



Book Review¹

Panic at the Borders. Probing Europe as it slams the door.

Eric L'Helgoualc'h

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Eric L'Helgoualc'h's book is both an investigation on the ground into the situation on the EU's external borders, and an analysis of the fear of "foreign invasion" in the EU.

The fear in question is used principally by politicians from populist parties or by the British military establishment who frequently compare the recent wave of immigration to a "tsunami" or to the invasion of the Huns, the Goths and even the Vandals. Eric L'Helgoualc'h points out that this idea is nothing new, that Raspail² used it back in 1973 when he foretold the end of the "white man's world" after it has succumbed to a massive invasion of people from underdeveloped countries. While fear of the return of war was the adhesive that initially bonded Europe's construction, can the fear of an invasion impart a fresh boost to the EU today?

The idea behind this book rests on a paradox which struck the author: it was on the beaches of Spain that he discovered Europe while an Erasmus student, and on the very same beaches in the south of Spain he witnessed people being greeted with truncheons because they were foreigners. Eric L'Helgoualc'h is both disappointed and astonished by the direction the EU has taken over the issue of immigration. The author even goes as far as to posit a form of schizophrenia between the European ideal and an increasingly repressive immigration policy. He is equally surprised by the widespread apathy towards the issue, as evinced by the absence of any response from a majority of those organisations that support the European project (he mentions, for instance, the *Mouvement Européen France* or the *Fondation Schuman*), which are probably too busy mulling over the financial crisis that is threatening the euro zone.

This synopsis aims to explore the author's analyses, while dwelling at the same time on the main issues that he has managed to identify.

¹ The views expressed in this work are not necessarily those of Notre Europe.

² Jean Raspail, *Le camp des Saints*, Robert Laffont, 1973.

1 - The Southern Countries' Problems

Malta, Greece and Italy have experienced a veritable explosion in illegal immigration over the past few years. *Between 2006 and 2008 there was a 64% rise in the number of migrants entering Italy, a 100% rise in Cyprus and a 400% rise in Greece.* The author visited all three countries to take a closer look at the situation there.

- *Malta*: there is a huge gap in this country between the generous shelter offered to refugees and the local people's inhospitable attitude. There are two explanations for this, namely the country's tiny surface area and its nature as an island. Certain parliamentarians' exasperations have prompted some of them to call on Malta to denounce some of its international commitments, such as the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

- *Greece*: the most important issue with which Greece is having to cope is asylum. Greece's asylum system is not sufficiently viable and it fails to meet European criteria. There is no specific government department for handling applications for asylum in the country, so the police is tasked with taking on the job. The Greek Government provides asylum-seekers with no legal assistance, and asylum-seekers often suffer from maltreatment in retention camps... Georgios Papandreou, who took office in 2009, has vowed to change Greece's asylum procedures in order to ensure that they become compatible with European law. The author also explores a hypothesis mooted by Amnesty International suggesting that Greece deliberately keeps its retention centres in a pitiful state of repair so as to discourage potential refugees from entering the country.

- *Italy*: this country has chosen to cooperate with Al-Qadhafi to contain migrant flows, but while such a strategy may be successful for a while, it cannot last, and it is easy to find fault with it when one considers the Libyan leader's degree of concern for human rights. Italy has thus farmed out its "migrant problem" to the Libyan regime without the EU reacting appropriately. This, because European law harks back to the Geneva Convention and prohibits the "refoulement" of asylum-seekers towards countries where they might be in danger of persecution. Despite the warning that Commissioner Jacques Barrot addressed to the Italian Government reminding it of its obligations, Italy has continued to conduct joint operations with Colonel Al-Qadhafi's regime, thus undermining the Commission's authority. The author argues that José Manuel Barroso was preparing to run for a second mandate at the time and that he made no attempt either to support his interior affairs commissioner or to place any major hurdles in Silvio Berlusconi's way.

2 - An Inefficient and Problematic Asylum System

The European regulation known as "Dublin II" has put in place a fully-fledged internal expulsion system: illegal migrants are sent back to the country through which they first entered the Schengen area. These border states themselves attempt to send the migrants back to the countries through which they transited before entering their territory: Turkey, Libya, Morocco... The alternative would be to establish a common asylum procedure with a mechanism based on resettlement by quotas, in which each member state in the Schengen area would take in an appropriate number of refugees in proportion to its capacity for intake. But the situation appears to be extremely difficult to improve because the "asylum-friendly Europe" deliberated at the Tampere summit in 1999 is constantly being postponed by the member states situated in the heart of Europe, which are not unhappy to see the peripheral member states play a buffer role.

The author highlights the fact that, in many member states, there is only a very slight, almost fuzzy difference between retention and detention centres, which allows retention centres effectively to turn into detention centres, because while there may be no punishment, isolation cells or barbed wire, bars and wire fencing are omnipresent and the inmates are deprived of their freedom.

3 - Shedding Light on Frontex

Established in the wake of enlargement in 2004, the European external border agency, Frontex, currently employs some 200 people in its Warsaw headquarters. In 2001, the Commission hinted that it was in favour of the creation of a European border-guard corps (which would strengthen people's sense of belonging and of common security), while the northern member states evinced a certain reluctance to hand over their sovereignty in this area. At the end of the day, this agency's powers are still fairly enigmatic. The author travelled to Warsaw and to the EU's southern borders in an attempt to unravel the enigma.

Eric L'Helgoualc'h notes that Frontex suffers from a **bad press**. Even the agency's name has been questioned: Frontex is said to be reminiscent of a brand of kitchen sponge, and some people have even pointed out that the resemblance transcends the merely phonetic, because Frontex has a soft side for those citizens who are free to travel around Europe and a rough side to display to the outside world. Others have suggested that Frontex is no more than a *"squad of professionals who get called in to put out fires on the border, a kind of all-risks agency"*. Frontex is also accused of being made up of "bad guys", or else it is likened to a militia set up to wage war on migrants, to *"pirates"* according to German political group Die Linke, or even to *"a semi-clandestine organisation"* in the view of a Swiss journalist... one can rapidly reach the point of no-return. To counter this situation, Frontex endeavours to display maximum transparency in the hope that it can shake off this stubbornly clinging reputation.

In addition to its image problem, Frontex also suffers from a **material deficit**. Frontex has no equipment of its own, it has to dip into a pool of equipment that member states make available to it, known as the CRATE (Centralised Record of Available Technical Equipment). And while the United Kingdom, France, Austria, Greece and The Netherlands vowed to take part in the agency's first sizeable mission, "Operation Hera" off the Canary Islands, they ended up not participating in it after all. Only about twenty of the 115 boats promised eventually materialised, and the same is true of the helicopters pledged for the mission. And lastly, as Illkka Laitinen, the agency's executive director, admits: *"Frontex's budget amounts to 88 million euro, which is about half the sum that the EU devotes to supporting the cultivation of rice."*

What does Frontex really do? It organises joint operations and it dispatches Rabits (Rapid Border Intervention Teams). Its officers are very rarely present on the ground. Frontex's head office bears no resemblance to a military headquarters; rather, it is a centre that devotes its energies to analysing factual data connected with the EU's external borders. Frontex is above all an **intelligence agency** whose information (on migrant journeys and experiences, human trafficker networks and migrant route maps) are its source of legitimacy. *"The agency builds its function through a routine made up of reports and of Excel tables, a methodical, regular and low-profile job that is light years distant from the image that it projects"*. Frontex completes its mission principally by providing advice and technical consultancy to Europe's governments (regarding the purchase of equipment, for instance). It also does a major job training border guards: *"Our ambition is to build a common way of looking at borders"*, says agency spokesman Michal Parzyszek.

The European external border agency's management committee includes a representative from each member state and two representatives of the Commission but there is no one from the European Parliament, and the author argues that several MEPs are unhappy with this state of affairs. There is no room for debating solutions to the phenomenon of migration as a whole, nor does the agency concern itself in any way with the humanitarian aspect of border crossing. Its approach is concerned primarily with security.

In February 2010 the Commission proposed changing the agency's regulatory framework. A few years from now we may well be seeing a European border-guard corps more akin to the model that the Commission originally envisaged. Frontex will soon be setting up a permanent bureau in the port of Athens to direct operations conducted in the eastern Mediterranean.

The agency's assistant manager has also complained about the absence of directives regarding the structuring of Frontex's missions or the human rights aspects of operations. Frontex has to move in that direction too, according to the home affairs commissioner. And the author, for his part, is considering setting up a baby sister organisation to Frontex called "Protex", whose mission would be to monitor respect for human rights in the exercise of the agency's functions.

Conclusions

Although Eric L'Helgoualc'h denies that he has written a political pamphlet, he nevertheless argues quite strongly that there is a gap between the EU's claim to defend human rights, and its migration policy. This end result of this policy is that migrants are being locked up in countries where they have to endure deplorable retention conditions. In seeking constantly to stem the tide of immigrants, the EU is failing to keep faith with its pledge to promote the ongoing dissemination of human rights. This observation only bears out the paradox of Europe's borders: Europe has been built on the basis of an ideal exalting freedom of circulation, the abolition of borders and openness towards one's fellow man, yet it has proven capable over the past decade of moving in a direction which, the author argues, is totally at odds with its values. In future, given that it resorts increasingly to the use of force and of coercion, the EU might even start to become a less friendly project in the eyes of those European citizens who have long seen it as a vehicle for openness and for humanism.

Circular immigration (foreigners coming to work in the EU but with an obligation to return to their native countries after a few years) might be a prospect further down the road. This kind of immigration would allow the EU to respond to the demographic challenge that the Old World is going to be facing over the next few decades, yet it is an option which continues to partake of a neo-colonialist and utilitarian dynamic.



Eric L'Helgoualc'h is currently a consultant in communication. A graduate of the *Institut d'études politiques* in Rennes and in European law, he has worked in the past for *Touteurope.fr* and written on a regular basis for *Rue89.fr*, *Libération.fr* and *Nonfiction.fr*.

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