Fortress Europe? Porous Borders and EU Dependence on Neighbour Countries

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/01/02/fortress-europe-porous-borders-and-eu-dependence-on-neighbour-countries/

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For the last two decades scholars (Geddes 1999; Alscher 2005; Sterkx 2008), political activists and journalists have described and denounced the construction of Fortress Europe. This term has been used to refer to all the restrictive immigration and asylum policies that have been implemented to stem migration flows to Europe (Geddes, 1999). These policies range from less visible control measures such as the requests for visas, to clearer and more deterrent measures such as the implementation of air, land and maritime border control operations, as well as the construction of fences all around the external borders of the EU. In addition to these physical barriers at the EU borders, it has also been argued that the EU is implementing a strategy of border externalization, by transferring some migration control responsibilities to neighbouring countries (Sterkx, 2008). The common view is that through this transfer of migration control measures, the EU border is being delocalized, stretched and expanded to the North African countries (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2014).

However, the current refugee crisis is demonstrating a fact that is too often ignored: Fortress Europe and EU border externalization are nothing more than illusions when EU neighbours refuse or are unable to cooperate on migration control. In other words, the EU capacity to stem migration flows depends directly on the good will, capacity and interests of neighbour countries to cooperate on migration control.

Porous Fortress Europe

Events over the past decade and recently have demonstrated that 'Fortress Europe' and 'EU border externalization' are inaccurate and inappropriate terms with which to describe and analyse the EU borders.

First of all, even if it is undeniable that the EU has done, and is still implementing restrictive and fortification measures to stem migration and asylum flows reaching its borders, this fortress is anything but a fortress if we take into account that more than 955,456 migrants/refugees have reached European shores in 2015 (counting only the maritime arrivals of migrants and refugees in Italy, Greece and Spain). By the same token, it cannot be said that the EU borders have been expanded and border control effectively outsourced to its neighbour countries, since almost all these migrants get to Europe from Libya and Turkey.

Second, it is now becoming clear that EU fortification and even military operations cannot stop migration flows from reaching Europe when a neighbour country is unable to cooperate. In this sense, although the Eastern Mediterranean route (from Turkey to Greece) has been the centre of attention since this summer, we must not forget that more than 150,317 migrants/refugees also arrived in Italy from Libyan shores in 2015. If the present rate of arrivals continues, Italy will receive a similar total number of migrants/refugees this year to that of 2014. During the 2000's, the EU managed to reduce the number of arrivals of irregular migrants to Italy by convincing the Tunisian and Libyan dictators Ben Ali and Gaddafi to cooperate in migration control through established cooperative bilateral arrangements (Paoletti and Pastore 2010). For example, Italy funded the construction of detention camps in Libya, return flights of irregular migrants from Italy to Libya as well as the implementation of joint border patrolling in Libyan waters (Paoletti 2010). However, since Libya slid into chaos in 2011 after the toppling and killing of the dictator Gaddafi, migration control cooperation between the EU and Libya has not been possible since there has been a

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context of civil war, with several militias, tribes and armed groups fighting and claiming power. In this context, the massive arrivals in Italy from Libya are taking place in spite of the European Union's agreement in May 2015 to implement the EUNAVFOR MED military European mission to fight people traffickers in Libya. Moreover, at the beginning of October the European Council agreed to move to the second phase of this naval operation, enabling the operation "to board, search, seize and divert vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking on the high seas". This military operation might have played a persuasive role with Syrian refugees, since only 7,300 Syrians arrived in Italy via Libya this year (in contrast to 41,000 in 2014).

However many migrants/refugees from other countries have not been deterred at all by these control measures and since the beginning of the second phase of the operation the arrivals have continued at the same pace. This is because, no matter how many fortification measures the EU implements at its borders, Fortress Europe is porous, without the support of neighbour (and transit) countries, when faced with the arrival of thousands of refugees escaping conflict or persecution. In this respect, the situation in Libya does not seem to be coming any nearer to a solution. In recent months, the UN has increased its efforts to mediate and push the several factions to accept a peace agreement, to such an extent that in October 2015 the UN envoy Bernardino Leon rather hastily announced a national unity government for Libya. Soon after this announcement, however, both the internationally recognized government (based in the eastern town of Tobruk) and the Islamist-led government (based in Tripoli) rejected the UN proposal. The instability will thus continue in the following months, and this context will certainly prevent any EU migration control operation from preventing irregular migrants to leave Libyan territorial waters. It might even make the situation more complicated, since the Libyan Tobruk government has already threatened the EU that it will use any necessary means to prevent any type of violation of the sovereignty of its territorial waters.

The EU incapacity to control the current flows has been in certain cases attributed too easily to the extraordinary and overwhelming situation provoked by the war in Syria and the advance of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. However, these current flows of people arriving on Greek and Italian shores come not only from Syria but from other regions and conflicts. In 2015, more Eritreans, Nigerians, Somalis and Sudanese have arrived on the Italian coast than Syrians. Conversely, most of the refugees arriving on the Greek shores this year come from Syria, although a significant number also comes from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Iran. Furthermore, although the instability in recent years in the Middle East certainly accounts in part for the current refugee crisis, it still does not explain how it is that, after more than four years of war in Syria, the number of arrivals in Europe has increased so dramatically in recent months. Indeed, the number of arrivals in Greece increased from 'only' 65,282 migrants at the end of June 2015 to 399,326 people at the end of September 2015. To keep these figures in perspective, this means that the number of people who have reached Greece from Turkey in less than 3 months is more than four times the number of people that arrived in Italy in 2011, as a consequence of the revolts in several Maghreb countries during the Arab Spring (64,261). All these data demonstrate how porous the fortified EU borders can become, when a refugee/migration crisis takes place.

A Crisis that Could have been Averted?

This extraordinary increase in arrivals on Greek shores since August might have caught some politicians and experts unawares, although several events in recent years in the EU external borderlands left strong indications of what was going to happen.

A first indication that the situation was getting worse for refugees and EU neighbour countries was the build-up of evidence in the past year that insufficient economic and material support to Syria's neighbouring countries was not only exacerbating the poor living conditions of millions of refugees, but also leading indirectly to Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt approving restrictive policies towards Syrian refugees, since these countries were totally overwhelmed by the situation (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015). A simple calculation as follows could have shown us that the situation in the neighbour countries was becoming unbearable: in Lebanon as of last year, for example, one in five people is a Syrian refugee. This is the per capita equivalent of Spain hosting nearly 9.5 million refugees, France 13.2 million or Germany 16 million.

Furthermore, the fact that the number of registered refugees in Turkish camps went from 1,060,279 in November

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2014 to 1,938,999 in August 2015 should have rung all the alarm bells for the EU, since this was clearly a ticking time bomb. Sooner or later the situation was going to become unmanageable for Turkey.

Indeed, although the EU is always worried about ensuring stability in its neighbourhood, it seems to refuse to learn the obvious lesson: whenever there is instability in one of its neighbour countries the EU should react before the situation gets totally out of hand, otherwise it will experience a migration/refugee crisis such as that taking place today.

Instead, the EU has continued until September 2015 to be passive and reluctant to take action regarding the heavy burden that Turkey was taking on, with more than two million refugees. This position clearly has not helped to reduce the increasing instability and political tension that Turkey has begun to suffer since the beginning of the summer, as the result of several events taking place in a short period of time. These events include several terrorist attacks on its territory, the inability to create a new government following the elections in June, the constant confrontation with the Kurdish minority and the threat of the Islamic State from Syria getting ever closer to its borders. Along with this unstable situation in Turkey, Syrian refugees in Turkey began to lose all hope that the war in their country was going to end, especially after Turkey, the US, Russia and Iran started to become more involved in the Syrian conflict. In early August, to make matters worse, the Turkish Minister of Labour announced that Syrian refugees would not be granted any special right to work. Many Syrians in Turkey made the decision to migrate to Europe, rather than continue waiting for the end of the war in a country where their living conditions were clearly deteriorating.

Therefore, the instability and geopolitical situation in Turkey triggered the journeys of large numbers of Syrian refugees last August from the Turkish western coastal towns to the shores of the Greek islands (Zaragoza-Cristiani 2015). Meanwhile the EU was unable to press Turkey to improve control of its coasts, because Turkey, by engaging more intensively in the Syrian conflict (joining the US bombing of Islamic State targets), and by unilaterally assuming the cost of the arrival of more than two million refugees (Turkey has spent more than 7,6 billion dollars providing assistance to refugees), had not only gained international clout but also the leverage to refuse to increase its cooperation on migration control.

EU Powerlessness and Dependency on Neighbour Countries

Indeed during recent months, Turkey has refused several times to comply with EU demands to increase its resources and cooperation on migration control (Triandafyllidou, 2014, 19). At the same time, the continuous arrivals of thousands of refugees on Greek shores have rendered the EU and its member states powerless, and dependent on Turkey to reduce migration flows.

Although this EU dependency on third countries to control migration, as well as the resulting empowerment of a transit state because of this dependency, might be surprising for some, the fact is that this situation is not part of a new phenomenon. In recent decades, the exploitation and manipulation of population movement by developing countries, in order to claim benefits from stronger states, has been seen several times in Latin America and Northeast Asia, but also in the Mediterranean (Greenhill, 2010).

The most evident case in the Mediterranean was Libya, when Gadhafi used to threaten Europe with "turning [Europe] black" unless the EU paid Libya at least €5 billion per year to block the arrival of illegal immigrants from Africa. By means of such threats, Gaddafi won not only the suspension of the economic embargo and international legitimacy (Perrin, 2009), but also increased financial support amounting to a total of €60 million for the period 2011–2013 (Paoletti and Pastore 2009). The surprising thing is that most of these Libyan threats were delivered in the year of 2010, when only 4,406 migrants arrived on the Italian coasts (Fargues and Fandrich, 2012, 17). Gaddafi's threats seem today ridiculous, and yet they were incredibly effective, if we compare the number of arrivals recorded on Italian and Greek shores today with the fact that from 2002 to 2010 the number of arrivals in Italy reached its maximum in 2008, with just 36,951 migrants intercepted (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis, 2012, 43).

Sub-Saharan African countries can also be found on the list of countries that have used migration as a "blackmailing tool". Some African leaders have used migration in order to maintain their power. For example, the Senegalese

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President Abdoulaye Wade used the 20 million euros that Spain gave to him for Senegal's cooperation on migration control, for his electoral campaign (Gabrielli, 2011).

Morocco is no exception, regardless of the fact that Spanish-Moroccan migration control cooperation is today seen by EU politicians and scholars as a model case in the Mediterranean. It is true that the number of arrivals coming from Moroccan shores has progressively decreased since 2006, despite the instability in the region since 2011 (Ministerio del Interior, 2014). However, Morocco has not always readily complied with Spanish and EU demands, and on numerous occasions it has used migration control strategically, to get higher leverage (Sanchez-Montijano and Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2013; El Qadim 2015).

Before the beginning of the refugee crisis, Turkey progressively increased its cooperation with the EU on migration control. However it has refused in recent years to cooperate on certain measures such as readmission. Although Greece signed a readmission protocol with Turkey in 2002, this protocol has not actually been implemented, with Turkey claiming limited human and material resources to carry out the task (Triandafyllidou 2014).

However, to come back to the current refugee crisis: whether or not Turkey is instrumentalizing the refugee flows, there is one thing certain: the massive arrival of people in Europe has benefited Turkey's position and increased its leverage. Since the crisis became critical in August 2015, the continuous massive arrivals in Greece seem to be to Turkey's advantage, since the EU and its member states have been progressively increasing their offers, to persuade Turkey to cooperate. Indeed, while in September the European Commission agreed to deliver 1 billion euros to Turkey to help it in assisting Syrian refugees, by the end of November 2015 the offer increased considerably. On the 29th of November 2015 the 28 Heads of State or Government of the European Union, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and European Council President Donald Tusk met with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. In this summit, the EU agreed three important measure. The first was to provide three billion euros over two years, for Turkey to fulfill the needs of the Syrian refugees living in the country. The money will be paid out bit by bit as conditions are met, leaving the total payout unclear. Second, the EU and Turkey have agreed to open the negotiations regarding Turkey's process of accession to the European Union. On the 14th of December the discussions over chapter 17 (economic and monetary policies) will be reopened, while the discussions over further chapters are expected to come in the first three months of 2016. Third, Turkey agreed to implement, as from June 2016, the readmission agreement, and in exchange the EU will lift visa requirements for Turkish citizens in the Schengen zone by October 2016 (European Commission 2015).

Therefore, the refugee crisis has improved the Turkish international position. Three months ago many EU leaders preferred to distance themselves from Turkey due to the increasing authoritarianism of President Erdogan. Now, however, several meetings have taken place between EU and Turkish leaders in the last two months, thanks to the effective Turkish strategy of using the refugee crisis and the desperate need of the EU leaders to stem refuge flows, as bargaining chips.

Unstable EU Borderlands and EU Dependence on its Neighbours

It is undeniable that the EU has implemented in the last two decades restrictive policies and has managed to control migration flows by fortifying its external territorial borders, as well as by creating buffer zones around the EU (Del Sarto, 2010). Indeed, EU power has certainly led to a certain type of EU external governance towards its neighbours, pressuring them to undertake reforms in several sectors and dimensions including security and migration (Lavenex, S. and N. Wichmann 2009).

However, it is also true that the EU has an extraordinary vulnerability dependence (Keohane and Nye 2012) on its neighbour countries, as regards migration control, that is too often forgotten. Sometimes our Eurocentric point of view makes us forget that the EU neighbour countries are states with their own tools and strategies to reach their own goals. These strategies include the exploitation of EU vulnerability dependence, or in other words the exploitation of the EU's inability to stop migration flows without its neighbours' cooperation. When a migration/refugee crisis occurs, the urgent EU need to control migration increases not only its dependency on its neighbours, but also the leverage of these states.

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This dependency and the complex bargaining game between the EU and its neighbours, to build stable and coordinated border control cooperation, both highlight the inaccuracy of the term 'Fortress Europe'. Concepts such as 'externalization of borders' or 'Fortress Europe' may be catchy and appropriate for political and human rights campaigns, but they are totally inadequate for the task of analysing and understanding events such as the current refugee crisis.

In order to define and determine the shape, extent and im/permeability of the EU borders, several factors have to be taken into account: the actual capacity of the neighbour countries to cooperate on migration control; the interests and willingness of the neighbour countries to cooperate; the level of instability in the neighbour countries and EU borderlands; the magnitude and causes of the migration/refugee crisis; the bargaining power of the neighbour countries; and finally, the interdependence and the vulnerability dependence of the EU in relation to the neighbour country, as regards the migration/refugee crisis in question. In this sense, an EU neighbour country cannot cooperate on migration control if it does not have enough resources and infrastructure to do so. Moreover, if a third country has to deal with millions of refugees like it is currently the case with Turkey, it is obvious that it will need additional resources and support from the EU to manage migration flows than in a context of regional stability. Likewise, while the EU would be able to persuade a neighbour country with low bargaining leverage to cooperate on migration control, the EU leverage will be irrelevant when dealing with a neighbour country with a strong geostrategic regional role and a low economic dependence on the EU.

In sum, the EU borders cannot be understood without taking into account the relations with its neighbours and the stability in its borderlands. The image of Fortress Europe is altogether too simplistic and naïve to express the complex dynamics and challenges that are taking place, and that demand our most urgent attention and wide ranging analysis, if we are to find solutions.

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