

“Fortress Europe”: An interview with Miguel Urbán

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The following article is an interview conducted by DEA (Workers’ Left) in Greece with Miguel Urbán — a comrade from [Anticapitalistas](#) in Spain who is also elected to the European Parliament — about the current situation in “Fortress Europe.”

Miguel, international events show that the EU is even more armored against new waves of refugees. From Ceuta to Evros, a new and tougher Fortress Europe is being built. A comment from you?

The beginning of European migration policies coordination, of the so-called Fortress Europe, is paradoxically the set-up of European internal borders.

That is, Schengen. As a condition to open its internal borders, Europe shielded the external ones. In this sense, the first step towards a common management policy for external borders was taken on June 14, 1985, when five out of ten Member states of the European Economic Community signed the Schengen Agreement [a treaty which led to the creation of Europe’s *Schengen Area*, in which internal border checks have largely been abolished].

From then on, migration policies and the presence of “third countries” became a matter of security. For this reason, police and judicial cooperation measures were developed in the EU over two fundamental principles: the shielding of external borders and the expulsion of “irregular” migrants. Thus, we could say that migration turned into a “problem” and a “threat” since Schengen, and this has conditioned European migration policies until today.

However, it is from the misnamed “refugee crisis” in 2015 that we witnessed an acceleration of xenophobic policies which are intrinsically linked to the European project crisis itself. We cannot unlink the austerity Europe that blackmails countries like Greece to impose the memoranda [severe austerity measures], from the Europe that shields its borders by turning the Greek islands into concentration camps like Moria [Europe’s largest refugee camp, which burned down in September 2020, leaving more than 12,000 homeless].

In fact, the defeat of Syriza [Coalition of the Radical Left] in the spring of 2015 was the prelude to the acceleration of xenophobic policies of Fortress Europe. Once the specter of an anti-austerity Europe was defeated, the EU could freely deploy a migration policy mirroring the extreme right, as Commissioner Margaritis Schinas shows.

What is the current situation on the Spanish border with refugees and what are the reactions of the anti-racist movement?

Currently, the “hot” routes to enter the Spanish State are the Atlantic to the Canary Islands, the Strait of Gibraltar to the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla and the southern coast of the peninsula. Most of the people arriving through these routes are Maghrebi and Sub-Saharan people.

In these routes Morocco plays a fundamental role, similar to that of Turkey on the border with Greece or Bulgaria. Morocco is not only a country from which many of its nationals depart, both for economic and political reasons, but it is also a very important transit country. This gives the country a key role in Fortress Europe's border outsourcing policy which they use to get a lot of money as "European border police". But they also get political favors from Europe insofar as Europe looks the other way to human rights violations committed on Moroccan territory and the Western Sahara. A few months ago, Morocco used migrants to blackmail Spain and the EU, allowing some 10,000 people to cross the border to Ceuta in one day. Many of those were unaccompanied minors. The Spanish government responded to that humanitarian emergency by deploying the army, as if it were an invasion. They bought the extreme right discourse and enforced numerous push backs, including push backs to children, instead of strengthening public and emergency care services to address the arrival of these people from a human rights perspective and not from a security and repressive framework.

The anti-racist movement in the Spanish state focuses on various issues. They question the repressive policies that violate human rights by the PSOE [Spanish Socialist Workers' Party] and UP [Unidos Podemos] coalition government. They denounce push backs and the situation in the Canary Islands, that have become "plug" islands insofar as migrants are not allowed to get to the peninsula. The anti-racist movement has also brought the illegal returns of unaccompanied minors to Morocco before the court. They set up support and assistance networks for people who have come to Ceuta, Melilla, and the Canary Islands. They even organized a public campaign for the regularization of the undocumented in the Spanish state, which for the moment has been stopped by the government.

In Greece, a practice that is being increasingly applied in the Aegean is that of illegal repatriation. There are numerous complaints about push backs and returns of refugees. How do you think this phenomenon should be addressed?

Push backs are a violation of international law and community law, so we have denounced it at the European Parliament and, together with social, we have presented the evidence of more than 10,000 push backs on the Balkan route, involving both Frontex and local authorities, including the Greek ones. These complaints were so serious that the European Parliament opened an inquiry commission to Frontex, that was at the end closed due to political pressure from the Parliament's conservative majority. It is essential to continue denouncing these illegal practices, to report them and document them, so the public knows about them. And also, to denounce both Frontex and the Member states before the human rights courts.

In many cases, those who show solidarity with refugees, either through their participation in the movement or through activism, are attacked by the media and get subjected to judicial persecution. How should we respond to the criminalization of solidarity?

The criminalization of solidarity is on the rise. This is an ongoing issue across European borders. Activists and NGOs are defamed and even prosecuted. From the European Parliament we have denounced it repeatedly to show support and to make them visible. But the best defense against the criminalization is public support and social mobilization, to get a shield against intimidation and criminalization of anti-racist activism.

You have visited Greece many times and have seen firsthand the situation in the islands. What do you think of the situation in the camps, and what do you think is the solution to the problem of European management?

The truth is that the EU's policy towards the Greek islands has been, with the Greek government

complacency, to turn them into actual open-air prisons and buffer islands of Fortress Europe. But the terrible situation in the Greek islands should not be approached as a tragic European exception, but as another piece in the puzzle of permanent exceptionality that the European Union has been putting in place for years. This way, the EU turned the so-called refugee crisis, that is in reality a human rights crisis, into a political overflow with the intention of justifying exceptional measures, such as the suspension of basic rights and the violation of international treaties signed by European countries. It seems that anything is possible. The masks in Brussels fell a long time ago and they no longer hide that one and only priority is to "protect" European borders. At least, no one will be able to take free of charge Euro-reformist deceptions that abound so much among the left.

Shutting down the crowded and militarized camps where people are forced to stay in inhuman conditions is the only solution. It is essential to set up equitable resettlement distribution at the European level, to enable safe passage, so that no one has to risk their lives to flee from violence (as we are seeing in Afghanistan). This means opening legal and safe entry routes to Europe. All these measures have been put into practice on other occasions, and there are legal mechanisms that allow doing so. What is missing is political will. And in order to change the European migration policy we first need to change the correlation of forces that allows the extreme right to set the EU migration agenda.

In the European parliamentary sphere, what initiatives do you intend to take in the next period to challenge the dominant racist European agenda that denies the opening of borders and the free passage of refugee flows?

At this moment, the priority for European Parliament is to respond to the Commission's proposal on the new asylum and migration pact, which represents a new twist in the configuration of Fortress Europe. This pact institutionalizes and gives the status of law to many of the policies that have been applied so far and that are based on exceptionality. These policies have justified horrors such as those of the Moria camp, the chain push backs in the Balkans or the deaths in the Mediterranean. In other words, this pact not only does not address human rights violations, but also endorses them and gives them the status of a European agreement, making them the condition of possibility of this new regulation.

There are two issues in the new pact that very clearly reflect this exceptionality and the neglect of the protection of the most basic rights of migrants and refugees. The first is the right for Member states to request the application of a kind of "crisis" clause, when they consider there are a number of arrivals greater than the management capacity of the State in question. This clause will allow, de facto, to suspend the right to asylum or to grant it only to people who have a nationality with a very high level of asylum recognition. In other words, the vast majority of people will simply be subject to deportation.

The second issue is the lack of a true and compulsory European monitoring mechanism, with resources, at the borders. Monitoring at the borders will be applied by each Member state, on guidelines that are not mandatory and with a non-binding status. If there is no legal obligation to control abuses at the borders, push backs and violence by police forces and border guards will continue to be legitimized.

But to face the challenge of the new asylum and migration pact, an effective parliamentary activity will not be enough. Decisions at the European Parliament are already taken and in any case the Parliament has not a say on the pact content. It is essential to organize a social movement to question Europe from the roots. Because beyond the obvious humanitarian urgency, the situation of refugees and migrants in Europe is not entirely a question of solidarity, but rather a first order political dispute that affects us all. The situation in the Greek islands is a symptom, not an exception.

And the normalization of exceptionality is a legal sinkhole and a gateway to true authoritarian barbarism.

Hence the need to analyze the migratory situation not only as a humanitarian crisis, but also and above all, as a crisis of human rights and therefore as a political crisis. A crisis that questions who has the right to *have rights* in Europe. A question that challenges each one of us. We better take it as such before it's too late.

What should be, in your opinion, the main proposals of the anti-racist movement and the left to the new movement of refugees towards Europe, after the events in Afghanistan and the Middle East in general?

First of all, it is important to remember that beyond the shocking images of these days, the reality is that the armed conflict and human rights violations in Afghanistan have been expelling thousands of citizens for years.

So far, the policy practiced by the European Union towards the Afghan population fleeing or having fled the conflict and gender apartheid imposed by the Taliban regime, has been the denial of rights. Locking those who flee in horrendous fields, like Moria's, and forcing people back to their country, even in the midst of the Taliban offensive, has been the European response to date.

The measures in the face of the humanitarian emergency that exists in Afghanistan should be, in my humble opinion: Firstly, the opening, by all European countries, of legal and safe channels, and a humanitarian corridor to ensure that Afghan refugees can leave Afghanistan and reach Europe. This includes the granting of humanitarian and asylum visas. Spain must establish a fast and efficient procedure so that asylum can be requested in the embassies and consulates of the different European states, reinforcing its administrative and diplomatic staff. Priority should be given to leaving the country of refugees who are in the most vulnerable situation, among them, human rights defenders, women who suffer gender persecution and any person persecuted for sexual orientation.

Europe must declare publicly that Afghanistan is not a safe country. Returns must stop. Resettling Afghan refugees should be conducted in dignified conditions, including those Afghan refugees currently held in European camps and in the countries bordering Afghanistan.

The suspension of the EU-Turkey agreement that prevents Afghans from reaching European territory via the so-called Turkish route is also a must.

Asylum applications are to be examined individually. Asylum seekers rights recognized in international regulations (lawyer, interpreter, decent reception conditions, right to appeal, etc.) must be guaranteed. Also ensuring that asylum is examined from a gender approach that takes into account the specific violence that Afghan women face in refugee camps, migratory transit, and host societies. The asylum process needs to give special attention to girls and adolescents, women who are heads of families, victims of trafficking and torture, sick and dependents, and those who suffer persecution because of their sexual orientation and gender.

Europe also should allocate funding for reception programs and for NGOs working in Afghanistan's neighboring countries, since they are the ones that today are holding the greatest effort in terms of protection and reception, with very few resources.

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