

# Europe's Walls of Shame

Dave Stockton Tue, 15/03/2016 - 09:47

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On March 5, 1946, Britain's war leader, Winston Churchill, delivered a speech in which he said, "an iron curtain has descended across the Continent". On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall began to fall, heralding, it was claimed, an era of freedom of movement for ordinary citizens. How bitter an irony it is then that, in southern and central Europe, country after country is now erecting high steel fences topped with razor wire.

To add to Europe's walls, EU leaders have decided to make the Aegean into the continent's impassable moat, with Frontex, Turkish and Greek border patrol boats, backed by Nato warships, turning back refugees who try to cross. Last, but not least, Turkey is negotiating a deal with the EU to take back those deported from Greece.

Macedonia has now slammed shut the gates in the 10ft-high fence along its border with Greece. Built with EU funds, its aim is to halt completely the flow of refugees through the Balkans towards their preferred destinations, Germany or Sweden. Armed security teams from six Eastern European nations have pledged to help Macedonia patrol it. Further north, Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary have also built massive fences. Austria, too, has effectively closed its frontiers except for a small quota. The metaphorical "fortress Europe" has, quite literally, materialised.

Initially, there were protests from the German and a few other governments that these acts were unilateral, illegal and in violation of EU directives. But now, Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, stated on Twitter that these were "not a question of unilateral actions but a common EU28 decision". He added, "I thank Western Balkan countries for implementing part of EU's comprehensive strategy to deal with migration crisis".

Clearly, the cost of this "comprehensive strategy" includes those much boasted "European values" human rights and solidarity.

## The Racist Backlash

Of course, the governments claim that all these measure are really about combatting "people smugglers" but a new generation of populist parties, which are more frank in their racist reasoning, is growing at the expense of conservative and social democratic parties. Marine Le Pen has already done this in France, winning 6.8 million votes and 28 per cent of the poll in the first round of the regional elections last December. Her even more right wing niece, Marion Marechal-Le Pen, scored over 40 per cent in Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur.

Now, in Germany, where, last September, Chancellor Angela Merkel initially welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees, the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) has achieved an electoral breakthrough, gaining seats in the regional parliaments of Saxony-Anhalt, Rhineland Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg for the first time ever.

In Britain, which has also put up stronger wire fencing around the Calais terminal of the Channel Tunnel and created squalid camps in Dover and Folkestone for the few who get through, Ukip is seizing the opportunity of the EU referendum to spread its anti-immigration message. A vote to leave in May would undoubtedly see a move to even tougher anti-asylum laws.

Gone are the initial expressions of benevolence and sympathy, triggered by the pictures of the tiny body of Alan Kurdi on a Turkish beach in September. Europe's politicians, fearful of the rise of the populist right, claim they are preventing this by closing their frontiers all along the routes that refugees have been taking over the past year or more. In fact, by dancing to the racist tune, they are only fomenting this crisis.

On 9 March, Hungary declared a state of emergency for the whole of the country, deploying 1500 soldiers to the borders. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán claims the "overwhelming majority" of those fleeing are not refugees at all. The Deputy Prime Minister, Zsolt Semjén, warns against the danger that people from outside the European culture represent: "This can be botched only once (?) and we'll have to live together with them, not only us but also our children and grandchildren."

The Slovakian premier, Robert Fico, goes one better, cynically adding that his country will only accept Christian refugees because it would be "false solidarity to force Muslims to settle in a country without a single mosque".

In Germany, the populist and fascist right parties have taken advantage of the backlash following cases of sexual harassment by supposed migrants in Cologne on New Year's Eve. Sections of liberals and islamophobic feminists (like Alice Schwarzer) have claimed to be rethinking the welcome to migrants because of the cultural differences with refugees from "patriarchal societies".

Sweden, which at the beginning of the crisis accepted the highest number of refugees per capita, has seen its government change its tune. The Interior Minister, Anders, told the newspaper Dagens Industri that about 45 percent of asylum applications are currently being rejected, and that many of the 163,000 who sought shelter in Sweden last year would be sent back. "I think that it could be about 60,000 people, but it could also be up to 80,000," he added.

When European Union interior ministers met in September last year to discuss proposals to redistribute 120,000 asylum seekers between them, central and eastern European states, the so-called Visegrad countries, were particularly hostile to the plan. Poland effectively vetoed it. Then, in the October 25 elections, a new right-wing government swept to power, headed by Beata Szydlo of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), promising to take a harder line on migrants.

Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski even suggested that, instead of granting Syrians asylum, they should be given military training to go back to "liberate" their country; explaining that he was only trying to avoid a situation where "we send our soldiers to fight in Syria while hundreds of thousands of Syrians drink their coffee on (Berlin's) Unter den Linden".

#### Paying Erdogan's price

Now, the EU is engaged in difficult negotiations with Turkey, which has given shelter to 2.7 million Syrian and other refugees. The EU needs the assistance of Turkey, within its territorial waters, to halt the flow of refugees to the Greek islands and to arrest "people smugglers". It wants Greece to deport "irregular" entrants and replace them on a "one in, one out" basis with officially processed asylum seekers from Turkey's own refugee camps.

They justify this outrageous violation of the asylum principles spelled out in many international declarations

as necessary to stop 'people traffickers' and deter migrants. Instead, they are trying to impose the principle that people fleeing war and persecution must seek refuge in the first 'safe' country and be vetted there to 'prove' that they are genuine. EU countries may then decide to admit some of them.

This is an attempt to extend the reactionary Dublin III Regulation that it is the first EU member state that is responsible for examining a person's asylum application and that any one who leaves that state and travels to another country must be transferred back to the country of first arrival.

The negotiations between Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's prime minister, and EU leaders on 8 March failed to reach an agreement but the outline of a deal they hope to finalise at a further summit on 17-18 March did emerge. The main points are;

'to return all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into the Greek islands with the costs covered by the EU'

'to resettle, for every Syrian readmitted by Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian from Turkey to the EU Member States, within the framework of the existing commitments'

In return for these, Turkey is trying to wring the following concessions from Europe;

'to accelerate the implementation of the visa liberalisation roadmap with all EU Member States with a view to lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens at the latest by the end of June 2016'

'to speed up the disbursement of the initially allocated 3 billion euros to ensure funding of a first set of projects before the end of March and decide on additional funding for the Refugee Facility for Syrians'

'to prepare for the decision on the opening of new chapters in the EU accession negotiations as soon as possible, building on the October 2015 European Council conclusions'

'to work with Turkey in any joint endeavour to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria which would allow for the local population and refugees to live in areas which will be more safe'

It is plain to see that Recep Tayyip Erdogan wants the EU to effectively ignore his government's suppression of civil rights, his takeover of Zaman, the highest-circulating daily in the country, the harrying of the editors of the daily newspaper Cumhuriyet and the imprisonment of some 20 journalists. To this must be added the persecution of the Peoples' Democratic Party, HDP, and his ongoing war against the country's Kurdish population.

The willingness of the EU negotiators to pay Erdogan his price for acting as jailer of the Syrian refugees does not make this a done deal and on many of these issues any single EU state (for example Cyprus) could veto it. A whole series of EU states have repeatedly delayed and, in effect, vetoed Turkey's accession to the EU, for reactionary reasons. The phrase about living in areas inside Syria 'where they will be more safe' might allow Turkey to pursue the plan to occupy a strip of northern Syria and frustrate the ambitions of Syrian Kurds and sabotage the ceasefire.

Tear down the fences

Meanwhile, Greek authorities report that, as a result, 12,000 refugees are now stranded on the border at Idomeni in a squalid encampment, intended for only one eighth their number. Volunteers caring for them state that more than 40 per cent of the camp's inmates are children, living in rain soaked summer weight tents, with babies sleeping on cardboard. Respiratory diseases are now rife. In all, some 36,000 are now trapped in Greece in deteriorating conditions, with thousands a day still making the perilous crossing.

Amnesty International's Secretary General, Salil Shetty, is correct when he states, "That Europe, which is the richest bloc in the world, is not able to take care of the basic rights of some of the most persecuted people in the world, is shameful".

Amnesty also condemns the counter-terrorism laws being introduced across Europe, in particular what it calls the "rights-sapping" state of emergency implemented in France after the jihadist attacks which killed 130 in Paris in November.

The state of emergency allows the interior minister to place under house arrest any person considered "a threat to security and public order" and to order searches of homes at any hour without a warrant from a court. Furthermore, a proposal to amend the constitution to strip people convicted of terrorist offences of their French nationality has been adopted by the National Assembly.

It is now clear that the so-called European Refugee Crisis is in no sense the fault of the refugees, nor even of the "traffickers", since, if the EU states lived up to their obligations, they would allow the transit of refugees by safe and legal means of transport. Certainly, Syria's civil war has caused enormous human suffering, like the interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, etc.

The victims of these conflicts deserve secure accommodation, food, medical care, education for children and young people. Those who have fuelled reactionary regimes and have bombed and blockaded these countries should be forced to pay for rebuilding the shattered lives of their peoples. They should offer asylum to all who ask for it and aid the countries that have already taken them in. The Dublin Regulations that violate this basic right should be repealed. The richest continent on earth with a population of 500 million can easily afford to do this. The suggestion that refugees will simply be a drain on services and resources ignores their productive labour.

The refugee crisis is a crisis of the capitalist and imperialist character of the EU but "national sovereignty", enforced by steel fences and warships, is equally reactionary, indeed potentially even more so. Within the EU and the wider Europe, we, socialists and, indeed, all progressive people, need to fight against the tide of racism and national chauvinism which threatens to do untold damage. The bedrock of resistance to this must be the common actions of the working class and the youth of the continent fighting for opening the borders and for a socialist united states of Europe.

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