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A ‘barbed-wire curtain’ around Europe

Europe’s growing border walls are an admission of failure. Not a solution

In the wake of Finland's announcement last fall that it will build a barrier along its border with Russia, the discussions surrounding the European Council meeting of 9 February 2023 confirmed that the tide had turned. Demands for stronger border measures have multiplied and some states have made it clear that they are willing to finance border barriers in other member states on the edge of the European Union. They are thus projecting their own anxieties beyond their territories: in the midst of a moral panic, Europe now seems to be building what the geographer Klaus Dodds calls a ‘barbed-wire curtain’: a protective bulwark, in the spirit of what Samuel Huntington imagined when he wrote *The clash of civilizations*. However, Brussels doesn’t seem quite ready to build a continuous external and concrete border wall itself. Yet.

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Europe has a historical yet complicated relationship with walls. At the outset of the millennium, the continent, which had long rejected the idea of border walls as relics of a bygone era, in time would change its tune. As the European Union expanded, it inherited the fenced-off borders in the heart of Cyprus and on the edge of Lithuania. But these were seen as mere remnants of conflicts from the past. For in the 1990s, the EU became the champion of a world without borders, a world of free movement and flow. Yet, this was a mirage: the Schengen area abolished internal border controls while the physical barriers on its periphery were gradually hardening — such as Spain, which was walling up its border with Morocco in its two enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, situated on the African continent. However, towards the end of the Cold War, there were still only 200 km of fenced borders in existence: vestiges of an ancient period, reminders of

geopolitical obsolescence.

Breaking ‘the wall’ taboo

The great change towards erecting walls instead of tearing them down in Europe happened in two phases, starting in 2015, when the Syrian crisis led the EU to believe that there was also a ‘migratory crisis’ in Europe. Then, in the following years, the change in the mindset continued both because of the Russian strategic threat in the wake of the invasion of Crimea and the instrumentalisation of refugee flows by Europe’s cumbersome neighbours. Thus, in 2023, all over Europe, stretching from Finland to Greece, from Ukraine to Calais in France, there are 17 walled-in dyads. While 1.7 per cent of Europe’s land borders were barricaded at the end of the 20th century, 15.5 per cent are fenced today – 2008 kilometres of walls now scar the continent.

The fact that Europe is fully embracing the walled-in world and its own border limits is effectively breaking a taboo – that of the wall – as explicitly expressed by some heads of government on the eve of the European summit in February 2023. The Trumpian formulae, both gruesome and horrifying, is no longer an exception. The wall has become an acceptable solution no longer limited to the vocabulary of populism and the Far Right, but rather entering fully mainstream discourse; legitimising exclusion as a tool of identity-based resistance in a world shaken by the winds of globalisation.

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Yet, walls, which now represent a lucrative and globalised market with astronomical direct and indirect costs, do not fulfil the objectives for which they are being built. While political rhetoric suggests they are intended to seal and render the border impervious, it fails to recognise that flows shift – both spatially and temporally – when impeded. Smuggling (whether of drugs, weapons, or people), irregular crossings and insurgency reorganise and become more opaque and thus more difficult to monitor. Flows disappear briefly to reappear elsewhere or in other forms. In the meantime, passage (both legal and illegal) becomes more costly and a magnet for organised crime. Thus, although border walls sketch a fantasised imperviousness, they are not meant to serve as watertight membranes but rather as mere sieves.

Research shows that not only do walls burden bilateral trade and borderlands' health, and affect a nation's image, but they are also limited in effectiveness, as they do not block unwanted flows nor do they significantly increase security. Indeed, the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website has long claimed that the wall serves only as a ' speedbump'. This perspective is shared by Finland's Border Guard which states that the prototype barrier being tested will 'slow down and guide the movements of any crowds that form', adding that 'even if people skirt the fence, it still fulfils its task by slowing down illegal entry and helping the authorities to manage the situation.' However, this clear-mindedness doesn't necessarily spill over into the public arena because border walls, as Trump proved in 2016, are an undeniably effective electoral weapon. An aspect that does not seem to have escaped the Austrian chancellor when he recently called for the erection of a wall along Europe borders – with the upcoming legislative elections in Austria less than a year away.

The wall as a silver bullet?

Just as a wall obscures the other side of the border, it also hides disagreements and opportunities for cooperation between border actors and border security policies. By de-structuring border areas economically, politically and ecologically, border walls amplify vulnerabilities and differences, which in turn accentuate violence. In their subsequent quest for security, states engage in damaging behaviours (such as suddenly shifting funding priorities, militarising border areas and mismanaging labour migration at the expense of local economies and ecosystems) – motivated by the prevailing rhetoric of a visible, theatrical silver bullet: the wall as a panacea.

As a matter of fact, border walls accentuate the global hierarchisation of mobility: a wall isn't an impenetrable rampart for everyone but a filter that dissociates flows, selecting which is the wheat and which is the chaff. For some, it will impose cruel choices and added difficulties. For others, it will be barely a speck in the landscape. For a few, it will even be an opportunity to enrich themselves. This unbalancing contributes to the political longevity of the wall-building process while also accomplishing a self-fulfilling prophecy: it becomes the announced remedy to the instability it breeds. Border walling creates a 'tragedy by design'. Hence, any transgression of the wall – Professor Scott Nicol calls these barriers 'ladder magnets' – becomes a demonstration of its very necessity, despite the fact that the wall itself is the reason some of these activities are now illegal.

By succumbing to the sirens of border fortification, European states are

contributing to the normalisation and dissemination of the walling phenomenon. Walls are – above all – an admission of failure (of cooperation – both international and European) and a renouncement of the founding values of the European Union. The resulting backlash will see an increased rift, accentuated flows, growing incomprehension and fears that are ever more primal, for which only greater cooperation can offer a remedy. For walls do not solve the problems they address. They merely act as a bandage on a broken limb, a smokescreen before increasingly glaring problems that remain unsolved.



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