

Homo homini lupus est... Are you afraid of wolves? Are you afraid that the toast in oven might be burnt? Are you afraid of spiders? Are you afraid that your train might be late? Are you afraid to be open-minded? Are you afraid of me? You definitely should, I come from Latvia, its means from nowhere and it means I want something from you... Most probably something really bad, horrible, terrible... Probably take your job, hang around with your daughter and stay in your country for ever...

With this little monologue I just wanted to show that we all live in a constant fear of different objects, actions and feelings. And it is normal to be afraid of certain things but if you look at me and see a representative of country, religion or any other group and are afraid of me I tell you: you have a problem, buddy!

What a lovely world would be if there were only Americans, Asians or Africans; excellent – no place for racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia or any other intolerance. A perfect world with a perfect secure future that we are longing so much for but it would be so boring as well – no interesting news on TV, no Discovery channel, not even reality shows on tropical islands.

Luckily the 21st century is the time when we are celebrating the cultural diversity, or at least we should, but besides this celebration there is a big black evil shadow which is called xenophobia. With this essay I would like to show how a tolerance towards different cultures and nations can be one of the basic stones for a secure future for everyone.

First, I am going to clarify the reasons why I chose to write about racism and xenophobia. Second, I will reveal how I have come across intolerance problems myself while being abroad and how I dealt with them and what it could have meant for people around me. Third, I will expand on situation in Latvia and will give suggestions for steps to combat racism and prejudiced assumptions of others. All the through I will give an explanation how I see the possibilities to create a secure future through building tolerance among people from different cultural backgrounds.

There are several motives why I have decided to arise the question about racism and tolerance. First, it is a long-term phenomena which has survived from the ancient times till nowadays and surprisingly is still of a big importance, although so much effort and financial funds are spent on reducing this problem. In addition it is taking another forms and expressions (1). According to the 2003 European Social Survey (2)

almost half of the respondents displayed a critical attitude towards cultural and religious diversity. In addition, the survey in 2003 by Eurobarometer (2) showed that 60 per cent of the respondents in EU-15 expressed the view that multiculturalism had certain limits, and this opinion has increased since 1997. Consequently, there comes the question – how long can it last and what will be the consequences?

Another fact that Europe has to face is the enlargement of European Union which means that now culturally Europe is richer than ever but somehow this fact is obscured by several violence outbursts against new Europeans in such countries as Great Britain and Ireland (5). Moreover, according to Mr. Doudou Diène, the United Nation's Special Reporter on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and related Intolerance, European Union will have a hard debate on Turkey's entry into the Union as it is a country with totally different cultural heritage and is so different from other EU countries (1). The situation mentioned before makes one wonder in what kind of Europe we will live and if it is what we expected and voted for in the referendum.

One more reason which makes the question about racism crucial, is the fact that it has become one of the prior discussions of United Nations, European Union, local governments and special agencies and centers to combat racism but the majority of people don't see it as a problem. In a survey carried out in Latvia on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, March 21, 2005, it was proved that people see this problem to be far away, mostly related with America and Britain (3). This attitude is fostered by local mass media which whether doesn't talk about it at all or presents separate information bits which are very confusing for an average citizen (6). Similar situations have been observed in the Netherlands, Great Britain and Belgium. Consequently, there is no link between people and the measures taken by world wide organizations and governments.

Moreover, I have not only observed the issue about racism and xenophobia but I have also experienced it myself which makes me think that this problem is an obstacle to very many young people in their daily lives and something more effective should be done to combat it.

To sum up, the complicated issue about the flourishing racism and xenophobia has deep roots back in history and is like a sleeping dragon which is guarded by people and mass-media and might awake any moment if certain well-balanced measures will not be taken.

Latvia is a small country where people whether prefer to observe the world from far away or simply don't have money to travel abroad. As I am an outgoing person, I

had decided that the time had come to leave the home and gain some experience abroad. I chose to be a volunteer for European Voluntary Service in Cardiff in a mental hospital for six months at age of 21. Two years after I decided to take the challenge and be an assistant for Socrates/ Comenius 2 program in Belgium. My motivation was to learn about another cultures, learn better their language and help people. However, I had no idea that my personality would be linked so much with my nationality. I cannot say that I experienced racism but definitely xenophobia. I was the first ever Latvian for both already a long going projects so I knew that people would judge me as a representative of my country (Eastern countries, to be more precise as many people don't know where Latvia is).

There were several moments when I felt to be too different from the common Europeans. First, I noticed that in the very beginning people were afraid to talk to me and they always started the conversation with Spanish or Danish volunteers as they could find more common things with them, for example, places that they had visited, weather conditions, football etc. Then I realized that people were simply afraid of talking to me as they didn't know where Latvia was, and they were not sure if I spoke English and they actually didn't know anything what to talk about with me. I understood that if I wanted to communicate, it should be me that starts the conversation. By this I encouraged people around me to talk to me, not to be afraid to ask questions as I did the same. It helped to burn the cold bridge called suspiciousness and people around me saw that I was the same as them.

Another unpleasant moments were in Belgium when I talked to people who had seen me for the first time and knew that I was from somewhere far far away. The second question/ statement in our conversation was: so you want to stay here. Is your family coming as well (in a rather negative tone)? I think that it is really sad that people have this assumption that people from non EU-15 countries go there only to have a job, to move away from their home for a better life. Consequently, the attitude towards foreigners is negative even before they have found what your real reasons are for being in the country. I believe that to solve this problem again the key is individual communication because it is the only way how to open eyes for stubborn people. In addition, to encourage people to talk to me and to reduce the negative attitude towards me, I made a poster about Latvia and about my project. It helped people to understand my motives of being in Belgium and they had a chance to learn about Latvia. Although, it might seem that only a little part of population is affected in this way, I am sure that this makes a chain reaction and next time when people will meet somebody from East, they will be more open.

To sum up, the key to combat xenophobia is a face to face communication as I showed it with examples from my personal experience. Although, it is slow and does not involve many people directly, it is with a guaranteed success for a long term positive consequences. I believe that any person can adapt this method because it requires only courage, initiative and knowledge about one's own country.

In the previous paragraphs I described how an individual can reduce xenophobia and racism traces while being the victim but in the following lines I will explain how I see the solution of this problem in countries which are abusing foreigners, mainly as an example mentioning Latvia.

Racism has been observed in Latvia through centuries, starting when Latvian peasants were slaves for German invaders, after for Poles, Swedish, Russians and in 20th century Latvians were under the power of Nazi Germany and Soviet Union, however this history mark has turned over and now they are Latvians themselves that are suspicious about foreigners (7). I am not going to talk about rusophobia because it is a very specific problem only for a small number of countries but about people who are not from Baltic states.

When I arrived back home from EVS, I had so many new impressions, wonderings and conclusions that I was eager to share them with everybody. Again the power of individual approach worked as I have many friends and acquaintances that have never been for a longer time abroad and were eager to find out and discuss the noticed peculiarities about foreigners.

Very soon after my returning I got a job as a youth trainer for future volunteers and it was a really awarding work as I could see how scared and unsure young people turned into courageous world explorers after the preparation seminars, where we talked a lot about different cultures, their peculiarities, expression and our role there as observers. I believe that this is again an evidence that to combat racism and xenophobia, the first step is to get involved personally or to know somebody who has seen something with their own eyes.

Of course, there is also a possibility that in certain situations people will develop their prejudices and will not change their mind about their superiority. I believe that a possibility of failure is much bigger if a person goes abroad only as a tourist, so my suggestion is that there should be more effort done to encourage young people to go abroad and see the world as volunteers, au-pair nannies or exchange students. I think that so far the number of people who participate is far too little and here comes the time when the governments and world wide organizations should play more important role, they have to encourage young people to see more than their nose but besides

they also have secure that everything is well-organized and there won't be any problems for the brave ones.

I would like to remind again that one of the reasons of racism problems is that people simply don't know anything that is outside their own countries (especially the big countries which think they are the center of the world). I realized it during my school teaching practices both in Latvia and Belgium. The teaching materials are old and they are not diverse. Moreover, they encourage people to think with stereotypes and there is very few information about other countries besides English speaking ones. I believe that simply at school, through books and different visuals, we can open eyes to our young generation, we can show them that there is a unique mix of cultures and all they have to do is to explore. Not always it is an expensive activity, in schools it is easy to make a chat with students in Albania or Greece. In addition, the program YOUTH offers so excellent opportunities for youth exchanges but hardly any school uses it. It also means that teachers should be motivated to work on this problem. Nothing will happen if the teacher herself has not been abroad. With this I want to say that at this point again there comes the help of organizations and governments.

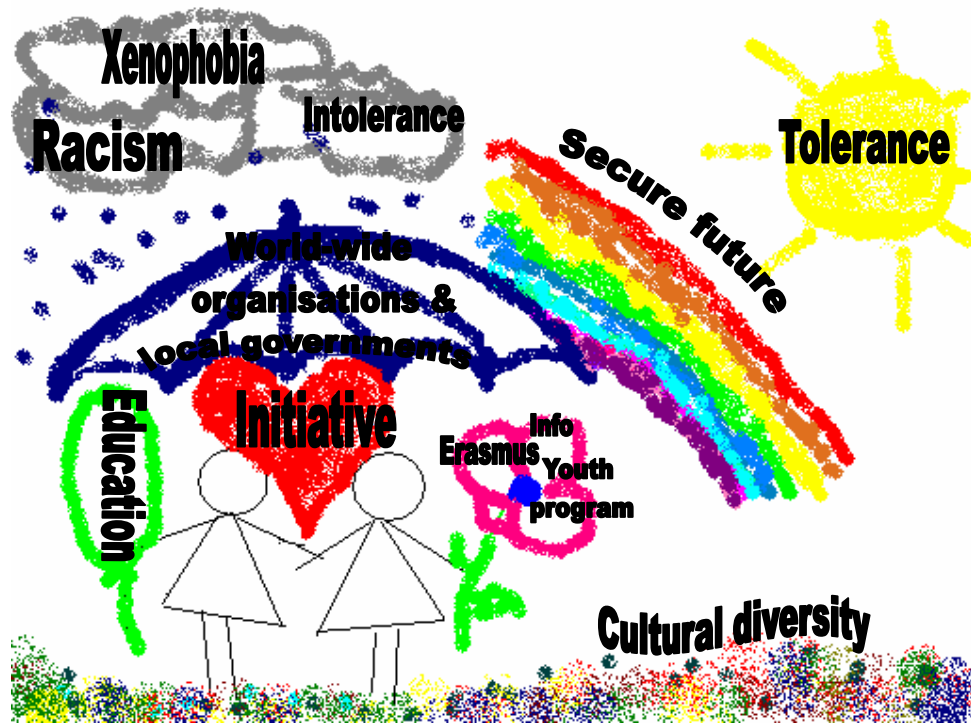
It is clear that it is the young generation that will need this secure future but school is not the only key. I believe that through mass media it is possible to make an interesting information bomb about celebrating this cultural diversity but somehow so far this kind of information is very little observed. I can remember that on the state channels only few times they have showed broadcasts about different countries or people from them. It is really sad because this information net is huge and could change so much as it is proved that there is a direct link between an educated person and his tolerance (2).

Another key for a secure future is the knowledge of languages. Although it has been declared and advised that every EU citizen should speak at least 2 foreign languages, people have difficulty to master perfectly even one. In Latvia only 1 per cent can speak French and majority have never heard Arabic or Maltese. Moreover, people that live close to border of another country don't understand each other. Sometimes it is even worse, like in Belgium, there are three official languages but hardly anyone is fluent in two of them. My suggestion is that the language teaching effectiveness should be increased. As a teacher I know what it means to teach from poor materials and with no teaching aids, so the first step is to provide all the necessary equipment, then prepare well qualified teachers and finally also pay normal salaries so that there is a competition in the job market and the quality rises. To do so, there should be a very strong education policy but so far many countries, including

Latvia, have failed. It means that the governments have to measure their priorities and whether invest in army to secure the country or alliance against aggressions and terrorism (which very often are caused by racism) or to invest in education and in this way reduce the possibility of cultural conflicts.

To sum everything up, racism (racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance) is a hard target to strike but if we all work together to reach the aim, there is a guarantee for a secure future, the state of our dreams.

I believe that everything starts from an individual, like a tree grows from a seed and like a river is formed from a spring. However, this individual has to be encouraged to take the initiative, to use different opportunities provided by governments and world wide organizations. My concept of building a secure future can be shortly seen in the following schema:



Are you still afraid of me? You shouldn't. Let's celebrate the diversity of cultures and smile, as smile is the shortest distance between people!!!

References:

1. <http://eumc.eu.int/eumc/material/pub/eurobarometer/EB2005/MR-194-03-05-01-EN.pdf>
2. http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/4-Relations_with_civil_society/1-Programme_of_action/14-Public_Presentation_Paris_2005/Study_Camus.asp#TopOfPage
3. http://www.humanrights.org.lv/html/lv/jomas/iecietiba/pretdiskrimin_kapacitate.html

4. <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=101346&lang=lv>
5. <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=101327&lang=lv>
6. <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=101969&lang=lv>

Disclaimer: The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this document are entirely those of the author(s) and are not necessarily those of the World Bank, or its affiliated organizations, or members of its Board of Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. The World Bank does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this publication and accepts no responsibility whatsoever for any consequence of their use. The boundaries, colors, denominations, other information shown on any map in this volume do not imply on the part of the World Bank Group any judgment on the legal status of any territory or the endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries.