

DEFLECT & DISTRACT EUROPE'S SCAPEGOATING OF MIGRANTS IS THE CRISIS

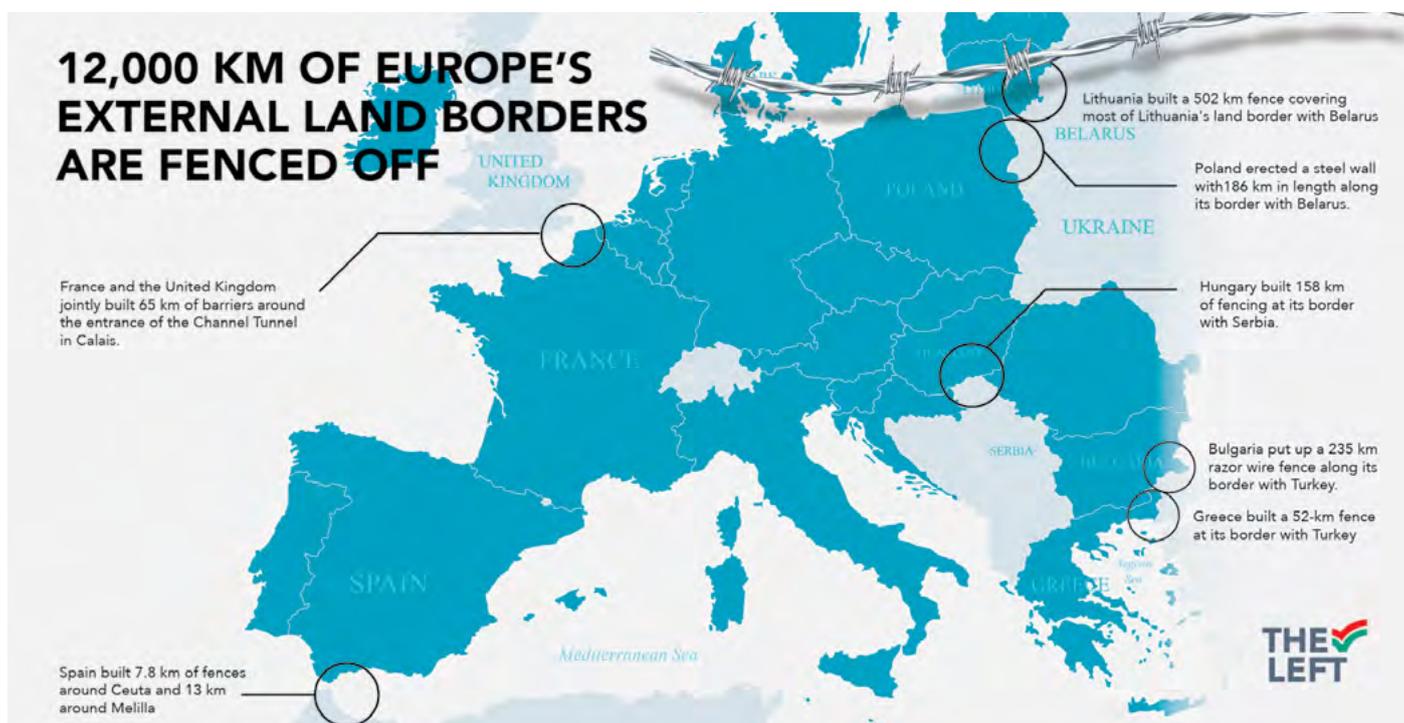
An explainer

Background

As Europe struggles to find its way out of a post-pandemic slump, grappling with a cost of living crisis and soaring energy bills, the EU Commission and Council are using the oldest political trick in the book and deflecting attention to people on the move.

In the run up to the EU Council of February 2023, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [pressed the panic button](#), alleging that asylum seekers were swarming European countries. Nonetheless, [analysts](#) urge caution since, while there might have been around 900,000 asylum requests across the EU, this represents a minuscule number in relation to an EU population of over 450 million people. Moreover, if Europe was able to manage the displacement of 8 million people from Ukraine, why should a figure short of a million asylum requests be a cause for alarm? Not only are these manageable numbers, but most importantly, they are the expression of a fundamental right enshrined in EU laws and treaties (Article 78 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and Article 18 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights).

Masked by the mantra of effectiveness and efficiency, the European Council and Commission continue to normalise and validate the xenophobic narrative of the far right, posing a serious threat to fundamental human rights such as the right to asylum.



What our MEPs say



Cornelia Ernst
(Die Linke, Germany)

"Inhumane proposals like externalising asylum procedures to third countries and building Trump-like walls in the EU are casually thrown around under the cloak of 'migration management'. What we need is a humane asylum policy based on solidarity and responsibility-sharing between member states, as well as safe and legal pathways to the EU. Those seeking protection must be the focus of EU asylum and migration policy."

The big clampdown: externalisation, fences and surveillance

The externalisation of European borders through deals with third countries, be they of origin or transit, has produced [egregious human rights violations](#), exposing women, men and children to inhumane treatments, torture and threatening their lives. Furthermore, it is now widely accepted among [researchers](#) and [organisations](#) that these measures do not stem migration flows, rather they expose people on the move to more risks and dangers. Yet the Council and Commission continue to put it forward as the silver bullet to curb migration to Europe.

In addition to this, we are now witnessing a renewed enthusiasm for walls, fences and aerial surveillance to strengthen EU borders. Wildly disregarding the most horrific events in the history of mankind, EPP President, Manfred Weber, declared that "[walls and fences should not be a taboo](#)".

Unfortunately, however, these are already a sad reality. Currently, more than [12,000 km of Europe's external land borders are fenced off](#). Such infrastructure enables member states to breach their obligations of international protection and fundamental rights. According to a 2020 analysis from the [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights \(FRA\)](#), serious fundamental rights concerns arise 'if there are no places along the border that asylum seekers can reasonably reach to request international protection without undue delay – i.e. there are no gates in the fence which are at reasonable distance from each other or if border-crossing points are not accessible as, for example, in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla following the COVID-19 pandemic'.

While the EU Commission and Council continue to drive forward an aggressive agenda of externalisation of EU borders, strengthening border controls and surveillance, member states such as Italy are hampering vital search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. The [Commissioner of Human Rights of the Council of Europe](#) has asked the far right government of Giorgia Meloni to withdraw the decree law limiting search and rescue, because it deprives people in distress of life-saving assistance. Similarly, following a [request from The Left](#), the Civil Liberties Committee in the European Parliament has sent a letter to the EU Commission calling on Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, to act in defence of fundamental rights.

The view from The Left

The horrors lived by people on the move at Europe's borders have been extensively documented both by [civil society organisations](#) and the [media](#). There are comprehensive reports of people being beaten, denied their right to request asylum and left drowning at the bottom of the Mediterranean. Such violations continue with complete impunity. By not acting, the European Commission is complicit in these crimes.

Rather than increasing external action, [striking deals with third countries](#) with dubious human rights records, or spending millions of euros on detaining people to then violently return them to countries like Iran, the European Union and its member states should be doubling their efforts to stop the exploitation of undocumented workers by providing them with a legal status.

The right to international protection should be effectively guaranteed across EU member states. Instead of lowering standards, the European Commission must ensure that existing asylum EU acquis is upheld, and should focus on its proper implementation.