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The EU's self-threatening border regime

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The EU project is haunted by its own failing border regime. Its obsession with repelling outsiders, even leading to their death, is undermining the very principles that allowed its unification in the past and is precipitating its own decline.

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Fuelled by the delusion that a dome can be built around the EU, Europe's pre-war borders are now being rebuilt based on anger, paranoia and fear.[1] The EU's current

border ideology follows the assumption that stricter visa rules, higher walls and unwelcoming reception systems will dissuade future migrants. This thinking is flawed. Mobility and diversity cut to the core of the EU's *raison d'être.* The EU has built and keeps reinforcing a discriminatory mobility system based on where people are born. This creates a geopolitical division between travellers who require a visa (mostly Muslims and people from developing countries) and travellers who do not. Rather than looking at the intrinsic value of the individual—regardless of their place of birth—, this system resorts to cartographic prejudice to decide who gets a chance and who does not.

The repercussion of this distinction is the criminalization of the very principle of mobility and openness that has been the most powerful force behind European integration over the past 64 years. The natural desire to move has been turned into an illegal activity which, in turn, fosters other criminal industries by diverting the travellers unable to obtain a visa towards more dangerous and often deadly routes.[2] Non-discrimination is a matter of substance, not degree. The disparity in prosperity between the EU and its neighbours guarantees that people trying to escape poverty and misery will keep looking for better lives in the EU following legal procedure if they can or circumventing them if they cannot. This is not a question of *whether* or not irregular migration will happen but a question of *when*.

The demise of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea is a calamity that does not stop at the boundaries of the EU. The failure to reconcile its internal and external borders could become the catalyst for the EU's eventual breakup. By restricting the scope of the universal rights that it is supposed to promote, the EU undermines its own cohesion. Discriminatory border controls are exposing the hypocrisy of a union that derives diplomatic strength from its exaltation of universal human rights,[3] and shaking the foundations of its supranational structure. How can the EU keep chauvinistic Eurosceptic parties at bay when its very rhetoric stokes fear of outsiders?[4]

What made the EU viable was the concrete achievement of intertwining Europe's traditional war industries through economic interdependence, thus making the horror of war 'not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible'.[5] Antagonising migratory discourses divide the EU along ethnic lines, an estrangement that creates space for international terrorist ideologies that exploit such resentment. Simultaneously, the discourse against non-EU migrants is gradually permeating the discourse against intra-communitarian EU migrants. It is a system that makes everyone miserable. The current border ideology therefore poses not only a fundamental ethical dilemma for the EU, but is economically unsound, politically disastrous and a threat to the EU's future.

To address this situation, two things are needed.

First, we need an EU-wide asylum policy that recognizes that migration is not only unstoppable, but (a small) part of life and moves in circular flows. Approximately 3% of the world population at present are migrants and this has been the case for decades. Both refugees and migrants are neither wolves nor sheep: they are perfectly capable of finding their own way. If they do not find a place and want to go back to their own country they should be given the chance to re-enter Europe at another time to try again. The EU needs to drop its perception of outsiders as charity cases. A union that criminalizes work and promotes the

biopolitical containerisation and marginalization of its vulnerable minorities is a threat to its own political stability.

Secondly, the EU should focus on an EU-wide foreign policy, for although it can neither solve the conflicts nor address the roots of poverty that afflict its neighbours, it can do more to develop a coordinated approach to these problems among its member states. The EU should not watch as embattled states around it collapse and not expect that their fallout will reach the EU in the form of migrants and refugees. To be snatched from the claws of xenophobic nationalism, the EU needs to devise a new grand idea for the political project that has created one of the greatest periods of peace and prosperity that Europe has ever enjoyed. The EU should use alignment and enlargement - its most successful foreign policy - to promote human development and open itself to rethinking where Europe can be. The EU must embrace the bold forward- and outward-looking attitude it once had, as it provides an example that trade, human rights, diplomacy, cross-border cooperation and migration not only work but create freedom and prosperity for everyone.

There was a time when the EU could be characterized as a project built on enthusiasm for openness and diversity. However, over time the EU has developed a 'border disorder' that is driving it into isolation and decline. The desire to protect its values should not mislead the EU to create a border regime that disavows those very same values: non-discriminating freedom and the universality of human rights are exactly the aims that have led us to prosperity and that will be able to preserve the EU. It is time to go back to the future.

References

1. See: Wodak, R., Khosravinik, M. and Mral, B. (2013) *Rightwing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury Publications; Kriesi, H. and Pappas, T.S. (2015) *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*. Colchester, UK: ECPR Press.
2. Van Houtum, H. (2010) 'Human blacklisting: the global apartheid of the EU's external border regime' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(6): 957-976.
3. See: Manners, I. (2002) 'Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?' *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *40*(2): 235-258.
4. See also: Van Houtum, H. & Pijpers, R (2007). 'The European Union as a Gated Community: The Two-faced Border and Immigration Regime of the EU' *Antipode*, *39*(2), 291-309; Van Houtum, H. (2010), 'Human blacklisting: the global apartheid of the EU's external border regime' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(6), 957-976.
5. See: Schuman, R. (1950) *Schuman Declaration*. http://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-204-en.pdf (accessed 29 October 2015).

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