

Cécile Kashetu Kyenge: We need to think about immigration in extremely rational terms

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Interviews

Cécile Kashetu Kyenge talks overcoming racism, EU-Africa relations, and why Europe's migration challenge doesn't constitute a crisis.



Cécile Kashetu Kyenge | *Photo credit: Bea Uhart*

Looking at both race relations in the US and Europe, do you think there has been an increase in racism in politics?

In the US and in Europe, we have seen a rise in racialisation in politics. Political movements based on populism and nationalism have grown.

The election of President Trump in the US and the growing support for parties on the right in Holland, France and Germany prove that racism in politics is on the rise. It is now acceptable for openly racist

parties to enter parliaments as a political force, and they sometimes form part of a coalition in national and regional governments.

This gives them a platform that encourages a political discourse full of hate, and drives forward legislation and policies that go against communities in vulnerable positions. I have personally witnessed this rise of racism in politics.

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Looking at the EU institutions, especially their leadership, they are not very diverse in terms of gender, race or religious backgrounds. What would you like the EU to do to increase diversity in European politics?

The European institutions should be able to represent European society in all its diversity. The EU cannot continue to seem impenetrable to talented potential employees who belong to ethnic or religious minorities.

In this respect, I think that the institutions should gather data to assess the racial, ethnic and religious diversity of their employees, so that they can assess concrete measures to tackle the lack of diversity.

For example, improving the selection process, introducing schemes that encourage more applications from ethnic or religious minorities, going so far as taking positive measures to hire them and help them progress in their career, as has been done for equality in general.

In the European Parliament, we have a very limited number of members who belong to ethnic and religious minorities, in contrast to the large percentage of foreign citizens living in many EU member states. This can be resolved by the national parties, who need to encourage greater democratic involvement, both active and passive, among minorities.

During the S&D group's 'With Africa Week', you chaired a session on 'Empowering women as political leaders' - what conclusions resulted from the discussion and what role can the EU play?

Today, Europe is becoming aware of the fact that its future cannot be separated from that of African countries. This is why it is important to embrace a shared approach to development, based on mutual benefit and growth.

Gender equality and the emancipation of women are vital for achieving inclusive, fair, sustainable development. The many different challenges faced by women who intend to go into politics should be based on building a community that supports them.

The European Parliament should be Africa's number one partner, demonstrating that training and education, partnership and collaboration, as well as human rights are an investment for all girls and women. Africa Week provided an opportunity to listen. A time to engage, which will make a significant contribution to the definition of measures that the S&D group plans to take forward for the future.

You came to Italy as a student from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to study medicine. What made you decide to enter into Italian politics?

After studying medicine and starting out as a doctor, I began to get involved in social issues. I would combine my professional commitment to my social one, and it was this combination that encouraged me to move into politics as a tool to change society.

I started from scratch, and couldn't decide between the Democratici di Sinistra (Democrats of the Left), and the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party). In the end I joined the Partito Democratico.

I can still remember getting the telephone call from Enrico Letta, then Prime Minister, asking me to join the government in 2013, after I was elected to the national parliament. I remembered all the battles fought over so many years for the "senza diritti" (those without rights).

My first thought was for all those women and men who had fought these battles, it was suddenly clear, that this 'yes' was a choice that wasn't individual, but collective. After my experience in government, I decided to run as a candidate in the 2014 European elections, and some 100,000 citizens chose me to represent them.

When you were appointed as the first ever black Italian cabinet minister, you received racist attacks from some fellow Italian MPs , how did you cope with these attacks?

For me personally, it was difficult to begin with. For me and for my family. You never get used to insults. However, hate is something personal. It is often a double-edged sword, it can injure the person on the receiving end, but also the person who is wielding it. People who hate, first and foremost hate themselves. In any case, during that specific period, I represented all the elements that make up hate crimes. The racial and sexist elements.

Female, black, educated, the haters obviously saw it as a combination of intolerable elements. When I became a minister, those kinds of attacks, which were so systematic, were a novelty. In some ways, they have also been underestimated.

This is demonstrated by the experience with Senator Calderoli, with the Senate's failure to take action against him for inciting racial hatred for the insults he threw at me. I am not a victim. I have all the tools I need to defend myself.

I never legally denounce the people who commit these crimes. I am a civil claimant, I encourage discussion within the process, I invite civil society to expose, to denounce.

Because for me, above all, society should be the one developing these antibodies, and the 'system' should be the one that reacts.

Because when it isn't happening to me, it is happening to those who do not have the tools they need to defend themselves. In these situations, I would like it to be the institutions and civil society who respond, standing alongside those who are the victims of all of this.

Can Europe find a long-term solution to the migration crisis, especially since the population of Africa is expected to grow rapidly?

We need to start to think about immigration in extremely rational terms. Adopt measures that take into account the society that the future has in store for us. Prevent social conflict and hardship, implement effective policies to encourage integration. To do this, we cannot continue to pretend that nothing is happening: Europe is going through an incredibly serious demographic crisis.

Incentives for childbirth are in part managing to limit the falling birth rate. But in fact, the crisis has a profound cultural aspect. This is demonstrated by the fact that, although immigration compensates for the falling population in the short-term, in the long-term, the children of this immigration adjust to the average birth rate and the same demographic models as the countries that receive them.

The continent of Africa is fully able to sustain the demographic growth that it is experiencing, especially if Europe gives a real boost to its economic and political partnership with Africa. The development and spread of democratic principles could be enough to encourage a decline in human mobility. I believe that Europe is not experiencing a crisis in terms of immigration. Rather,

Europe is experiencing a tragedy in terms of its demographic decline. Globalisation has established the principle of the free movement of goods and capital.

The same rules apply to the movement of people. And today, Europe is an attractive destination for migration. In any case, I do not believe that a few hundred thousand migrants constitute a crisis in an area with more than 500 million inhabitants.

How would you like to see EU policies towards Africa change so that a genuine partnership is created as part of any future EU-Africa strategy?

I believe we need to start again and rethink our cooperation with the continent of Africa, focusing on sustainable development and reinforcing legal immigration channels, as well as on helping the diasporas that are in Europe today.

A renewed partnership could benefit both continents, thanks to the consolidation of multilateral relations as well as political and economic ties. We urgently need to fill the political voids that have been left in many African countries in the last two decades, while China, the United States, the countries of the Arabian Gulf and Brazil have been investing, forging 'friendships' over that time with their own political and economic leadership. The EU too can, and must, continue to play a role in Africa to create and nurture their mutual wellbeing.

What are your main policy priorities for the next few months?

I am looking at a number of different issues, on a European, national and international level, and they all come under a single framework of measures. There is no doubt that, if I had to choose a specific dossier, I would choose the reform of the European asylum system, and in particular, the reform of the Dublin regulation. What we call an immigration crisis is actually the Dublin crisis.

This regulation has seriously called into question the principle of solidarity between members of the European Union. I believe that member states need to take a decisive step, the Council needs to make a breakthrough in the discussion on reforming the Dublin regulation, and do so in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure.

As Commission President Jean- Claude Juncker has said, the time for ad hoc measures is over. We need a comprehensive, structural, clear reform, that is able to respond to what is now a structural phenomenon: immigration. Border nations can no longer be left alone to manage asylum seekers. We need a centralised, rational, shared, combined approach to managing the situation. We need a European approach to managing the situation.

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