
EU Colonial Amnesia as a Bridge: Connecting EU-African Relations and African Minorities Discrimination

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Introduction

On 15 April 2013, a group of eleven deputies submitted a written declaration to the European Parliament proposing the establishment of a European day in recognition of the victims of European colonisation and colonial slavery (European Parliament 2013). Jean Jacob Bicep, a French deputy of African descent from Guadeloupe, led this submission. Despite the proposal's significance for acknowledging the lingering economic, political, and psychological impacts of colonialism, this initiative failed due to the lack of will within the European Parliament to admit the need to recover a historical memory of colonialism¹.

When discussing colonialism, historians of the European Union have primarily adopted either a domestic or an international perspective. Within the European sphere, scholars have mainly examined how the culture that surrounded the colonial rule affected minorities. On the other hand, studies on external relations have focused on the persistent economic and political asymmetries between African states and the European former motherlands. This paper aims to bring together these two approaches, arguing that an analysis of the impact of colonialism and postcolonialism on minorities should also consider the international level of analysis. The main research question is whether the lack of a historical memory of colonialism has affected relations between Africans and Europeans on both grounds. The investigation focuses on the multilateral forum offered by the European Union (EU).

Remarkably, when the European integration process began, a significant portion of Africa was still under colonial rule. In 1957, the Rome Treaty established an Association with the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) maintaining "particular relations" with most founding member states. Although the Association was presented as benefiting local populations, OCTs relationships with France, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands were colonial (See: Laschi 2014: 371-391). Furthermore, the process of decolonisation that would unfold in the following years was not a result of European governments acknowledging the Eurocentric vision of their relations with the African continent, nor was it overcoming racial stereotypes. Even the reforms enacted by some European governments to renew their empires sought to "*partir pour*

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¹ Author's interview with Mr Jean Jacob Bicep, 16.03.2023.

mieux rester” (Gentili 2008: 142). In this scenario, the Year of Africa preluded significant implications for African minorities within Europe and the European Economic Community's external affairs with the newly sovereign states. Relations between the two continents have gradually normalised, abandoning their peculiar and neocolonial features. The OCTs Association was renewed through the two Yaoundé Conventions and then enlarged to the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group within the framework of the four Lomé Conventions and the Cotonou Partnership Agreement in 2000. The ACP group is the primary focus of this research, as its long-term institutionalised relationship with the EU helps distinguish between elements of continuity and rupture from the colonial past. Moreover, it provides a basis for identifying the persistent challenges that continue to arise in various international forums. Indeed, current relations with African countries follow several channels. Firstly, the Samoa Agreement signed in November 2023 keeps covering sub-Saharan Africa, alongside the Caribbean and the Pacific. Moreover, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) governs relations with African Mediterranean countries, while three regional strategies have been enacted in the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel. Finally, the EU-Africa partnership is a formal political channel for relations between the EU and the African Union, thus including the whole continent.

Despite internal contradictions and although not each political group or deputy followed this direction, the European Parliament has been the most active European institution in transforming dependency ties into equal relationships. Since the formation of the Commission for the Overseas Countries and Territories in 1958, the then European Parliamentary Assembly, initiated original proposals aimed at building direct relationships with the representatives of the OCTs and promoting an image of a multilateral Community that differed from the old motherlands (See: Laschi 2016). Besides, as more countries became independent, the main discussion topics concerned freedom, equal rights and dignity of the citizens of the new sovereign states. However, the contextual attempt to remove ambiguity from the concept of Eurafrika was not accompanied by a thorough reflection on a colonial past shared by four of the founding countries. Even the most active promoters of equality failed to acknowledge the colonial culture that had long justified colonialism. Furthermore, declarations on mutual cooperation were frequently linked with references to the legacy of the European civilising mission. By the end of the Sixties, the African continent was still presented as a pawn in the international chessboard rather than as a subject of a now multilateral arena (Aigner 1968: 14-16).

Nevertheless, colonisation left a long-lasting political, economic and psychological imprint on the dominated territories, making it difficult to completely break away from the colonial past at the time of independence. Culturally, this conditioned how African societies perceived themselves once political emancipation was achieved. On the other hand, the legacies of the imperial past would have complicated the elaboration of a historical memory among European citizens.

This gap has adversely affected the two levels of analysis discussed in this paper. Firstly, racism and discrimination still affect African minorities in European countries.

Some political leaders openly distinguish "white and Christian" individuals from "black and Muslim immigrants" (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2011: 16). A significant example can be seen in a speech by Nicolas Sarkozy in Dakar on 26 July 2007, where he stated that the African man had not yet sufficiently entered history (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2011: 16). On the external level, the weight of economic and political ties built during colonial times also negatively influenced dialogue between Africa and Europe.

This paper argues that the issues affecting domestic dynamics are also the most disputed between African and European representatives during international negotiations, reflecting the inability of the parties to understand each other fully. Two concrete examples are scrutinised to explore the interconnection between the internal and foreign spheres: immigration into Europe and the promotion of fundamental values and human rights beyond European borders.

African leaders are perturbed by Europe's tendency to categorise migration within the security sphere. Furthermore, the relevance given by the European Union to values and fundamental rights often raises concerns about cultural imposition among African governments. The revival of these ancestral fears highlights the need for reflection on the lack of historical memory of colonialism.

1. Migration Dynamics in the European Union: Between Postcolonial Legacies and Partnership Challenges

The first decolonisation wave left an unprecedented geopolitical scenario in which the Association with OCTs had to be completely revised. On 20 July 1963, the Yaoundé Convention was signed between the European Community and its member states on the one side and the African States, Madagascar and Mauritius (ASMM) on the other. During the signature ceremony, the national sovereignty of the associated countries was reaffirmed, together with the reciprocity of their duties and the peer-to-peer representation between the two parts (Holland 2002: 28). The Commission's President Walter Hallstein declared that European nations were associated with their old colonies in an equal relationship for the first time, though presenting development cooperation in continuity with the particular ties foreseen in the Rome Treaties:

Il est hautement remarquable et d'une grande valeur politique et humaine que lorsque la plupart de ces pays sont devenus indépendants, ils ont voulu et ils ont pu conclure avec la Communauté, en partenaires égaux, un accord sans précédent au monde, qui crée des liens nouveaux, plus nombreux et plus solides pour une grande oeuvre commune (Hallstein 1979: 434-437).

Despite these declarations, however, the backlashes of these policies were still visible in European cities, where racial imaginaries crystallised in the colonial era were vivid. In France, the inheritance of a brutal administration was apparent in the intimidating practices adopted by the officials charged with development politics or migration management, often chosen along the lines of the colonial bureaucracy (Spire 2020: 162-163). Similarly, even though the 1948 British Nationality Act granted British subject status to Commonwealth immigrants, they were still discriminated

against and mistreated compared to citizens of the United Kingdom (Deplano 2020: 60). The situation worsened with the implementation of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, which reclassified British subjects as Commonwealth Immigrants, further marginalizing them (Deplano 2020: 60). A slightly different discourse applies to Italy, where immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the presence of third or fourth generation immigrant communities is significantly less common. The Italian colonial empire lacked deep-rooted, long-lasting administrative structures and was based on different ideological premises. Demographic imperialism was represented as a way to offer Italians the possibility of emigration without facing discrimination. After the loss of the colonies following the Second World War, the democratic regime invested in an abundant cinematographic and bibliographic production focused on the peculiar integrity of the Italian colonial past. This "self-absolving" rhetoric involved a nostalgic re-elaboration of the Italian civilising mission towards the African continent (Ertola 2022: 145). Notably, until the 1974 Carnation revolution, the perception of a peculiar empire was also maintained in the *Estado Novo*'s regime in Portugal, which depicted the colonial empire as inclusive and multi-racial in nature (Minter 1972: 22).

Although intergenerational turnovers would have caused this continuity to fade, the absence of a constructive dialogue regarding colonialism and its lasting impacts affects the management of African origin's immigration at internal and international levels.

Domestically, the periodical resurgence of racism and xenophobia involves citizens from all over Europe in the context of a highly polarised political debate. Indeed, the legacy of a colonial culture remains internalised in the collective consciousness of European citizens from all Member States, including those who were not directly involved in colonialism². In this sense, Alessandro Triulzi discusses the concept of "latency of colonial memory" in a scenario that shifts the relationship between former colonisers and the formerly colonised to Europe and the North of the Mediterranean (Triulzi 2008: 589). Similarly, Nicola Labanca argues that since the early 1980s, the coexistence between Italian and African origin workers has allowed racist stereotypes and prejudices to surface and draw nourishment from the colonial discourse (Labanca 2007: 469).

Historically, European institutions have tried to address these phenomena. However, postcolonial amnesia impeded understanding the deeper causes of racism. A notable example in this sense is the remarks made by Claude Cheysson, the European Development Commissioner at that time, after the Kingston Interministry Conference held on 15 July 1974³. Cheysson advocated for an agreement on industrial cooperation with ACP countries and linked the need for an African immigrant workforce in Europe to the spread of racial issues within European cities (Cheysson 1974: 160). A decade later, similar concerns were raised within the European Parliament. In December 1985, a Committee of Inquiry into the Rise of Fascism and Racism

² Author's interview with Mr Jean Jacob Bicep, 16.03.2023.

³ This conference was a crucial step towards signing the Lomé Convention in 1975.

in Europe published its results, highlighting that colonial ties favoured migration towards former European motherlands. However, when identifying the causes of racism, the document stated that immigration "exacerbated" this problem (European Parliament 1985: 68).

During the last few years, particularly after the 2015 migration crisis, this topic has become increasingly centered on the security dimension. In 2018, 38 per cent of Europeans perceived immigration as the most significant security threat, even if the flows had reduced (Deplano et al. 2020: 1). But this is not a new phenomenon, and underlying prejudices resurface when politicians exploit fears and uncertainties for their own agendas, perpetuating divisions within society. EU migration management policies partly absorbed this perception. In September 2020, the European Commission presented the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, with the aim of overcoming the Dublin system. While it raised awareness on welcoming asylum and international protection seekers as well as highly skilled workers, countering irregular migration remained a top priority, leaving aside migration for economic purposes (Borraccetti 2021: 1). Entered into force on 11 June 2024, the new legislative framework is still weighted towards the security dimension. Remarkably, the first pillar of the new common EU migration system remains securing external borders (European Commission, 2024).

But these fears also affect international relations between African countries and the EU, as European governments fail to fully grasp the economic benefits of migration and the gains from engaging with diverse cultures. Following the widening and diversification of the cooperation agenda on the one side, and the need for a standard immigration policy included in the Amsterdam Treaty on the other, immigration was first included in the 2000 Cotonou Partnership Agreement (CPA) with ACP countries. Article 13, paragraph 5, focused on preventing "illegal immigration" and easing the returns procedure of irregular migrants (Official Journal of the European Communities 2000: 10). However, African countries belonging to the ACP group insisted on addressing the underlying causes of migration more explicitly. The compromise reached in the CPA referred to fair treatment of legally resident ACP nationals, the extension of rights compatible with those of EU citizens, and the fight against labour discrimination, racism, and xenophobia (Holland 2002: 192).

It is worth noticing that negotiations leading to the last Samoa agreement with ACP countries encountered the same concerns. On 22 November 2016, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini and the European Commission presented a joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on a renewed partnership with the ACP countries. The document identified six strategic priorities, including migrations and the rule of law (European Commission 2016: 7-8). While the latter is discussed in the following paragraph, the principles guiding the former should have been mutual solidarity, partnership, shared responsibility, and human rights protection (European Commission 2016: 12). A comprehensive approach would have allowed to combat irregular migration and seize, at the same time, the opportunities of regular migration. The Commis-

sion's recommendation on the future partnership, submitted to the Council on 12 December 2017, reaffirmed this need for a coherent approach, balancing these two main objectives. Regarding irregular migration, the Commission reiterated the obligation of third states to unconditionally readmit their nationals irregularly residing on European territory (European Commission 2017: 10-11).

Finding a common position within the Council proved complicated. Migration was among the thorniest issues to be discussed by member states, demonstrating the extreme polarisation of the topic. Domenico Rosa, European Commission official and Chair of the INTPA working group leading the Post-Cotonou negotiations, confirmed that more pronounced and tangible interests emerged in areas such as returns and readmissions⁴.

Significantly, contrasts mirrored the same division lines between the border countries and the rest of Europe as for the European Pact on Migration and Asylum (Ishmael 2021: 11). Among those who opposed the inclusive approach advocated by the Commission, Viktor Orban threatened not to sign the post-Cotonou agreement unless a mechanism for returns and readmissions was included (Carbone 2019: 144). This connection between internal and international dynamics requires addressing migration from a global and comprehensive perspective, as the same concerns affect the two dimensions.

Carbone (2019) provides a valuable comparison between the ACP and Council negotiating mandates, particularly regarding migration. On 22 June 2018, the Council's negotiating mandate reaffirmed the principles of solidarity, partnership, and shared responsibility as the basis for migration policies. Moreover, building on previous agreements, the Council acknowledged that proper management of regular migration would result in sustainable development, prosperity, and innovation (Council of the European Union 2018: 22). However, the text was highly balanced on irregular migration to overcome the deadlock (Carbone 2019: 144). Title V only dedicated three paragraphs to the benefits of regular migration, generically mentioning knowledge exchanges, prospects in terms of investment and labour force, and social protection for workers. Conversely, the provisions in the six paragraphs on irregular migration were much more detailed, securing the creation of a mechanism to facilitate returns and readmissions (Council of the European Union 2018: 41-42). The ACP negotiating mandate, which had already been adopted on 30 May 2018, prioritised the promotion of legal migration pathways, highlighting the advantages of an international exchange in terms of skills and experience and arguing for a voluntary management of returns and readmissions (Carbone 2019: 145-146). Remarkably, in line with the Commission's recommendation, it considered remittances as an engine for inclusive growth and sustainable development across borders (ACP 2018, 38-39).

Given these premises, the issue of returns and readmissions was highly disputed during negotiations on migration and mobility in May 2019 (Carbone 2022). On the EU side, the Council's negotiating mandate set general guidelines and political prior-

⁴ Author's interview with Domenico Rosa, 22.03.2023.

ities within which the negotiator could operate, fully aware that not all objectives would be achievable⁵. The European Commission's negotiating team aimed to promote a mechanism that could facilitate the rapid return of irregular migrants from Africa, particularly limiting the role of the deemed "inefficient" African administrations (Carbone 2022: 756). By contrast, the renamed Organisation of African Caribbean and Pacific (OACP) maintained that economic migration, in addition to asylum and international protection, also needed to be framed to prevent irregular immigration and fatalities (Ishmael 2021: 17). Noteworthy, the OACP's critique on the regulation of economic migration had been internally discussed in relation to the EU pact on Migration and Asylum.

In autumn 2020, the OACP and the European Union finally reached an agreement on readmission requests and travel documentation issuance for irregular migrants (Carbone 2022: 757). However, within European institutions, some European deputies denounced gaps in the management of legal migration pathways (Ishmael 2021: 11).

Two opposing views on migration emerged in the paragraphs above. The security lens through which the EU sees migration, impedes understanding the point of African leaders focusing on the opportunities offered by migration. The same observations could be advanced by scrutinising any other partnership framework⁶. Furthermore, the division lines and fears that hinder dialogue between the two continents also impact the internal migration management within the EU, confirming the need for a comprehensive approach and a reflection upon the historical gaps impeding pragmatic solutions.

2. Irreconcilable values? Insights into the introduction of Human Rights Clause

The previous paragraph highlighted the polarisation of the domestic debate around immigration. However, the effectiveness of political discourses that defend national borders lies in the presumed opposition between irreconcilable fundamental values. On the internal ground, the ideological landscape evokes dichotomies opposing light and darkness, good and evil, civilized and barbaric; echoing themes pervasive in colonial culture and shaping narrative literature (Casales 2023: 9).

Again, this issue is also divisive on the external level, where African leaders often instrumentally define the promotion of EU fundamental values and the protection of human rights in international agreements as covert colonialism.

The introduction of the human rights clause in international agreements is strictly linked to the evolution of the European Union's self-perception. The European identity has become increasingly centred on the political dimension, focusing on respecting human rights and minorities. Additionally, the emancipation of Central and Eastern European countries opened up the prospect of a Community even closer to geographical Europe. The imminent enlargement to the East thus induced the Com-

⁵ Author's interview with Domenico Rosa, 22.03.2023.

⁶ During the 2015 Valletta, for instance, African leaders perceived the EU's actions as an attempt to cut flows from Africa, while the EU unsuccessfully tried to introduce a procedure for a rapid return of irregular migrants (Carbone 2022: 755).

munity to promote incentives for democratisation and respect for human rights in its relations with third countries (Palayret 2009: 47). On the other hand, with the end of the Cold War, it became more complicated to tolerate pro-Western but authoritarian political regimes. Thus, cooperation with the ACP moved away from the principle of political neutrality, linking the notion of development to the promotion of human rights (Pallotti 2009: 233). Article 5 of the 1989 Fourth Lomé Convention placed the human being at the centre of cooperation to protect his dignity, exceeding its original, purely economic and commercial scope (Holland 2002: 45). In February 1992, the Maastricht Treaty introduced the European citizenship. Correspondingly, promoting and protecting democracy, human rights and liberties became a core element of the EU's external action and development cooperation⁷.

The human right's clause was first included in the mid-term review of the Fourth Lomé Convention, signed on 4 November 1995 between the Community and 70 ACPs in Mauritius. Following the EU enlargement to new member states without a colonial past, the introduction of political conditionality was also the result of a new consensus on development aid and the resizing of the economic and strategic importance of the ACP group. Respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as stated in the new Article 5, became an "essential element" for promoting development (Official Journal of the European Communities 1995: art. 5). Article 366 of the revised Lomé IV Convention governed the procedure for suspending aid in cases of severe human rights violations. According to this provision, in the case of incompliance with the essential element clause, a member state or the Commission itself could have requested the opening of consultations to resolve the dispute peacefully. Without an agreement, the Community would have taken several measures against the violators, including suspending financial assistance (See, for example, Brown 1999: 58).

Only a year after the signing of the Lomé IV review, in November 1996, the European Commission presented a Green Paper on relations between the European Union and the ACP countries at the eve of the 21st century, reiterating the need for a political conditionality as a guarantee of the development cooperation politics' transparency. For their part, ACP countries should have initiated political and social reforms. However, the holistic nature of African societies complicated the creation of an institutional framework that would protect human rights (European Commission 1997: 28).

The subsequent submission of the Commission Communication on the guidelines for negotiating new cooperation agreements with ACP countries provoked a heated debate within the European Parliament. The French draftsman for the Cooperation and Development Commission, Michel Rocard, warned on the counter-productive effects of the Council's excessive demands in terms of good governance and human rights:

I would like to draw your attention to the risk of our being transformed into old colonialists and moral preachers if the intensity of European demands continues to increase. This would, through brutal conditionality, transform their view of other

⁷ See, for example, Article 130 of the Maastricht Treaty.

people's democracy. We therefore have a problem of style or of the way we manage negotiations. On the issues, that is, the substance, we are in agreement and have the same objectives. This report clearly suggests that you do your best to encourage the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, in particular the African ones, to embark upon an internal debate themselves, through the mechanism of the Organization of African Unity. Human rights are inviolable and there can be no question of discussion – you must not kill, there must be freedom of expression, there must be a prison system which respects the individual and so on. The problem is the transposition of our democratic models onto other countries. This is where it is a question of gaining a better balance in our partnership (Rocard 1998).

As a member of the Group of the Party of European Socialist, Rocard believed that the sole way to escape neocolonial accusations was to include the ACP countries in the definition of the minimum democratic framework underpinning the partnership, thus breaking with a tradition in which "the practical rules and democratic conditions are still by and large formulated unilaterally by the European countries" (Hory 1998). On behalf of the Council's British Presidency, Short surprisingly recognised that "if conditionality is imposed it is never effective" (Short 1998).

According to most MEPs, a positive note was the Commission's emphasis on involving ACP citizens in promoting respect for democracy and human rights. For efforts to be successful, it would have been fundamental to dedicate attention to local contexts involving civil society actors and gradually accompanying domestic change (European Parliament 2014: 7). During the debate on the results of the ACP-EU Joint Assembly, which took place in February 2000, Mr Fruteau stated that involving new partners, rather than introducing stricter conditionalities, was "the only way they can emerge from humiliating and childlike dependence on aid and take responsibility for themselves, the proof of success" (Fruteau 2000: 82).

This was particularly evident because, while the fourth Lomé Convention's midterm revision had already introduced the political dialogue, human rights violations persisted. Sanctions were selectively applied, often under pressure from member states interested in stabilising strategic geopolitical areas or those with historical interests (Lucarelli 2009: 265). Moreover, the European Parliament was excluded from decisions on aid suspensions despite repeatedly asking for greater involvement: in the Resolution on the Council's proposal on a framework procedure for the application of Article 366a, the Parliament voted in favour of including its assent prior to the possible decision of the Council (European Parliament 1997).

In addition to creating contrasts between European institutions, the human rights conditionality was among the most contentious issues during the following negotiations with ACP countries, leading to profound misunderstandings. On the one hand, some African governments refused to change for practical calculations. However, the reason behind such an irreconcilable confrontation was the opposing views on the values promoted by the European Union.

Demonstrating that deeper reciprocal preconceptions prevent pragmatic solutions, fundamental rights were also a problem in the process towards the Samoa Agreement substituting the CPA. On 12 December 2017, the Commission presented

its recommendations on future partnerships to the Council. As previously mentioned, among the main strategic priorities, the document identified guarantees of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and good governance.

When the post-Cotonou negotiations were launched in September 2018, the most significant disagreements were once again on political themes, such as sexual and reproductive health, shared rights and values, and, as already discussed, migration. Concerning sexual and reproductive health, divisions emerged on gender and sexual orientation. Some African countries defended their own traditions against what they interpreted as a cultural imposition by Europeans (Ishmael 2021: 16). On the other hand, European public opinion demands that funds are not used to finance human rights violations. Some NGOs, for example, criticised the absence of a specific reference to the fight against sexual orientation discrimination once the agreement on the text on human rights, democracy and rule of law was reached (Concord 2021: 16).

Disagreements also arose over the death penalty and the International Criminal Court, with some African states having withdrawn from its jurisdiction (Ishmael 2021: 16). In general, there were conflicts regarding the order of importance between values and economic growth. Some African countries prioritized their development efforts and believed that only in a context of economic prosperity could they promote democratic values and human rights, which they saw as aspirations rather than priority objectives (Ishmael 2021: 16). Finally, some ACP governments accused the European Union of applying double standards, ignoring violations by some EU member states (Ishmael 2021: 16).

The fact that the same issues hinder dialogue parallelly within various frameworks managing EU-Africa relations and across decades necessitates reflection on the roots of these misunderstandings.

On the European front, the influence of deep-rooted stereotypes and an unelaborated sense of guilt have sometimes led to inconsistent attitudes and policies. On the African side, however, initiatives in support of human rights, the rule of law and democracy have often been misinterpreted as attempts by the old motherlands to impose an alien culture.

This situation is further complicated by the perception that even those Europeans who advocate for equal partnerships often do so from a paternalistic viewpoint. A notable example in this sense occurred in 2018 when Norbert Lammert, the former president of the Bundestag and chairman of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, expressed concern about Chinese influence in Namibia. In response, President Hage Geingob stated that Europeans should not feel pity for the Namibian people, as if they were incapable of managing their own country (Daum, 2024).

Nevertheless, considering the current geopolitical scenario, an equal dialogue on human rights is fundamental. Indeed, illiberal powers have advanced new models and approaches to international relations that may not prioritise human rights protection. For instance, China's foreign policy is based on anti-hegemonism and respect for national sovereignty. When it comes to its relations with Africa, China has expressed its desire to establish a relationship of mutual independence, equality, and

non-interference in internal affairs (Taylor 2006: 2). However, China has shown support for illiberal governments in Sudan, Angola, and Zimbabwe when it was economically beneficial (Pallotti 2018: 229). These new variables underscore the importance of cooperation, trust, and respect as the only antidotes against the challenges posed by undemocratic alternatives to European values.

3. The Reviving of Historic Memory to Bring Together Internal and External Dimensions

Different views on migration management and human rights protection hinder the development of an equal dialogue between Europe and Africa, unveiling divisions that cannot be solved through pragmatic solutions. In this sense, technical or short-term oriented strategies risk shadowing the historical roots of deeper divisions. Besides, the ideological turn that speeches take when dealing with African-origin minorities within the EU shows the need to reflect upon the long-term obstacles lying behind reciprocal misunderstandings.

While the European institutions have made significant efforts to address the historical memory of the past, including references to Nazism and Stalinism, the issue of colonialism has largely been neglected at both national and European levels. In the Council, Member States have consistently ignored this necessity. Countries that once cultivated domination relations with the African continent are afraid of taking responsibility for "harrowing" issues⁸. On the other hand, following successive enlargements, the new member states without a colonial past refuse to be involved in what they perceive as an alien debate. Among them, Central and Eastern European Countries suffered domination under the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires or, more recently, the Soviet Empire (See Sierp 2021: 32). Brexit further diluted the presence of old motherlands within the EU, leading the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, to state that: "a new generation of leaders is coming to power. They are not hampered by the burden of nostalgia" (European Council, 2020).

Historically, among the European institutions, the European Parliamentary Assembly has been the most committed into overcoming colonial and post-colonial ties. Over the past two decades, individual MEPs and groups have repeatedly called on both the Parliament and other institutions to address the impact of the history of colonialism on the culture of European citizens. Back in December 1985, the previously mentioned Committee of Inquiry into the Rise of Fascism and Racism in Europe released its findings, stating that the various forms of racism present in Europe at that time were, to a large extent, rooted in its colonial past. Moreover, the dominant Eurocentric perspective was still prevalent in European society, influencing its perception of the rest of the world (European Parliament, 1985: 23).

However, internal divisions complicated an agreement on colonialism remembrance even within the EP. A key example is the 2013 proposal by a group of eleven parliamentarians led by Jean Jacob Bicep. Inspired by the French "Loi Toubira", which

⁸ Author's interview with Jean Jacob Bicep, 16.03.2023.

recognised slavery and colonialism as crimes against humanity in May 2001, the written declaration suggested the institution of a European day in the memory of the victims of colonialism and slavery. Nevertheless, the initiative did not materialise due to the disinterest of the main European political groups, including the Greens, to which Bicep himself belonged. According to the former MEP, the reason for this failure was a "crispation" that led representatives of European institutions to bypass a debate on colonial memory⁹.

Only during the last few years did the recrudescence of racist expressions push European institutions and, particularly, the European Parliament to investigate and fill this gap. Besides, various civil society groups and individuals have been active in all member states to ensure the opening of a debate on the issue at the European level.

On 26 March 2019, the European Parliament approved a resolution regarding the fundamental rights of people of African descent. The document recognised the impact of colonialism on contemporary society, and it acknowledged the link between atrocities committed during the colonial period and the current discrimination faced by people of African descent. Furthermore, specific episodes were finally explicitly mentioned. Recital F stated that:

(...) histories of injustices against Africans and people of African descent, including enslavement, forced labour, racial apartheid, massacres, and genocides in the context of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, remain largely unrecognised and unaccounted for at an institutional level in the Member States (European Parliament 2019: 3).

According to Bicep, this resolution is essential but insufficient without a real sociological change. However, the document could constitute a substantial step ahead, as it raises the issue of memory regarding colonialism and launches a discussion at an institutional level. Moreover, it proposes concrete initiatives that, if implemented, could contribute to rooting memory in the consciences of European citizens in the long run.

The resolution encourages member states to officially recognise and celebrate the stories of people of African descent in Europe, with particular reference to crimes committed in the context of European colonialism. Furthermore, to promote awareness among citizens, the Member States are invited to declassify colonial archives and to devote more attention to colonialism in education (European Parliament 2019). Finally, Article 8 invites European and national institutions to consider symbolic and concrete reparations, such as public declarations and apologies, as well as the return of stolen artefacts. The latter aspect is vital in softening the contrasts in political and trade relations between Europe and Africa.

A multidimensional approach is also included in the 2022 Resolution of the European Parliament on the role of culture, education, media and sport in the fight against racism. Indeed, the Parliament once again recognised the link between colo-

⁹ *Ibidem*.

nialism and the phenomena of racial discrimination in modern society (European Parliament 2022, art. 27). Therefore, it identified a series of initiatives at the cultural level that could raise European citizens' awareness of a little-known past.

Considering this activism from the European Parliament, in September 2020, the European Commission adopted a Communication entitled "A Union of Equality: The EU Action Plan Against Racism (2020-2025)." The Commission proposed fighting racism and stereotypes by spreading "knowledge of history", as colonialism and slavery are also part of European history and have repercussions on society dynamics. As part of its efforts to address racism, the Commission proposed a commemorative initiative. This approach is contributing to the ongoing European discussion on the importance of acknowledging colonial history (European Commission 2020: 16).

The periodical resurgence of racist incidents in European cities and the continuous presence of sources of conflict that go beyond economic and strategic interests in the dialogue between the European Union and African countries have made it necessary to address the underlying causes of racism and persisting mutual stereotypes. If fully developed, the recent proposals by the Parliament and the Commission could increase awareness among European citizens of a long-neglected issue.

Conclusion

There has been a wide discussion in historiography about the African viewpoint on colonialism and the impact of colonial culture on the ongoing economic asymmetries and varying bargaining powers between the two continents. Additionally, there have been studies on the process of European integration and its connection to the requirement of maintaining influence during the parallel process of decolonisation (See, for example: Hansen & Jonsson 2014).

However, there is a gap in the current discussion surrounding the link between the internal and the international stage. Indeed, these two spheres should be brought together because the root causes of racism against minorities and misunderstandings between the two continents are closely intertwined. To show this connection, this paper analysed two concrete subjects: the management of migration and the different perceptions of values and human rights. These issues not only hinder dialogue between African countries and the European Union on political matters, but they also complicate economic relations. Moreover, these same topics also have an impact at the internal level, favouring a decade-long and hard-to-define discrimination.

The colonial and post-colonial eras have ended, but their legacies will persist as long as the colonial past is not discussed. The resurgence of racist phenomena in European cities and the persistence of elements of friction that go beyond the economic and strategic interests in the dialogue between the European Union and African countries have made it necessary to address the root causes of racism and the persistence of mutual stereotypes. This requires cooperation between various European institutions, including the Council, which is responsible for the interna-

tional relations and security policies of the European Union. It is hence crucial for member states to implement initiatives to address the colonial legacy. In this sense, the latter initiatives from EU supranational institutions have shown a significant advancement in this direction, evolving the European debate on the lack of colonial memory. At the same time, civil society plays a pivotal role in cultural transformation, as the initiatives taken by the Parliament and the Commission to combat racism owe much to the recent anti-racist currents in Europe, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement.

In summary, these projects would raise the awareness of European citizens on an issue that has been neglected for far too long, and initiate a constructive loop that would, in turn, allow EU institutions to benefit from civil society's inputs. This would be reflected in improved relations between the two continents, characterised by a greater level of mutual understanding, trust, and respect.

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