegal immigrants from North Africa: six

Eritreans, five Somalis, three Nigerians, and three Sudanese. We chose North Africans because they have experienced the highest degree of discrimination among all marginal groups in the last year in Italy (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2009). It was delicate work and difficult to find illegal immigrants willing to share their perceptions of Europe. We sent out an invitation to participate in our research study to various human rights and health organizations, humanitarian religious and non-religious organizations, and other civil society institutions which take care of illegal immigrants in Trieste and its surroundings in different ways. We visited them and introduced our research project in person. We additionally invited potential informants, asking them to share our call for action with regard to illegal immigrants. Seventeen illegal immigrants responded; they were willing to meet and share their perceptions of the EU. All the informants were told that participation would be voluntary; they did not have to agree to be interviewed, and if they declined to answer any questions, they would not be adversely affected.

Generally, the informants were young males, mostly travelling alone and not part of any family groups. The largest contingent, 14, was in their twenties, three of them were in their thirties. More than half of them had finished high school, while five of them had graduated from a university. However, we are not claiming that this is characteristic of the majority of illegal immigrants; it is probable that those who were more educated were more prepared to participate in this research because of their knowledge of languages and their articulation abilities. Only two of the informants were female; males were far more prevalent and visible among the migrant populations that we saw, and women were more reluctant to be interviewed.

There were specific questions asked, such as: (a) What were your perceptions of the EU like before your immigration to the EU? (b) Before immigrating to Europe, where did your perceptions of Europe and your expectations of Europe come from? (c) Based on your experiences of living in the EU, have your perceptions changed? How would you describe the EU as you experience it now? In-depth interviews were used to gather data on the informants' perceptions beyond the official declarations of leaders and official reports (e.g. Hansen et al. 1998). This research technique was also used to get more in-depth information on perceptions than the media portray. Furthermore, some other techniques, such as surveys, would be useless because of the inaccessibility of the informants.

The interviews were conducted in English or Italian in a park and/or in public eating halls. Individual interviews averaged about 45 minutes, and some lasted well over one hour. The interviews were recorded after the interviewees had given consent. All tapes were transcribed and translated into English, and all interview notes were written up. Each interview was analyzed by both researchers. All names of interviewees are withheld for their protection as well as that of their families.

## **RESULTS**

The informants spoke about Europe as a homogeneous entity. No one used the expres-



sion “European Union” or “EU”, and they only rarely used the word “Italy”. That is, their journey had not been directed towards a specific country, but to “Europe”.

### **Illegal Immigrants’ Representations of Europe before Leaving Africa**

Answers to the question of what their perceptions were of the EU like before leaving Africa reveal that they their image of the EU had not been precisely formed, but was focused on the possibility of their economic success in Europe. Typical answers were that Europe meant a “good job” (Nadifa, a 28-year-old Somali woman), “wealth” (Aman, a 25-year-old Eritrean), and “economic success” (Abdikar, a 25-year old Somali).

The immigrants had formed the ideal image of economic success in Europe through the mass media. They said that the African media do not cover Europe extensively, but when they do, they represent it in an idealistic way, especially in regards to its economic conditions. This representation of Europe is not limited to the news, but is particularly prevalent in entertainment programs. The informants were describing the popularity of numerous radio and television series showing how Africans working in Europe became rich and returned home wealthy. Now they see it as deception: “magic”. A typical example:

The media mostly praise how Europeans live, how developed and rich they are, how well they live ... Television shows are very popular ... I tell you, the whole families, villages watch it together ... these shows present how Africans live in Europe ... and they show people who succeeded when working in Europe and who returned back home. ... When I was watching this at home, I believed that it was all true, of course; today I see that this is all just ... how would I say ... magic. These pictures enchant you so that you think it is all true. And, of course, everybody wants to live like this. Me too. (Papa, a 32-year-old Sudanese)

Another key information source is people who are members of organized crime groups and who use marketing to get the support and protection of the local environment; they are represented as those who help people on their way to Europe. A typical example:

Now, when I look back, I can tell you that smugglers do their job very well. It all started when my father told me that when they had come to our village for the first time, a neighbour had got his voyage to Europe for free. Later, they introduced packages “three for the price of two”. In this way, they try to earn money as well as favours from the local people. (Suleman, a 36-year-old Eritrean)

The third key source of information is the immigrants themselves, who present a false picture of their life in Europe to their families. Because they are afraid to disappoint their families, they send them photos of someone else’s wealth and/or they describe their imaginary life over the telephone, and they assure them that they have succeeded.

Same as others told me, now I say it to my people ... Tell me, what should I do? I cannot tell them the truth. My father would collapse. I cannot bring the shame on

him that his son did not succeed, when he got into debt and gave me everything for my journey, so I call them on the phone and say them that I am well, and I send them photos of beautiful houses and girls ... Yes, and this is why I persist, as I cannot return home with nothing to show. ... I do not know if you understand this... when you go, you must not return poor. This would be a shame for the family. (Mustafa, a 31-year-old Eritrean)

With these unreal representations constructed by the media, members of organized crime groups, and the immigrants themselves, the picture of the real life of illegal immigrants in Europe and of a different Europe does not make its way to Africa.

### **Illegal Immigrants' Representations of Europe based on their Life in Italy**

All the informants said that because of their negative experiences, they have changed their perceptions of Europe entirely. Our informants' discourse about the EU includes elements of violence, economic exploitation, racism, and inhumanity.

#### *Europe as a Repressive Country*

Our informants prevalingly described Europe as a repressive country, referring to their everyday life in Europe. At the same time, they were directly connecting this impression with their travel to Europe; on their journey, they experienced suffering and abuse, and they placed at least some part of the blame on Europe.

The majority of informants also connected their impressions of Europe to their motive for leaving their country. They left because they wanted to escape from violence. However, on their journey to Europe as well as in Europe itself, they became victims of violence again. Therefore, they were disappointed and angry with Europe. They came from Eritrea to avoid forced conscription into an army that had no time limit. Some of them were even forced to act as personal servants to high-ranking officers. They came from Darfur, Sudan to escape war; from other parts of Sudan, fleeing from forced conscription and repression; from Nigeria to escape the conflict in the Niger Delta; and from Somalia, where the armed conflict and the collapse of state institutions had started 18 years earlier, to escape from a so-called failed state and a never-ending war. For example:

In my life, I cannot get rid of violence, fear, running away. I ran away from the army, but its methods have been following me all along my journey in their most brutal form, and they are still here, where I would expect them least of all. Europe is one big repression, violence, covert oppression, and physical ... we are beaten from all sides. I am disappointed and angry with Europe. (Habtom, a 24-year-old Eritrean man)

Before embarking on their voyage across the Mediterranean, the Eritreans, Somalis, and Nigerians collected all the money from their relatives or/and sold one of their organs (most often a kidney or cornea), and left their country in trucks organized by local criminals, making their way to neighbouring Sudan. From there, they embarked on the



perilous journey across the Saharan Desert. All informants said that in Libya the police, the army, and smugglers operate together; they humiliated, extorted, stole from and beat them. Some men and both women said that they knew of cases of rape and sexual assault. Madihah, a 24-year-old Eritrean woman who was held in the Libyan migrant detention centres of Al Fellah and Misrata, said, “All of the women had problems from the police. The police came at night and chose ladies to violate.” Informants almost universally expressed their opinion that Europe is to be blamed for this, because it supports and finances the Libyan state, which tries to prevent immigrants’ entrance to Europe by using repression. A typical example:

Europe supports and pays money to Libya, so that it performs most of the dirty work for Europe. The army, the police, and smugglers work together. First, they take all your money, then they beat you like an animal every day ... there are even cases of rape, especially by the army ... to drop dead as soon as possible ... The worst comes at sea ... For four days we had no water and food ... most people died there because they could not go on like this ... some of them were sick, some died because they were drinking salt water ... some fell into the sea because of the waves. (Abdi, a 31-year-old Somali)

Most of the informants tried to reach the Italian islands of Sicily and Lampedusa at least twice, two of them even eight times, and they had negative experience not only with representatives of the Libyan repressive services but also with the Italian ones. All of them expressed the opinion that they had no other choice but to try to enter Europe illegally; if they tried to come legally, they would be returned to Libya. More than half of them alleged that the Italian naval personnel did not offer food to those who had been at sea for four days, confiscated their documents and personal effects without returning them, and used force in transferring them to the Libyan vessel. Some even claimed that Italian naval personnel used electroshock batons and clubs to force the migrants off the boat.

All informants described their everyday life in Trieste as being subject to various kinds of repression. Repression is carried out by the “ordinary” citizens who report them to the police, and by youth groups (i.e. skinheads) who beat them or even kill them. Because of their illegal status, they change their place of residence, hide from the police; they live in fear of the police catching them, beating them and deporting them.

I managed to come to the north, as I had been told that people who live in the north are friendlier, but this is not true. You have to know... for me and most of my African brothers, life in Trieste is much worse than it was at home despite the war and hunger. I sleep in parks, on the streets, in the subways, under the road bridges. Here, people report me and my brothers to the police; they shout at us that we should return to wherever we came from. It is the worst when the youths get you, as they brutally beat you. They did this to me once, half a year ago, and I barely pulled through. I was covered with blood. Some of my brothers were not so lucky and they bled to death. We constantly move around and watch out not to be caught and beaten and

deported by the police. ... This is not a life ... When I was leaving home, I thought that Europe was a promised land. Now I know it is not ... Why?! What is wrong with Europe? (Ezekiel, a 24-year-old Eritrean)

Three immigrants even admitted that they work for the local mafia, which constantly threatens, tyrannizes, and even kills them. They spoke out of despair, as they thought they had nothing more to lose.

You know, we are simple targets because we have no documents and we cannot turn to anyone for help. Look, two weeks ago, hit men gunned down two brothers for breaking the rules. And nobody knows this except us, because we do not exist. They can beat us, take advantage of us, walk on us, even kill us, and nothing happens. (Ghedi, a 27-year-old Nigerian)

### *Europe as a Country of Modern Slavery*

Another prevalent representation of Europe was modern slavery. The informants connected this representation to their work and life experiences in Italy, which exhibit the key characteristics of “modern slavery”, defined as “a relationship in which one person is controlled by another through violence, the threat of violence, or psychological coercion, has lost free will and free movement, is exploited economically, and is paid nothing beyond subsistence” (Bales et al. 2009: 30). More than a half of the informants described their slave labour on the plantations, three of them at the construction sites, women in domestic service, restaurants and hotels, as economic exploitation and maintenance of violent control. Nobody worked in forced prostitution and sex services, although many of them mentioned that this kind of slave labour is widespread in Trieste and elsewhere in Italy. The majority of informants worked in more or less closed workplaces which were controlled by the Mafia. They referred to these places as “labour camps” with poor life conditions, e.g. numerous illegal immigrants had to sleep all in one place and on the floor, there was not enough drinking water and water for washing, and their meals were too small. Their stories usually ended with the conclusion that exploitation in Europe is bigger than that in Africa, so Europe is actually the third world and not Africa.

When I made it to Europe, people on the island told me that I could earn [money] if I worked [at] a plantation ... Once you enter a labour camp, it is hard to get out, because you are literally owned by farmers who are ruled by Mafia bosses ... and they are all connected to the police ... You could see this precisely when the police caught and exiled those workers who resisted ... escaped, but they did not put farmers in prison ... I was doing all kinds of things, picking oranges, olives, tomatoes, and grapes, as well as strawberries and potatoes here in the north. They were driving us from one farmer to another and they were literally torturing us. I tell you, we were working from morning till night in the hot sun, and we lived in camps with minimal food, we all slept together on the floor, there were no toilets, and no water to wash. When you were resting during work, the warders kicked you, even if you

were sick. The warders were the worst ... the worst is that our African brothers who sold themselves were the worst warders ... In the first months I got no payment at all; later, here in the north, I was paid 20 euros a day, but they counted out money for food and accommodation, so most of the time, I got out only five euros ... When I got a chance, during transportation, I ran away ... Now I live worse than in Sudan. Here they exploit you more than back home ... Europe is the third world and not Africa. (Aman, a 25-year-old Sudanese)

Even though the majority ran away to the north from plantations and construction sites controlled by the Mafia in the south of Italy, more than half of them found themselves in Mafia hands in Trieste again because of their existential distress; now they sell false designer goods for the Mafia, they work in restaurants and hotels (mostly washing dishes or cleaning toilets), and work in domestic services (cleaners in homes).

Yes, I sell bags on these streets for the Mafia. But how else shall I survive? I would be pleased to have a normal job. It does not have to be teaching, although I have the education for it; they can give me a job of a ... I do not know ... a postman, a taxi or an ambulance driver. Instead, they would rather allow the Mafia to enslave us. We work hard for almost nothing ... if we did not get food for free, we would not survive. And now you cannot say no anymore. Nobody sees this as a problem ... this is business as usual. It is like this because it suits the majority of people. Yes, it suits Europe. (Abdikar, a 25-year old Somali)

The representation of Europe as a place of extortion is based on the informants' experiences that their slave labour suits the state authorities, especially their repressive apparatus, the Mafia, business, and the "ordinary" people, because they live off the proceeds of it; therefore, they change nothing.

#### *Cold, Racist and Inhuman Europe*

All the informants also constructed a cultural representation of Europe: it is non-empathetic, racist, and inhuman. The majority compared the cold weather in Europe to people's cold, non-empathetic relation to them, and they characterized Europe as cold. A typical example:

Everything is so cold here. The weather is cold and the people are cold. Just look and see their relation to us. They do not care even if we drop dead from hunger on the street. This is supposed to be "la dolce vita"? ... It is ugly what I am going to say now, but I wish Europeans had war, so that they could see how it is when you are running away. (Ghedi, a 27-year-old Nigerian)

The above statement reveals how the informants expressed the double nature of Europe, which presents itself as civilized, rich, developed, and democratic, while the

immigrants see it as undemocratic, exclusivist, and racist. Some of them even pointed to the historical continuity of racism. A typical example:

Europe as the so-called rich society has, in reality, developed an attitude of rejection of foreigners, especially toward us who have a different colour of skin. This is an ordinary racism, which was experienced by our ancestors who were abducted to slavery, in times of colonization, robbery ... but now it is visible in a way that they do not help us to make up for their mistakes in Africa, so that we are chessmen on their chessboard and they do not let us enter Europe; in Europe they despise us and they let us know all the time that we are less worthy than they are ... Europeans' self-image as "brava gente" clashes with an increase in acts of racism, which is a true face of Europe. (Ermi, a 25-year-old Nigerian)

One of the informants compared Europe and its racism with the USA, where they have a black president: "You know, it is interesting how most Europeans were thrilled when Barack Obama was elected as American president, but they themselves are racists. Every day they scornfully shout at us, 'bingo bongos'" (Nadifa, a 28-year-old Somali).

The informants described Europe and Europeans as inhuman because their relation to illegal immigrants is inhuman.

We beg people for food on our knees, but they do not give it. Is this human? No, they are not people. Europe is not my homeland and I would return home long ago if I could, but I must send money home so that my family can survive. (Kofi, a 31-year-old Sudanese)

All the informants implicitly or explicitly stated that Europe is not their second homeland where they could live "on their own free will". They stay here because they have been taught not to return to Africa poor, as they must not fail their families who gave them money to travel to Europe and who now depend on them: "Europe is not my homeland! But I cannot return! My family at home depends on me. Beside, when you leave Africa, you are not supposed to return empty-handed" (Madihah, a 23-year-old Eritrean).

## DISCUSSION

The dominant representation of the EU is a mythical image of the EU, which is universal, modern, civilized, harmonic, progressive, and united, while its positivity is constructed through antagonistic negation of all else (Velikonja 2005). The EU is an exclusivist concept which includes by excluding (Mastnak 2001). This representation of the EU is built on a reduced history of Europe, on the continuation of Hellenism, the Latin world, and Christianity, and it characterizes the horrors of European history merely as deviations (Velikonja 2005) which no longer occur today. Why is such a representation prevalent? Because studies do not research the perceptions of those social groups which

could present a different image of Europe, e.g. the Others of contemporary Europe, i.e. illegal immigrants. This study has tried to make at least some contribution to fill this gap.

The key finding of this study is that African illegal immigrants represent the other, darker side of the EU, the one which is denied by the mainstream representation, or is described as something deviant but long ago brought to an end. African illegal immigrants perceive Europe as a dark narrative of their experiences with the EU: repressive, slavish and cold, racist and inhuman. This representation points to the fact that deviant occurrences are still very much present in the EU of today. However, they are unnoticed because we, the EU citizens, do not see them or do not want to see them. In their representations of the EU, illegal immigrants revealed that they experienced racism, racial segregation and slavery, which is described by Balibar (2004: 45) as “European apartheid”.

The study also revealed why there are no changes in representations about Europe in Africa: the myth of a Europe where every African can succeed is (co-)constructed by the media, which are a dominant social force, members of organized crime groups, and the illegal immigrants themselves, who do not tell their people in Africa how they really live.

If we compare different discourses about illegal immigrants and the EU, we find out that the prevailing EU discourse about illegal African immigrants is a discourse of threat; illegal immigrants are characterized as a risk group and an object of fear, a threat to the political system and to the cultural environment of the state where they came to, and as a social and economic problem. On the other hand, illegal immigrants had a vague image of Europe before leaving Africa, as they associated it with economic success. Based on their experiences when travelling to Italy and living there, they changed this image radically, so that the present discourse of illegal immigrants includes elements of violence (Europe as a repressive country), economic exploitation (Europe as a country of modern slavery), and cultural and racial discrimination (Europe as cold, racist and inhuman). These antagonistic discourses also show that it is necessary to expand the post-national thesis of the EU so that it will no longer be limited to the normative level, but will include evidence regarding different people’s views in its arguments; not only the mainstream views, but also the views of the marginal social groups. We argue that representatives of the post-national thesis should not deliberate only on what the EU should be, but should also give a voice to illegal immigrants to present their image of the EU, their experiences with the EU, and thus uncover the EU (immigration) policies and the EU logic of authority construction. At the same time, EU inhabitants must demand that the EU authorities provide help, human rights, and a decent life to illegal immigrants, as well as all other immigrants, different minority groups, workers, unemployed ... animals ... to us all.

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## POVZETEK

### EVROPSKA UNIJA – NOVA DOMOVINA ZA ILEGALNE IMIGRANTE? ŠTUDIJA IMAGINARIJEV EVROPSKE UNIJE

Karmen Erjavec in Melita Poler Kovačič

Na prelomu stoletij so se pojavile nasprotujoče predstave o tem, kaj tvori identiteto Evropske unije (EU), kdo ji pripada ter kje so njene notranje in zunanje meje. Študije imaginarijev EU so doslej raziskovale zlasti medijske reprezentacije, stališča politikov in javno mnenje o EU. Pogledi sodobnih Drugih, tj. ilegalnih imigrantov, azilantov in beguncev, so bili prezrti. Ta študija skuša zapolniti to vrzel z vključitvijo reprezentacij ilegalnih imigrantov iz Afrike. Ključno vprašanje je, kakšne reprezentacije EU imajo ilegalni imigranti in iz kje te reprezentacije izvirajo.

Dosedanje študije o EU negujejo »nacionalno« in »postnacionalno« perspektivo. Predstavniki prve gledajo na EU skozi prizmo nacionalnih držav in opozarjajo, da v EU manjka skupen »mi«, skupna identiteta. Manj skrbi s pomanjkanjem skupnih kulturnih in etničnih dejavnikov imajo predstavniki druge perspektive, ki poudarjajo državljske in politične vrednote. Ta pogled vidi EU kot prostor, zapolnjen z univerzalnimi, kozmopolitskimi vrednotami, kot so strpnost, vključitev, intelektualna odprtost, dialog, enakost in zaščita človekovih pravic.

Predstavniki nobene od obeh perspektiv pa niso empirično podprli svojih argumentov s pogledom ljudi na EU. Še posebej pa ni bila opravljena raziskava, ki bi odkrila, kako sodobni Drugi reprezentirajo EU. V zgodovini je bila evropska identiteta zgrajena na principu izključevanja, še posebej Turki (islam) in Slovani (Vzhod) so igrali pomembno vlogo v konstrukciji EU kot univerzalnega, modernega, civiliziranega, harmoničnega, razvitega in enotnega prostora. Danes prevladujejo drugi Drugi, na primer ZDA kot bogat konkurent EU na eni strani ter barbarski in nevarni ilegalni migranti na drugi strani.

Prevladujoči EU diskurz o ilegalnih afriških imigrantih je diskurz o (ne)varnosti. Ilegalni imigranti so označeni kot Drugi, rizična skupina in objekt strahu, nevarnost za politični sistem in kulturno okolje, v katerega vdirajo, ter kot družbeni in ekonomski problem. Ta reprezentacija je v bistvu imanentna EU avtoriteti. Nevarnost imigrantov je dejansko nevarnost, ki jo sproža avtoriteta, saj ta potrebuje nenehni grozilni apel, da lahko ustvari atmosfero, v kateri demonstrira svojo moč. Svoje moči nikoli ne uresniči v popolnosti, saj bi s tem razkrila lastno šibkost in njena moč bi izginila. Ta diskurz o (ne)varnosti pa obenem konstruira iluzijo o harmonije EU, ki jo kali le prisotnost ilegalnih imigrantov.

Od septembra do decembra 2009 smo v Trstu in njegovi okolici s pomočjo slovenskega uredništva italijanskega javnega radia RAI izvedli 17 poglobljenih intervjujev z ilegalnimi imigranti iz Eritreje, Somalije, Nigerije in Sudana. Vprašali smo jih, kakšne predstave o EU so imeli pred odhodom iz Afrike in iz kje so izvirale; ali so se njihove predstave na podlagi izkušenj življenja v Italiji spremenile in kako EU vidijo zdaj.

Ilegalni imigranti imajo pred prihodom v Evropo megleno podobo o EU, saj jo povezujejo z ekonomskim uspehom. Študija je tudi razkrila, zakaj se reprezentacije o Evropi v Afriki ne spreminjajo; mit o Evropi, kjer vsakega Afričana čaka uspeh, soustvarjajo mediji kot dominantna družbena sila, pripadniki organiziranega kriminala, pa tudi ilegalni imigranti sami, ki svojcem v Afriki ne želijo priznati, kako v Evropi dejansko živijo.

Raziskava je pokazala, da so se na podlagi izkušenj reprezentacije ilegalnih imigrantov o EU spremenile; zdaj Evropo reprezentirajo kot: 1. deželo represije; 2. deželo sodobnega suženjstva; ter 3. mrzlo, rasistično in nečloveško deželo. Ključno spoznanje te študije je, da afriški ilegalni imigranti prikazujejo drugo, temačno plat EU – tisto, ki jo prevladujoče reprezentacije zanikajo, ali pa jo opisujejo kot nekaj odklonskega, vendar že zdavnaj preseženega. Pričanja ilegalnih imigrantov razkrivajo, da so izkusili rasizem, rasno segregacijo in suženjstvo. Njihove reprezentacije opozarjajo, da so odklonski pojavi še vedno močno prisotni, vendar neopaženi, ker jih državljani EU ne vidijo ali ne želijo videti.

Reprezentacije ilegalnih imigrantov o EU utemeljujejo potrebo po razširitvi postnacionalne teze o EU; ta ne sme biti omejena zgolj na normativno raven, ampak mora obsegati poglede in argumente različnih ljudi – ne zgolj dominantnih, ampak tudi marginalnih družbenih skupin. Postnacionalna teza se ne bi smela osredotočati zgolj na premislek o tem, kaj naj bi EU bila, ampak bi morala vključiti tudi glasove ilegalnih imigrantov, ki razkrivajo svoje izkušnje, svoje reprezentacije EU, in tako razkrivajo (imigracijsko) politiko EU. Sočasno bi prebivalci EU morali zahtevati, da oblasti zagotovijo pomoč, človekove pravice in dostojno življenje tudi ilegalnim imigrantom.