Hungarian walls: a failure of the European migration policy?

Description

Hungary only reveals a more profound evil: the absence of a European migration policy by responding to the migration crisis with walls and arbitrary regulatory constraints. This unthinking contributes to the xenophobic misguidedness in the countries of the European Union (EU) and even makes possible the failure of the European integration project as a whole.



A physical barrier erected to contain a threat (illegal immigration, terrorist or criminal groups, smuggling, introduction of illicit products) the wall responds to a need for protection as old as the world. History teaches us that the erection of walls always ends up being ineffective. Neither Hadrian's wall, nor those of the Greek cities, nor even the Great Wall of China could contain « barbarian » invasions. No Maginot Line, Berlin Wall, or Iron Curtain has been able to prevent airlifts and history from happening. And when they are not destroyed, walls end up as tourist attractions that always arouse visitors' same astonishment and skepticism. Unfortunately, no matter how much the history of the walls talks, no one listens.

"Men build too many walls and not enough bridges."

This bitter quote from Isaac Newton is still very relevant today. While U.S. President Donald Trump has been struggling to get Mexico to fund the wall he is about to build on the part of the border between the two countries, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban has asked the European Union, also unsuccessfully, to repay half of the €880 million Hungary has paid since 2015 for the construction of a border wall with its southern neighbors. « It is no exaggeration to say that Hungarian taxpayers have financed the security of European citizens, » he argues in a letter sent to the European Commission in September 2017(1).

In the face of immigration, V. Orban has not only erected walls. Since the first Paris attacks (January 2015), he has multiplied controversial initiatives: the invention of so-called « no-go zones » in several European countries, stigmatization of « Muslims in their majority » presented as a threat to the Christian identity of Europe, referendum (in October 2016) against the European plan for the distribution of migrants (and refusal since then to accept 1,300), authorization given to Hungarian military in areas in a « state of crisis due to massive immigration » (areas bordering Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria) to carry out identity checks and take migrants into custody, or even to fire non-lethal weapons at offenders, authorization given to Hungarian police officers to search any private home where migrants might be housed(2). Since April 2016, V. Orban has been trying, without much success, to reconstitute the Visegrád group (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic) to carry his « Schengen 2.0 » project, which aims to build a « fortress Europe » with walls, watchtowers, barbed wire and thermal cameras(3).

Hungarian wandering, European wandering

This Hungarian misguidance is a symptom of the wandering of a European migration policy struggling to meet its challenges. Faced with unprecedented waves of migrants, from 2014 onwards, the EU quickly found itself at a loss, its regulatory framework proving inadequate to the situation: the Schengen Agreement for the free movement of persons (signed in 1985, applied in 1995), the Convention (1990) and the Dublin Regulation (2003) for the processing of asylum applications, the Maastricht Treaty governing the rules for granting European citizenship (1992)(4).

Aware of its powerlessness in the face of the magnitude of the migratory movement, the EU has recently been trying to regain control of its external borders. In doing so, it is raising new barriers to entry into its territory. Thus, after the 2015

shipwreck of 800 migrants off the coast of Sicily, the European Council decided to triple the resources of the Triton surveillance and rescue operation (in action since November 2014) to seize and destroy boats carrying migrants (Operation Sophia since June 2015), to intervene militarily in Libya against smuggling networks, to allocate aid to border controls between Libya and Niger as well as to the Libyan coast guard, and to allocate 5,000 Syrian refugees on European territory. In 2016, the EU signed an agreement with Turkey committing the latter to reduce the flow of migrants to Greece and agree to receive migrants sent back by that country to allocate European funding. In 2017, Brussels offered Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria to join, like Libya, a network for exchanging information on movements at sea (the Seahorse Mediterranean Network)(5).

This reorientation of European migration policy has resulted in a significant slowdown, starting in 2016, in the number of arrivals. Hungary, for example, registered 29,432 asylum seekers in 2016 (mainly from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, and Iraq), compared to 177,135 in 2015. The Hungarian administration responded with a 91.54% rejection rate(6).

At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of detention cases of migrants in the EU's neighboring countries (North Africa, the Middle East), which have become natural dead ends for hundreds of thousands of migrants who remain stuck there in undignified conditions. In other words, while they temporarily limit the influx of arrivals, the new European measures do not provide any long-term response to the migratory crisis.

Rise of xenophobic ideas and withdrawal in Eastern Europe?

The danger for the EU is not the migration crisis but that of allowing political space for the speeches made by someone like the Hungarian Prime Minister. Not because they should be banned, but because the absence of a clear European position on the migration issue is the best ferment for developing xenophobic and withdrawalist ideas. Yet immigration is an opportunity for an aging Europe, which is expected to experience a population deficit of around 20 million people in the next quarter-century. Yet the EU could face a potential irregular influx of 16 million migrants over the next 25 years. Over this period, the population of sub-Saharan Africa will increase from 1 to 2 billion, that of North African countries from 210 to 350 million, and that of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan from 93 to 147 million(7). No wall will be able to contain such pressure, and, as Victor Hugo wrote, "Everything limits man, but nothing stops him; he responds to the limit by stepping over it"(8). As long as the EU cannot think of a concerted reception policy and propose a more ambitious development aid, it will have to face the temptations of withdrawal that are already manifesting within the EU. The Hungarian case is a paroxysmal example.

"We have a message for the refugees: don't come!", had launched V. Orban at a press conference in Brussels on September 3, 2015(9). Since then, the Hungarian government has redoubled its efforts to challenge the EU's asylum system. But the Hungarian walls have not removed those waiting in Serbia, in appalling conditions, to be admitted to transit zones. In these « pre-transit » spaces, families are crammed indefinitely into tents provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Serbian authorities. In September 2017, the state of emergency related to mass migration was extended by Budapest for six months. The form authorizes deportations of failed asylum seekers and sets admission procedures. These are highly arbitrary and based on a non-transparent waiting list managed by « community leaders » installed in « pre-transit » spaces. In 2017, Hungary halved the number of people allowed access to the transit zones on the Hungarian side of the border (50 people per week, compared to 100 in 2016). Those permitted to apply for asylum are required to stay in the transit zones for the duration of the procedure (housed in five-bed containers) without any support or legal assistance. Those who are rejected are immediately deported. And those who would attempt to cross the border at a location other than the transit zones are ruthlessly turned away. Thus, from July 2016 to August 2017, 18,334 people were stopped as they attempted to cross the border. These are in addition to the 14,438 irregular migrants deported from Hungary in the same period(10). At the same time, the asylum seeker reception centers in Debrecen and Bicske were closed in 2015 and 2016, respectively, to be replaced by a container camp in Kiskunhakas (in May 2016) and a temporary tent camp in Körmen (from May 2016 to May 2017). The monthly allowance for asylum seekers and the school enrollment benefit were discontinued on April 1, 2016.

Victor Orban dreams of seeing his Central European neighbors adopt this particular way of dealing with immigration. Without officially supporting the Hungarian Prime Minister's "Schengen 2.0" project, Bratislava, Prague, and Warsaw

have nonetheless expressed strong reservations about the European program for the distribution of asylum seekers (Poland has not taken in any refugees, Slovakia is not taking in anymore, and the Czech Republic has withdrawn along the way). This has now earned Prague and Warsaw (as well as Budapest) an infringement procedure, opened on June 13, 2017, by the European Commission with the European Parliament and which could lead, if no solution is found, to the European Court of Justice and financial sanctions. This aggressive approach implemented by both sides reflects many incapacities. It undermines one of the founding principles of European construction, that of solidarity between member states. It presents a risk that the problematic migration crisis management will put the future of European integration at stake.

Notes:

(1) *Francetvinfo*, September 2, 2017.
(2) Assen Slim & Robert Rahner, « Accueil des réfugiés : la Hongrie face à elle-même », *Regard sur l'Est*, September 26, 2015.
(3) Assen Slim, « Hongrie : un référendum ou ne démonstration de force du pouvoir ? », *Regard sur l'Est*, September 13, 2016.
(4) *European Parliament, September 19, 2017.*
(5) *European Commission*, January 25, 2017.
(6) *Asylum Information Database*, September 25, 2017.
(7) *Le Temps*, June 6, 2017.
(8) Victor Hugo, *Les travailleurs de la mer*, 1866.
(9) *Youtube*, September 3, 2015.
(10) *Hungarian Helsinki Committee*, September 25, 2017.

Thumbnail: Keleti station in Budapest, September 2015 (photo: © Assen Slim)

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