

Interview with Bloggers from *Migrants Matter*

<http://migrants-matter.blogspot.lu>

About the Blog and Authors

The blog regroups former students from more than 40 different countries who came together during the Master's programme in Human Rights and Democratisation. They are deeply concerned by the treatment of migrants in Europe today, and have decided to take action on this by pulling together and launching a campaign for better protection of their rights.

Theodora Ralli from Greece, has studied Psychology and Human Rights and Michele Romano is a law student from Italy.

1. When and how did the idea about starting this blog arise?

Michele: At the bottom of the idea of starting the blog, there was a willingness to launch our advocacy campaign called *Migrants Matter*. We decided to open the blog to raise our voices in favour of the ratification of the UN Convention on Migrant Workers by EU Member States: a commitment that goes in parallel with the activity of lobbying.

Theodora: It all started in October 2013. We were still students then attending the European Master of Human Rights and Democratisation. On the 3rd of October there was a shipwreck close to the Italian island Lampedusa, that costed the lives of about 400 people trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. We felt that we should do something about this. After long discussions and several meetings when we focused on issues relevant to migrants within the European Union, we found out about the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW). We had all heard stories about the exploitation of migrant workers, their scanty wages and the difficult living and working conditions they find themselves in. We also knew that no one has been doing anything to change this and we identified the multiple challenges that we would encounter if we decided to build an advocacy campaign around the ICRMW. A major

one being of course the great anti-immigrant sentiment and discourse that dominates Europe. This is when we came up with the idea of a blog – apart

from the blog we have a lobby team that contacts directly politicians and other stakeholders – that

will present the other side of the coin, or else the reality as it is. Our goal has been, and still is, to do some myth-busting on topics related to migrants presenting the situation as it really is, providing with alternative explanations and promoting other realities that do not consider migrants as a threat.

2. How did you become contributor at *Migrants Matter*?

Michele: The blog serves the purpose to impact civil society in the awareness of issues related to migrant workers and how their rights are at risk in the European Union.

Theodora: Being among the founders, I chose to join the “blog team” because I enjoy writing. It was fun familiarising ourselves with Blogger and searching for topics to be featured. I also liked the consistency of the group – it was very varied. We had people from Law, from Psychology, from Languages and our different backgrounds reflected on the way we approached the topics. We always thought that this heterogeneity has been one of our biggest advantages and distinctive characteristics.

3. What triggered your commitment to the cause of migrants and refugees?

Theodora: What triggered and continues to trigger my commitment to the cause of migrants and later of refugees is the fact that migrants and refugees in the European territory are not able to stand for themselves, for a number of reasons like their status of undocumented. On one hand this results in them falling victims of mistreatment and injustice and on the other hand they are not able to denounce their employers in this case. We as a blog team and me personally have wanted to show our support to them, write about them and advocate in order to improve their working and living situation. Common conceptions among Europeans are “migrants steal our jobs” or “migrants are dangerous”, they “pose a threat to the perseverance of our cultural identity” etc. These arguments have been dominant in the 90s and have been promoted through the European media as well. On the other hand, I strongly believe that this kind of information and ideas have prevailed only for political reasons and because the counter-argument may have not been so strong. Our – and my personal – commitment derives from the belief that we can reinforce this counter-argument through our blog pieces.

4. How would you formulate the objectives of this blog?

Michele: “We are committed to building a different kind of European Union, one where the honest work of all people is valued, and where socially conscious words are followed by actions that demonstrate coherence and integrity.”

Theodora: The main objective of the campaign as a whole is “to improve conditions for migrants in Europe through developing awareness and lobbying for effectual policy for migrant workers, specifically through promoting the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.” The specific objectives of the blog are in line with these goals and especially aim to raise awareness on the situation of migrants in Europe. We also want to provide a holistic view of the situation and this is why we feature articles by guest authors that reside in different parts of Europe.

5. What did you expect at the beginning and how would you evaluate the results of the blog or your contributions so far?

Michele: Honestly, we started as a group of friends studying human rights who couldn't hold anymore the heavy stone on our chests, meaning to hear every day tragedies on migrants remaining seated on our couches. From a student-led project, we became something bigger and the thousands of visitors who to-date read the Blog made us understand that this is the right direction.

Theodora: Since the blog started as something parallel and complementary of our lobbying activities within the wider context of our advocacy campaign, our blog articles have been the means of communicating our progress regarding the lobbying front or other activities and events that we organised or participated in as *Migrants Matter*. At the beginning we could only publish articles that we wrote, but as the time passes and the campaign gains more visibility, people approach us asking to contribute to our blog with an article. Before it was us that reached to them but now more and more people take the initiative which has resulted in more guest authors. Furthermore, we have always planned to have a more inclusive online platform that would feature not only articles but all of our projects. This website is a reality since last June!

6. In which ways would you consider blogs a tool of civil resistance, if you understand civil resistance as a form of public action

that welcomes participation and is not privileged or exclusionary?

Michele: A blog, blogging, or simply writing is the opposite of “privilege” and “exclusion”. Writing is inclusion, is life, and is the real revolution. All revolutions started with a piece of paper in which words were written. As the Latins said “*verba volant, scripta manent*”. I could go back in time to explain the importance of written words, but we have recent examples concerning the Arab Spring Movement and the Pakistani Malala – the 2014 Peace Nobel Prize Winner. At the same time Internet is an instrument of political propaganda and can be used for detrimental purposes. There are always two sides of the coin.

7. Did the Internet expand the possibilities of these kind of actions and make them more accessible to a greater audience?

Theodora: It surely did. The web enables you to connect with people from all around the world instantly and makes your work visible to a greater audience. The challenge that lies beneath is the plurality of the websites. It is easy to reach more people and establish contacts but at the same time a lot of work is required from one's part to stand out and pass their message.

8. Did the new means of communication, such as Internet, Twitter, Facebook, etc. link social movements, like the fight against anti-migrant measures, at the national and international level? And do you consider yourself part of a larger movement?

Michele: They do. These means are probably the main channels that human rights movements use to spread their voices. Before the advent of the Web, it would have been almost impossible for someone to know what was going on thousands of kilometres away, in other continents. Now everything is different. Anyway, we must be careful and avoid believing in everything we read. It is important to always check the source of the news. When we write an article we always use sources, and we quote them, in order to avoid any possible mistake or confusion. We consider ourselves not as part of a larger movement, but as part of The Movement that is Internet.

Theodora: We have managed to create and establish contacts with a number of NGOs that take action in the area of migrant rights. They promote initiatives of our campaign and we know about theirs. For instance we are currently working together with migrantas in a combined project that will soon be published on our website. When we plan and work on projects like this one, it really feels like being part of a larger movement

or "community", a community of those that have same goals as we do.

9. Considering the rising nationalist sentiments in the European countries (also on the level of the civil society), what kind of measures should one take against them?

Michele: The answer to this question is education and culture. Sociologists agree upon the fact that biggest barriers come from the poorest substrate who is frightened to lose the small benefits that the central government provide for them (a sort of war between poor) and from the richest, who believe migrants are just another weight for the national economy. Thus, nationalists use these weak arguments to hide their racist sentiments. The reality is that a weak state is simply incapable to develop policies that integrate migrants inside the local environment. It is proved that migrants raise the GDP of the economy they work in, and not the opposite. Thus, it is probably late to eradicate nationalist feelings, but is not to educate young generations to a strong feeling of acceptance.

Theodora: The nationalist sentiment is indeed growing in a lot of European countries. This is visible and easy to detect among certain right-wing movements and political parties (Golden Dawn in Greece, Le Pen in France) who have always included nationalistic ideas in their discourses. However, the ongoing refugee crisis seems to have intensified these ideas and these sentiments among less extreme political movements across the European territory. UK's Cameron has been less than supportive towards the thousands of people that wanted to request asylum in Great Britain and Hungary's Orban has passed a law criminalising the illegal entry of refugees and migrants through the newly built fence across the Hungarian-Serbian borders. The nationalistic sentiment goes hand-in-hand with the anti-immigrant sentiment and it moves according to the movements of the refugees and asylum-seekers.

What I think is the counter balance for the anti-immigrant discourse and the racist ideas is information and having the facts right. Misinformation can lead to misconceptions and reinforce the nationalistic sentiments.

Interview by Charline Kopf on 8th October 2015