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ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION, A PROBLEM WITHOUT A SOLUTION

The shipwreck disaster on October 3 2013, that saw the sinking a few miles off Lampedusa of a boat filled with over 500 immigrants and that has caused over 300 deaths, has brought back the attention, even of politicians for once, over the issue of illegal immigration. Words such as “shame” and “horror” have been widely used, but besides from feelings of disdain and resentment, the problem can be hardly solved.

The media circus over the October 3 events cannot overshadow similar recurrent incidents that have plagued the Mediterranean over the last few years. For what they are worth in a phenomena still lacking an exact evaluation, statistics state that around 8 to 10 thousand people have drowned while crossing the sea on their way to Europe. They could be many more, but it is hard to verify. The data is based on vague information, tales of survivors and bodies recovered from the sea.

Numbers are relatively important when taking into account a biblical exodus of people fleeing from their home countries to fulfill a dream or a hope, to escape from a war, to survive from a poverty without dignity. Just like all migrations caused by social despair, there is no way to stop them, nor adequate mean to face them.

An inconvenient position

Italy's geographical position puts it in first line and makes it the first landing point – in most cases a mere transit – for this multitude of hopeless people trying to reach Europe. Most of them come from sub-Saharan Africa. Among the different migrations, the Africans are the poorest, they lack the financial means to travel a safer route and thus risk their lives crossing the sea in crammed makeshift boats. Lampedusa and the southern coasts of Sicily are the terminal of these hope filled, or rather despair filled, trips.

Following social turmoil in north Africa and in the Middle East, the influx of migrants has returned at a very high level. The point of departure is usually Libya and, since the fall of Ben Ali, also Tunisia. During Muammar Gaddafi's reign, Libya used illegal immigrants as a tool to financially and politically blackmail Italy. During his first historical trip to Italy, it was the Rais himself that had stated: these immigrants are fleeing from misery (Gaddafi did not like the term asylum seekers or refugees) and we will send them all over to you. This meant he had no interest in keeping them in Libya and that if he had to he wanted something in exchange.

In fact, after the signature of the Italy-Libya treaty in 2008 and after receiving an adequate financial “compensation”, the Libyan dictator declared his willingness to fight illegal immigration. The Italian Guardia di Finanza (the Financial police) sent in 3 military patrol boats (later they were raised to 6) to jointly control the Libyan coastline and to curb illegal immigration. The Italian Ministry of Interior sent police officers to Tripoli to link up with their local counterparts and an enormous flow of resources (money, vehicles, training courses, equipment etc.) was on its way to Libya. Overall, between 2008 and 2010 Libyans received around 60 million euros. The result was that Libya finally accepted the principle of repatriations, namely the idea that they would have taken back all those migrants intercepted at sea by both Italian and Libyan patrols.

The shameful repatriations

On May 6 2009 the first repatriation took place. The writer was present on Tripoli's commercial dock and was a direct witness of a human drama. The migrants didn't know they had been taken back to Libya and they initially reacted with stupor. Then it was pain. Some were crying, others thought of rebelling and tried to get off the Italian patrol boats. The Libyan security forces immediately began their abuses. They hit and whipped the most riotous. People were dragged off their boat and kicked into containers: one for women and one for men. Dehydrated men were left ailing on the dock, incapable of reacting or moving, simply exhausted. Besides them were pregnant women lying on the floor. No one cared to assist them. And all of these people simply disappeared, Italy did not care about their fate. They were thrown into Libyan detention centers, they had over 20 of them all over the country, and sent back to the hell they had tried to escape from.

Politicians in Italy had applauded as a success the deportation policy, a new tool in the fight against illegal immigrants, without realizing they should have been ashamed of themselves. They clearly kept all the questions on the destiny of these people to themselves. It was better not to know in order not to feel responsible for the abuses inflicted on these people. They went all the way to say that these migrants stopped at sea had never filed an asylum request (but they had not idea they were being brought back to Libya).

Then the civil war began, Muammar Gaddafi was killed and the country entered into a spiral of instability that is still without an end. The migrants Italy had deported found themselves inadvertently in the middle of a civil war. The fact that the Rais employed African mercenaries to fight the rebels added another burden on the migrants. Once the dictator was defenestrated, they were accused of having fought to save Gaddafi. Many were killed or abused, but this is a story very few are willing to talk about. Especially because the international coalition that had favored Gaddafi's downfall could not be delegitimated by the revenge taken by the rebels over the migrants. After all, this had been a fight for freedom and democracy, there was no room to talk about the violations perpetrated by the rebels against other fellow Libyans or on African migrants.

Back to business

Now that the situation in Libya has gradually gone back to normal, the human trafficking network is flourishing once more. We should always keep in mind that migration is not only a social plague, but a great international business. Despite the civil war in Libya, the clandestine migration structures were still in place in Sudan, where people gather before reaching the coasts on the Mediterranean. At that time, the criminal organizations managing the traffic dedicated their efforts to channeling Eritrean migrants towards the Sinai and towards Israel.

Given the current ongoing instability in Libya, with militias dictating their rule, the Libyan police without any coercive power and criminal groups (made up of people freed from jail during the civil war) still roaming around, has allowed traffickers to go back to business at a pace greater than in the past. The very same illegal structures Gaddafi once encouraged (when he had to blackmail Italy or Europe) are now fully operational. They have been favored by social chaos, endemic corruption reinforced by the civil war, the connections between criminals-militias-traffickers, police turning a blind eye (just like in the past) in the name of their share of the pie and the collusion of politicians (some government officials, maybe not by chance, come from the Zuwarah area, the so-called "capital" and main departure point of the boats filled with migrants).

The change in Libya's internal situation and in the contact people with which it used to dialogue, did not mutate how Italy wants to deal with illegal immigration. Rome still believes it is facing migrants and not refugees fleeing from wars or dictatorships. And it also still thinks that repatriations are part of the solution. Italian police officials are still on the ground (their number had been increased and then reduced due to security concerns). Five out of the six donated patrol boats have been sunk during the war, but there is now talk of fishing them out to re-start joint patrols. The influx of training courses, bilateral meetings, financing and largess is also back on track. The problem is now finding adequate and reliable partners with which to deal with in Libya.

Frontex, the useless

Hence, Italy still believes in a repressive approach when dealing with immigration. The statements on October 4 2013 by the Italian Minister of Interior, Angelino Alfano, during his visit to Lampedusa hinting to a strengthening of the activities of Frontex, the EU agency tasked with patrolling Europe's external borders, go in this direction. Frontex patrols the Mediterranean also to curb illegal immigration. A deployment of vessels, airplanes, helicopters and radars that, also due to the lack of effort and political attitude by most European countries, hardly produces any results.

But the problem is not the inefficiency of Frontex, but the overall approach in dealing with this issue. What the Italian Interior Minister said in Lampedusa was basically: a stronger Frontex will help diminish the number of immigrants at sea. Thus, less deaths. The equation is logical in its maths, but neglects the key issue. People's despair has no limits and will not stop the exodus of those ready to risk their lives on makeshift boats. These people are fleeing from conflicts and poverty, they cross the Libyan desert during the winter, whilst they go by sea in the summer. During their trip they face abuses, robberies, rapes, but still hope for a better tomorrow. They know what they are leaving behind – and

this provides them with the strength to face the risks of this transhumance – but they don't know what they will find. It could be death, as has often happened, but it could also be marginalization.

And this is where the problem lies. Both Europe and Italy have to realize immigration cannot be eradicated with repression and with the policy of repatriations. Such a phenomena has to be dealt with in a framework respectful of both the rule of law and of the solidarity owed to all human beings affected by global crisis. In other words, immigration cannot be stopped, but solely piloted and addressed. Law n.189 of the 30th of July 2002, better known with the name of the two former Ministers who signed it, Umberto Bossi and Gianfranco Fini, envisages the introduction of the crime of illegal immigration and the expulsion of the clandestine. It is a law conceived along the “repressive” line (just like the repatriations) and whose limits are now evident. As already stated, this is a wrong approach that might even produce results in the short term, but fails to solve the issue in the long one.

But then, and this is the basic question, what can and should be done to solve this problem? If we cannot convince an illegal immigrant to avoid risking his life on a boat that could easily sink, if he cannot be repatriated because this would cause him more suffering, if one wants to avoid him being marginalized or live an illegal life once on European soil, what are we supposed to do?

The search for solutions

The solution lies mostly at a European level. The first thing to do should be a judicial initiative: a European law applying to all EU member states establishing a common legally defined path for the entrance of immigrants (this would once and for all define what is illegal and what is not), common citizenship and family reunion criteria, penalties for traffickers and the application of all those international safeguards for refugees and asylum seekers.

Secondly there should be common welfare assistance criteria: a displaced person cannot arrive in a country and be forced to live a marginalized or illegal existence. He needs to follow a path that leads to integration. He needs social assistance (to understand the rules of where he now lives, to speak the language etc.) and financial support until he is able to take care of himself. This already happens in several European countries, but not in all of them. Reception and integration standards should be aligned. Furthermore, the Dublin Convention, a juridical opprobrium binding asylum seekers to their first landing point – in this case Lampedusa and Italy – hindering their autonomous choice over their destiny, should be overcome. The end result is that refugees are once again pushed towards illegality, simply because they attempt to join relatives or friends in other EU member states.

A third form of intervention is also possible. And it is the once envisaged by Romano Prodi's government that had decided to create reception facilities for immigrants on Libyan soil. Italy had financed a hospital in Kufra, while similar structures never saw the light. The idea was that instead of assisting the migrants in Italy, it was better to do it in Libya. A

probably utopian project that took for granted the Libyans' willingness and capability to address this issue and overestimated – in Gaddafi's days, just like today – their respect for human rights. There is still a portion of the Arab world's culture that perceives Africans as someone that can be exploited and despised. It is not racism, but pseudo-slavery. Prodi's project, although well conceived but realistically impossible to put into effect, raised the issue of the conditions of the immigrants before their sea trip.

Europe could do something similar, that is tackle the issue before solving it on its soil. If it's not possible to intervene in the countries of origin to prevent immigration (hard to think of negotiating in places like Somalia or Eritrea under dictator Isaias Afewerki), something could be done in the countries immigrants transit on. In Libya, for example, the local UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) bureau could (with EU financial support) select the asylum seekers or follow their applications to access the European zone. Under Gaddafi, the UN agency lacked the official recognition of the Libyan government (as stated previously, the Rais did not like the term “refugee”). Today it could be different.

Migrations require a mix of rule of law, solidarity, welfare, but mainly humanity. This is a phenomena that should be understood and not demonized. Room for repression should be reduced to a minimum. And foremost the approach should be enfranchised from the political rhetoric and the exploitation that usually come with it: both the ineffective “politically correct” façade and the ill-concealed racist xenophobia.

TERRORISM WITHOUT A CAUSE

Recent events in Kenya have highlighted once again how senseless and aimless Islamic terrorism has become. Official statements from terrorists groups vow for "revenge against the infidels", but the truth is there is no true political goal behind any of these attacks. Furthermore, extremist Islamists have shifted their targets more and more towards those very same muslim populations they claim they are fighting for. The most blatant example is in Syria where the jihadist international brigades from all over the world target Bashar al Assad in a "holy war" only because he is from an Islamic minority, the Alawites. The fact that Islamic clerics worldwide - be they Sunni, Shiite or whatever - still fail to condemn the killings of muslims by other muslims and the targeting of "infidels" has become intolerable.

Somali terrorism

Al Shabaab, literally "the youth", are now a blacklisted terrorist organization affiliated to Al Qaeda. Their founder is Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, former colonel in the Somali army who defected in the early 90s. In 1996 he founded Al Ittihad al Islami, Somalia's first fundamentalist group. A decade later he would help the Islamic courts take over the Somali capital Mogadishu following a string of U.S. and CIA funded killings targeting the alleged ringleaders of the attacks against American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and 2002. Hassan Dahir Aweys split from Al Shabaab when he lost its leadership and founded a splinter group, Hizbul al Islam. He has been in the custody of the Somali governments for over two months now. The Somali president Mohamud has still to decide whether to prosecute him or release him.

The rise of Somali extremists was initially funded by local Mogadishu businessmen who wanted to take over the warlords in the management of the city's most lucrative activities: the port, the airport and thus the different trades routes. One of their most prominent supporters was Abukar Omar Addane, a wheel-chaired octogenarian with a red beard who allegedly hosted in his Ramadan Hotel the terrorists Abu Talha al Sudani and Fazul Abdallah Mohamed.

The Union of the Islamic Courts that took over Mogadishu in early 2006 had its most radical branch in the militia of the Ifka Halane court. Their leader was Hassan Dahir Aweys' Afghan trained protégé, Aden Hashi Ayro. Their training camp was initially in Mogadishu's Italian cemetery that had been desecrated for the occasion. The Islamic Courts were ousted in January 2007 by the Ethiopians and the Al Shabaab were pushed out of the capital and resettled in southern Somalia. Ayro was killed by a U.S. drone in Dusamareb in May 2008. Over the last few years they have held control of portions of the territory and, most prominently, of the southern city of Kismayo, which they lost in recent months.

As Ethiopia pulled out and was replaced by the African peacekeeping mission Amisom, Al Shabaab declared their war against foreign occupiers and infidels. The fact that Amisom has supported and continues to support the Transitional Federal Government that has been trying to lead the country out of a 23 years old statelessness is one of the aggravating reasons behind their resilience. Yet, most of Al Shabaab's attacks target Somalis. Ever since in Baidoa in 2006 their first suicide bomber exploded against a

government checkpoint, the Somali extremist group has killed dozens of students, public officials and basically anyone attempting to reinstate a rule over the country. In the areas under their control they have applied Taliban-style Sharia with its arsenal of amputations, stonings, ban of music and cinemas and so forth. In a basically 99% muslim country member of the Arab League, Al Shabaab have been waging a war against traditional Sufi Somali Islam.

In other words, their objective of instating an Islamic state in Somalia will come at the expense of Somali muslims first. This has come with the blessing of all those Saudi and Qatari charitable organizations that, over the last 20 years, have been funding and promoting radical Wahabism and Salafism at the expense of Sufism together with those Somali businessman who are still profiting from the war economy and don't want to see their dividends being taken over by a central government.

Terrorism without a goal

Until today Israeli officials label Yasser Arafat as an "archterrorist", as in a recent Op-ed published in the New York Times and signed by the Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon. Terrorist or freedom fighter, Arafat and his Organization for the Liberation of Palestine had a clear political goal: an independent Palestinian state currently under Israeli occupation. He surely employed terrorist techniques to achieve his goals in what was, and still is, an asymmetric war between one of the most powerful armies in the world and unarmed civilians.

History has plenty of examples of how alleged terrorists have turned into freedom fighters or vice-versa, including now ailing Nobel Peace Prize Nelson Mandela. The common denominators were always similar: a central government allegedly abusing its power or oppressing a minority group or a foreign occupation or colonialism, the absence of democratic means to counter the abuses and thus the resorting to armed opposition and thus terrorism. The underlying ideology could have been Marxism, the search for civil liberties or you name it. But there was always a clear goal: independence, autonomy, a new form of state or freedom from oppression. Whether the motives behind the decision of taking up arms or their aims were legitimate or not, there was always the idea that those fighting were representing their people and trying to do some good for them.

On the other hand, Islamic extremist groups have a tendency to confuse who they are really representing. Ideally it is the Umma, the muslim nation, they are fighting for. But there is very little they are doing to truly unite and bring together all muslims. They have used the banner of Islam as a tool to fight foreign occupations - like in Afghanistan first against the Soviets and then against the U.S. lead coalitions or as Hamas and Hezbollah have been doing against the Israelis - in what can be seen as an understandable reason to fight. This does not mean one justifies suicide attacks, but it is easy to spot the reasons inspiring them.

But if the war on terrorism can be considered over - after all Al Qaeda has been kicked out of Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden is dead, his successor Zayman al Zawahiri offers an ideological umbrella for those groups still looking up to "the base" and nothing more - its

tocsins are still well and alive. Now the target has become the establishment of Islamic theocratic states, just like in Iran, but as opposed to the Iranians, with a Sunni rule. These fundamentalist movements have gradually shifted to Salafist and Wahabi instances - and have often lead the movements of the Arab Spring - waging a jihad against anyone opposing their political programs. But as has progressively happened in most muslim countries, the move to a politicized version of Islam has too often ended with the targeting of other fellow muslims. Whether from a different current of belief - Sunnis as opposed to Shiites as in Iraq's ongoing civil war - or because considered too secular - as in Tunisia for example - extremists have waged a holy war against other compatriots and believers of their same God.

Jihad in Syria

The most blatant example is in Syria. Invisible Dog has gone at lengths at describing the geopolitical context surrounding the fight to overthrow President Bashar al Assad. But what began over two years ago as a legitimate political struggle by opposition groups to get rid of a decades long dynastic dictatorship, has now turned into something different.

If taking up arms against an autocratic ruler in the struggle for democracy can be understood. Turning this conflict into a holy war attracting foreign legions of radicals to fight a minority sect of Islam - the Alawites from where the Assad's originate - is a totally different story. Once again, the banner of Islam is used against other fellow muslims. And, just like in neighboring Iraq, the meaning of a struggle is lost along the way and is progressively replaced by a meaningless fight in the name of a common religion, but against alleged infidels worshipping the same god.

The very fact that there has been infighting between different rebel groups in Syria is significant. The recent truce brokered between the Free Syrian Army - the umbrella organization grouping opposition groups - and the Al Qaeda front group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) signals a friction between two inevitably conflicting views on the future of Syria. Although sharing a common objective, it is hard to believe that all those non-Syrian extremists fighting on the ground are there to grant the Syrians a better democratic tomorrow. It is not hard to predict their personal struggle will continue until they install a leadership that responds to their "islamic" criteria.

Islamic democracy

The underlying question is whether Islam and democracy are two concepts that can cohabit under the same sun. For too long we were lead to believe there were irreconcilable differences and pointed to those theocracies or monarchies where Islam is used as a pretext to impose oligarchic or autocratic rules. But we forgot of democratic examples like in Northern Nigeria where Sharia law has been imposed since 2000, but where the rule of law - both at a local level and at the federal one - has prevented religious-based abuses. And it is not a coincidence that the north of Nigeria has been witnessing the rise of terrorist group Boko Haram in those very same states where Sharia is already part of the code. Once again, extremists believe their personal view of Islam is "better" than the rest.

Any religion has a set of behavioral norms that it tries to impose on its followers. The 10 commandments given by God to Moses were a first example of what had to be avoided in order to reduce conflicts (don't steal, kill or take someone else's woman). The Koran and the Sunnas revealed to Prophet Mohamed went a step further and codified a series of social, civil and penal norms. Penalties and punishments were added to the single provisions. But the fact that they were spelled out over 14 centuries ago doesn't mean they cannot be adapted to our contemporary society without them losing their original meaning. Those who preach Salafism and thus end up tangled with terrorism expect us to live in the 6th century when the world has moved forward. They might not like it, but they can't avoid it.

What is really lacking is an Islamic clergy indicating the path aligning beliefs and democracy. An Islamic renaissance capable of combining both the secular and religious demands coming from within muslim societies. And if they have to be Sharia based, it doesn't mean they have to give up all those checks and balances provided by rule of law. The same goes for the different currents of Islam, whose differences cannot be solely reduced to picking the rightful descendants to the Prophet. Sunni and Shiite infighting does not have any sense from an Islamic point of view. The targeting of other fellow muslims and non-believers should be ended. And it is time those who bear the moral authority over other muslims - be they in Cairo, Mecca or Tehran - raise their voices or else they will continue to be considered way too tolerant and accommodating with those waving the flag of Islam to perpetrate senseless crimes against humanity.

DATAGATE SCANDAL, MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

After about three years, we are witnessing the second “psycho-drama” involving the intelligence services of the USA and the governments of the rest of the globe.

The “Wikileaks” scandal had placed Julian Assange in the center of the stage and had seen private Manning acting as the deep throat and sacrificial victim in the story. Manning is, for the moment, the only person condemned for the leak (35 years in prison).

Now another employee of the US government has decided to speak out – in the name of freedom of information – to the media and, what's worse, to foreign intelligence services that are not considered “friendly” by the US administration.

The revelations of the NSA (National Security Agency) analyst Edward Snowden have not caused great damage but have provoked a number of reactions, going from the melodramatic one offered by EU Parliament head Martin Schultz to the typically French militant “fighting style” statements of PM Francois Hollande.

In the past few years we've seen an overexposure of the intelligence services on the media, in movies, TV shows, etc. Whether these are cause or effect of the latest scandals is yet to be determined.

We will thus trace a brief history of the fundamental events regarding this latest leak.

It must be said upfront that the recent “Datagate” scandal is only the latest in a series of scandals that have struck the Obama administration since the beginning of his second mandate (we shall not include the Wikileaks scandal, which happened at the end of 2009). It's as if Obama's second mandate is jinxed:

First, tax inspectors seem to harass certain NGO's connected with the “Tea Party” which – behind the facade of philanthropy – serve as a means of tax deduction, thus becoming the instruments that finance the conservative parties in the USA.

The September 11, 2012 attack against the US consulate in Bengazi, Libya, did not only cost the life of three US embassy officers, but the career of some of the most influential among the Obama administration: the head of the CIA, General David Petraeus, whom was supposedly sacked because of an extra-marital affair, was actually fired for not putting sufficient emphasis on the role of Al Qaeda in the attack (as stated by the Republicans); the sacrifice of Petraeus saved the neck of the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Finally, the news that the US intelligence is tapping the telephones of the AP (Associated Press) press agency in order to find out from what “sources” (which are confidential and should remain secret) they are obtaining information about the terrorist activity of Al Qaeda in Yemen.

After these events, the public opinion was ripe and ready for the latest leak.

Let's talk about the main actor of the Datagate scandal, Edward Snowden

Snowden is a 29 year old analyst of the NSA and computer “genius”. Despite not having completed high school (according to some he did, albeit privately), he joined the Special Forces in 2003, breaking both his legs during training, an incident which led to his dismissal. Then, because of his background as a computer specialist, he was called back into the CIA. From the CIA he moved to the NSA as an employee of the companies that the NSA outsources their work to. His responsibilities – and his salary – increased dramatically, to the point where at the age of 29 he was making 200 thousand dollars per year. He lived in Hawaii together with his girlfriend in a comfortable villa on the ocean near Honolulu. What more could one want at his age?

Yet Snowden was a troubled soul. On May 1st 2013 he obtained from his superior to be put on leave for two weeks in order to cure his epilepsy. On May 20th he left for Hong Kong, bringing his laptop filled with classified information with him. Once there, he contacted the Guardian and the Washington Post and began leaking.

On June 5, the Guardian published Snowden's first revelations (his codename was Verax – from Latin “he who tells the truth”). In them, Verax said that the NSA, through a series of programs (the most important of which is called PRISM) and with the complicity of “big-data” (the giants of the information sector such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Yahoo!, Skype, Youtube, Apple...basically all of them with the exception of Twitter) and Verizon (the biggest telephone operator in the US) listened to and recorded the phone calls, e-mails and internet traffic of millions of US and non-US citizens. A “Big Brother” for which the right to privacy is a mere pretext for the abstract speculations of philosophers and jurists with too much time on their hands.

The Obama administration tried to downplay the revelations, stating that the program played a fundamental role in the fight against international terror, and that at least three terrorist attacks were thwarted thanks to the wire-tapping. This triggered the irony of the US Republicans, whom said that Obama's second term was “Bush's fourth term” and the heavy critique by the New York Times, which wrote: “Obama has lost all credibility”.

All of this happened as Chinese President Xi Jinping was on an official visit in the US. During which visit Obama cordially reprimanded his Chinese counterpart for the frequent hacker attacks that the Chinese directed against US government and military targets.

In the meantime, on May 9, Snowden had revealed his identity. He claimed – always on the Guardian newspaper – that China was one of the main targets of US cyber espionage and that a good deal of the 61 thousand hacker attacks against China were directed against civilians. It is easy to imagine the embarrassment of President Obama and the satisfaction of Xi Jinping who could finally reply to the cyber-moral lessons dispensed by the US.

The US government, caught off guard, tried to further limit damages by saying that the NSA program managed to stop 50 terrorist attacks, 20 of which were supposed to take place in European countries (but not in Italy, as stated by the spokesman of the Italian

secret services). Also, they accused Snowden of high treason and spread the rumor that Snowden might be collaborating with Chinese intelligence. Snowden immediately denied the rumors and gained the support of the Ecuadorian government, which offered him political asylum (Wikileaks founder Julian Assange – who publicly supported Snowden and provided a lawyer for him - is currently hiding inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London). At this point the US officially asked the Chinese to extradite Snowden and send him home, but China rejected the request.

On June 23, with the blessing of the Chinese government, Snowden (who was accompanied by Wikileaks lawyer Sarah Harrison) boarded an Aeroflot flight to the Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow. The Ecuadorian embassy in Moscow sent a car to the airport which, escorted by two vehicles of the Russian secret services, took Snowden from the airplane to the Capsule hotel in Sheremetyevo's transit area. Once there, Snowden met the Ecuadorian ambassador who formalized the offer of political asylum.

The frustration of the US administration was evident. Its secret services had been duped twice (the first time when Snowden defected). But even more importantly, they had witnessed a tightening of relations between the Russian and the Chinese, whom never saw the other with a good eye, despite the Shanghai Pact (also known as SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 2001).

The “Snowden affair” forced the US to give in on a series of issues that were traditionally used as a lever against their political opponents: first among these was the respect of human rights. Finally, the governments of Beijing and Moscow could play the role of those that are defending a poor idealist that is being persecuted by the evil Americans. Putin could make his SORM program (the Russian wire-tapping program, usually used against dissidents) look like the counterpart of the PRISM program. The Chinese, after learning that the NSA recorded millions of Chinese SMS messages, could finally state that the US acted like poor victims, but they surely were the greatest outlaws of our time.

The governments of Russia and China had also used Snowden's revelations to rekindle the fire with their internal public opinion, which always meets initiatives against their historical enemies with enthusiasm. Putin – former colonel of the KGB in eastern Germany during the Soviet era, then director of the FSB in Eltsin's Russia – and the Chinese government – which still uses “re-education camps” against its dissidents – can hardly claim the high ground on human rights, but now the US couldn't either.

The extradition request sent by the US to the Russians was met with ironic conceit, as were the furious threats of terrible repercussions on the relationships between the two countries. Putin's reaction was borderline provocative: “Unfortunately Snowden is in transit, so he is not on Russian territory”. The US feared that Snowden could barter secret information with political asylum in Russia. It was a founded fear, as Snowden was constantly surrounded by Russian intelligence operatives during his stay in Moscow.

There followed a number of rumors, voices, confirmations and denials about Snowden's imminent trip to Quito in Ecuador, with a stop-over in the Havana. These rumors caused a diplomatic incident when, on July 3, the “Falcon” airplane with on board the Bolivian

President Evo Morales flying from Moscow was forbidden to fly over the Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese territories for fear it might be carrying Snowden. The airplane was finally forced to land in Vienna.

Three kinds of allies

While a pleased Russian government was waiting to decide whether to extradite Snowden, he decided to make a further, shocking, statement on the Guardian and Der Spiegel newspapers. Snowden claimed that the NSA was constantly monitoring the diplomatic offices of foreign governments in Washington and New York. Snowden claimed that there were 38 targets, which included the embassies of Italy, France and Greece, the offices of the European Union, Japan, Mexico, India, Turkey and South Korea. But that was not all. The wire-tapping was not circumscribed to embassies, but was enacted abroad as well. According to Der Spiegel, the NSA had divided allied countries into three categories:

- The USA
- UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand (Anglo-saxon countries that are historical allies of the US and which constitute the members of the Echelon spy system).
- All the rest of the European countries, which can be freely probed.

Germany stood out among these, with an average of 500 million telephone and internet communications tapped by the US intelligence every month – especially in Frankfurt, where the European Central Bank and the Bundesbank are. France followed, with an average of 60 million recordings per month.

As for Italy, in December 2012 there was an average of 4 million recordings per month.

At this stage, faced with the mounting embarrassment on both sides – the spies and the spied – politicians abroad were almost forced to react. Some said that the whole thing was just a normal exchange of information with “friendly” intelligence services (we will speak later about what this term means within the intelligence community). Some said that it served to thwart terrorist attacks. Some even expressed (false) indignation, like the French, Germans, and the President of the European Parliament Martin Schultz, who stated:

“I’m shocked... I feel treated like an enemy. It is shocking to see how the USA can use measures against its closest allies that are not unlike those taken by the KGB during the cold war... I ask the US government: are we enemies?”

It would be useful to remind Mr. Schultz that the main target of the KGB during the cold war were the communist parties of western Europe (not to mention the ones of the “satellite” countries). Not only were they allies, but they were “brothers” in the name of the common adherence to the Marxist ideology. All this happened while opposition parties, both in Germany and Italy, hypothesized an active complicity on the part of their governments that were being knowingly spied.

Once the show had started, its actors had to keep reciting, so the virulent statements of Francois Hollande (who saw the circumstance as a chance to re-gain some of the French's lost grandeur) were followed by the more measured statements by Angela Merkel's spokesperson. The object of the dispute was also the treaty of free exchange between the US and the EU, which the "loyal" and "sincere" Europeans feared to sign when faced with the "evil" US. Moving, isn't it?

But the UK and Italian governments did not follow the "firm" line of the French.

- The UK government remained silent about the whole thing, in virtue of the historical alliance with their former colony across the ocean.
- The Italians adopted a low profile, confiding in the "surely satisfying" explanations by the US that will soon be forthcoming.

Putin, on the other hand, was happy to turn the knife in the wound. On July 1, following Snowden's official request for asylum, he stated:

"Of course he can stay, provided he promises to stop causing problems with our American partners".

The statement caused rage among the Obama administration, seen that Snowden was constantly under the protection of the Russian secret services. Then, on July 12, Putin added that:

"We must save this youth from the death sentence which the US have surely placed on his head".

Meanwhile, Snowden continued – with perfect timing - to add further details to his revelations about the investigative activities of the NSA against foreign diplomatic offices on American ground. Among other things, he revealed that the code-name for the Italian embassy at the UN was Cicuta (a poisonous plant) and that of the embassy in Washington was "Bruneau" or "Hemlock" (same as Cicuta).

France continued to raise its voice, threatening to pull out of the negotiations for the treaty of free exchange between the USA and the EU. They would not, of course, and in the end they would sit at the negotiating table with the US (Germany will be there too) on July 8 to seal a deal which produced 2 million new jobs. To sabotage the deal would have been sheer madness.

Faced with the impossibility of transferring Snowden from Russia to Latin America (where several countries were willing to give him asylum), the hypothesis of receiving asylum from Russia itself became more concrete. The White House reacted furiously and threatened very grave repercussions in the relationship with Russia, among these was a boycott of Russia at the September G-20 summit in Saint Petersburg.

On August 2 Russia officially gave political asylum – though temporary, 1 year - to Snowden. After 39 days, Snowden finally left the transit area of the airport Sheremetyevo

– provided that he really was there. (It is more likely that the 39 days were spent somewhere outside Moscow under the tutelage of the Russian secret services).

As retaliation, Obama canceled a meeting with Putin that was scheduled just ahead of the G-20. A move which ended up being counterproductive, as reliable sources say that during a telephone conversation between Obama and Putin, the latter said that Russia: “was put in the corner by the aggressiveness of the Americans, that did not allow them to transfer Snowden to another country”. Putin is not the kind to be frightened by threats, especially if they come from Washington. The Russian president was even praised by known dissidents and opposition leaders, which goes to confirm that the old external enemy still brings consensus to the regime.

Around mid-August, Obama made a first attempt to regain the confidence of his people. He convened a meeting with the silicon valley giants in order to enact new measures for more “transparent” wire-tapping. Meanwhile, Snowden was making his final revelations (at least with the media, we do not know what he told the Russians). According to a doc published by Der Spiegel, the EU would be top of the list in the “attentions” of the US secret services. Germany and France in particular, followed by Italy and Spain. According to the document, the US secret services have given each country a score going from 1 to 5, in a decreasing order of interest. First place is, of course, occupied by China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, North Korea, Afghanistan. In Europe, France and Germany have a score of 3 (as does Japan in Asia). Italy and Spain scored 4. The Vatican, with a mere score of 5, seems to be totally uninteresting for the US.

The World Athletics Championships in Moscow and the worsening situation in Syria finally shifted the spotlight away from the Datagate scandal. The G-20 in S. Petersburg was also completely geared towards finding a solution to the Syrian crisis.

The events that we have described above appear as a paradigm of the relationship between intelligence and politics. A sort of “clinical case” from which emerge the problems of this gray zone that stands between saying, not saying and implying.

The overexposure of a secret world

As we mentioned earlier, in the past few years we've witnessed a progressive “overexposure” of the world of intelligence. Leaving out the traditional spy literature, we are referring to the film and television industry.

Aficionados of the genre are not to be blamed. The problem is that the exasperated overexposure of the intelligence community tends to draw the attention of the public opinion on a world which, for its very nature and mission, must remain hidden. If we add to this the constant attention of the mass media (press, TV, internet, etc.) which are always out hunting for a scoop, we get leakers. Members of the secret services that, for any reason, from personal rancor to greed, decide to go to the media and utilize them as an amplifier for their claims. Even worse, others may chose to use the media as a means of blackmail with regards to their former employers.

This mutual relationship between the intelligence community and the media is also the backdrop (not the cause) of the recent terrorist alarm sounded in July by the US intelligence regarding possible Al Qaeda attacks against US diplomatic offices in various regions.

Those who know the intelligence community also know that if there is a real danger, the last thing to do is to say so – it only produces panic, which would already be an achievement on the part of the terrorist (that is, unless the goal of the secret services is to create such panic). But the latest (unfounded) alarm was closely tied to the Datagate scandal, it became obvious after the government “leaked” the news that the NSA wire-tapping allowed authorities to find out about it.

Another interesting aspect of the Datagate scandal is the hypocritical ostentation of ingenuity and innocence on the part of the authorities of the “target” countries (not all of them).

The exponents of European governments and of the EU that expressed their dismay – trying to pass as the poor victims of a diabolical machination on the part of the US and invoking the respect of “friendly” relationships between their country and the US – have been mocked by all those that have any notion of international relations. In politics, the word “friend” is used as an instrument of propaganda and as a “norm of language” used in official statements in front of journalists. In the world of intelligence, the word “friend” is a contradiction altogether. Whomever can be spied, must be spied (if one doesn't spy someone else, it's because they are not technically able to do so).

“Weddings of love” between secret services do not exist, all weddings are of “interest”. Most often they are actually just “affairs” until objectives converge. After that, it's “enemies like before”. Those who are your friends today, may not be your friends tomorrow. Compromising information that may seem useless today could prove to be of vital importance tomorrow. History is filled with such cases.

For example, we could cite the “everlasting” friendship between the US and Israel, which did not prevent the expulsion as “persona non grata” of Israeli agents that were operating undercover in the USA.

There are serious doubts on the assumption that the US would abstain from controlling their Anglo-saxon “brotherly friends”, and even greater doubts that the courtesy would be repaid, seen the efficiency and cockiness of the MI-6.

What moves the leakers?

Speaking of the “idealism” that moves the actions of Manning and Snowden, it must be said that the “repenting” of a man who works as an intelligence operative and who suddenly realizes that the job he's been doing for years is next-to illegal (sometimes illegal tout-court) is quite suspicious: didn't he know about it when he got the job?

As for Bradley Manning, after being handed his sentence, he stated that he wanted a sex-change in order to finally be able to express the woman he felt he was inside. Naturally,

this may seem at first like a trick of his lawyer in order to cash in on mental infirmity. There is, however, another possible hypothesis: some “government agency” could have suggested (or imposed) this sexual identity crisis upon Manning in order to make him unreliable in the eyes of the public. It would spare Manning a lot of prison time in exchange for his credibility.

Politics vs Rights

In conclusion, the modus operandi of the intelligence agencies are not and can never be the same as those of other State institutions. A thoroughly political activity such as that of the secret services cannot be measured with the same parameters used to measure rights and legality. Rights have to do with justice, politics have to do with power. Politics are about the survival of the State, in the face of which any other consideration or value, be it of the noblest kind, will be cast aside.