

Press release

LDH (Ligue des droits de l'Homme/droits humains) (France), Arci (Associazione ricreativa e culturale italiana) (Italy) et Novact (Institut Internacional per l'Acció Noviolenta) (Spain)

After Ceuta : for migrants' rights, against all forms of racism and for the safeguarding of democracy against the distortion of facts by governments

Our organisations are key actors in France, Italy and Spain in the fight for migrants' rights, in accordance to the provisions of the international treaties that our respective countries have signed.

Tomorrow, the Interior Ministers of the member-states of the European Union (EU) are due to have an unscheduled meeting to discuss migration issues. The meeting was triggered off by the events which unfolded last week in Ceuta, where tens of thousands of people crossed the border of the Spanish enclave situated to the North of Morocco (North Africa) before leaving it to return to where they departed from. Over 100 persons died as they attempted to cross the border.

One may anticipate that, once more, the Interior Ministers of the EU are to take measures aiming at further restricting migrants' rights, thus persisting in their steadfast willingness to disregard the principles of international and constitutional law.

Owing to our long-standing experience as organisations defending the rights of migrants, we believe that we shall have to react against the proposals, borrowed from the political agenda of the far right, which are to be made during that meeting and which, we fear, are to further harm the rights of migrants, as also evidenced by the policies shamelessly implemented by a majority of EU governments.

While the rights of migrants are of major relevance to assess the effectiveness of the access to rights among EU member-states, another key issue has emerged following the manner in which EU governments have framed the public debate over the Ceuta events. Governments have brazenly veered away from the values and practices underpinning human rights, democratic debate and the rule of law as set down in EU treaties – no less.

The democratic drafting of public policies is possible only when underpinned by facts. The mandate of democratic institutions, including governments, is to act in response to facts.

Facts are crystal-clear. Within a few hours, over 50.000 people (mostly from Morocco, but also from other African countries) unlawfully crossed the border into Ceuta, a Spanish enclave located in Moroccan territory. Finding themselves stranded there, most of them, in the space of a few subsequent hours, have been swiftly forced back into Moroccan territory, with no respect for due processes. Governments have been informed of this in real time, ahead of any form of public knowledge of what had taken place.

How comes that within democracies bound by the rule of law, as a response to what was unfolding in Ceuta, we have witnessed :

- the decision of the center-right French government to implement reinforced controls at the border with Spain, all along the Pyrenees ;
- the request to the EU by the far right government of Meloni (with the support of the Finnish and Danish governments) to suspend Spain's inclusion of the Schengen area (which neither the European treaty nor the juridical framework allow), even though, as the Schengen treaty makes it clear, no irregular migrant may reach the Schengen area from Ceuta ;
- the umpteenth xenophobic and racist outburst from Spain's political opposition, which raises the alarm over an alleged « migration crisis » and a mooted « pull factor » via hate speeches which normalize human rights violations at Europe's borders.

Public opinion has been swamped with bare-faced lies and absurd proposals, while political decisions with no relevance to what is at stake have been taken by all governing parties, from the social-democrats and the liberals to the right and the far right. During the last few days, our societies have faced a head-on attack against the basics of democratic debate, which imply a hard-headed approach to facts and trustworthy analyses.

In the last few years, fake news and the manipulation of public opinion have been presented, notably by the European Commission, as attacks originating from outside the EU. While in fact they are also to be ascribed to campaigns and interests coming from political forces within the EU. What is taking place concerning the events in Ceuta makes it imperative that European institutions recognize the processes underway and promptly respond to them.

It is not acceptable in a democratic context that governments contribute to the manipulation of public opinion through an abusive resort to emotions. Are such emotions stirred up with the legitimate objective of fostering European values ? As a matter of fact, it is quite the contrary which takes place. A number of high-profile politicians fan fears and hatred, and act in a vilely populist manner, with no regard for their fellow citizens, for the principles enshrined in EU treaties, for truth, or for an efficient and hard-headed drafting of policies.

The way the meeting of Interior ministers is presented to public opinion rightfully elicits our misgivings. All this ado is downright farcical. Many will suggest that we over-react, but the trends we have been witnessing in the last few years point in the opposite, deleterious direction. We nonetheless remain hopeful.

When governments do not think themselves accountable after having distorted facts so as to manipulate public opinion – today over migrants' rights, tomorrow over issues of war and

peace, of social inequalities and economic deprivation, they pave the way to authoritarian, illiberal and fascist forces. In the last few weeks, in Europe, it is not just forests that have been ravaged by wildfires brought about by the climate catastrophe, it is also democracy itself that governmental firebrands could reduce to ashes.