Europe Day Through a Broken Mirror: Fortress Walls and Institutional Complicity

Words by Poppy Groves

On May 9, the EU dresses itself in blue and gold, lighting up its monuments to celebrate a shared vision of unity, peace, and prosperity. Simultaneously, across the continent of Europe, fences are being fortified and policies tightened in order to deny these ideals to people on the move at its internal and external borders.

Europe Day marks the anniversary of the 1950 Schuman Declaration, which proposed postwar cooperation as a foundation for peace and for the eventual birth of the European Union. "Europe will not be made all at once," Schuman said, "but through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity."

As the Union evolves, what is the price of solidarity which is solidified by the exclusion of the 'others' condemned to violence and death at its borders?

The legacy of genocide and the complicity of contemporary European structures

Europe Day, born from the ashes of genocide and war, is lauded as a celebration of unity and shared ideals. This vision of peace, however, is sharply undermined by contemporary Europe's selective engagement with human suffering. Europe witnessed genocide only 30 years ago, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina its memory is not only emotional, but aesthetic and bodily; marked into landscapes, architecture, and everyday life.

This memory sits within a layered political geography that is often disrespected by lazy simplification. European thought is no monolith, and "Europe" and "EU" are often carelessly interchanged. The hierarchy between EU and non-EU states sustains structural exclusion, particularly in the Balkans, where Europe's historic complicity, inaction, and selective intervention during the Bosnian genocide and the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo are not only historic wounds; they are amplified today by a leftist critique that often centres anti-US or anti-NATO imperialism, without fully reckoning with the layered nuances of our complicity.

Our roles in upholding these contradictions are not being adequately confronted. NGOs, institutions, and policy spaces often reproduce the very harms they claim to oppose, through inertia, through the limitations of entrenched operational frameworks, and through arrogance, as uncomfortable as this is to acknowledge. These harms are baked into the very logic of humanitarianism under capitalism, where NGOs too frequently act as buffers that

manage and contain the fallout of state and market violence, rather than fundamentally challenge it. How do we meaningfully confront the hypocrisies of this anniversary and these imbalances of power, when our own ways of working are so often complicit in reinforcing narratives of exclusion and control?

Colonialism's contemporary shadow

The full text of Schuman's Declaration makes reference to the "development of the African continent" as "one of its essential tasks", revealing the deeply colonial logic embedded in his vision of a united Europe, one where Europe positions itself as the agent of African "progress" without confronting its own violent role in centuries of colonisation, extraction, and exploitation. What is framed as "development" is in fact a continuation of imperial relations, where Africa's resources and labour remain instrumental to Europe's recovery and prosperity. This exposes how the European project was never just about intra-European peace, but also about consolidating Europe's position in the global capitalist and colonial order.

While atrocities in Sudan and Congo are met with muted responses, and the genocide in Gaza and Zionist settler colonial violence in Palestine is met with equivocation or complicity, Europe's claims to human rights leadership ring hollow. These failures of moral clarity and institutional accountability expose the double standards embedded in the EU's external policies. Various European nations posture as defenders of human rights and of international law, yet recoil from meaningful engagement with or enactment of the advice of the International Court of Justice or International Criminal Court on Israel's actions. Countries from across the continent, and the EU as an entity, continue to profit from and fuel the occupation through arms exports, surveillance technologies, and trade partnerships. The weaponisation of antisemitism discourse to criminalise or discredit Palestinian solidarity is yet another means of suppressing dissent, flattening complexity, and shielding power. Fortress Europe, with its lethal border regimes, is both a symptom and a cause of these imperialist logics: rights and protections remain reserved for those born in the right place, with the right passport, and the right skin.

The freedom myth: European borders and their racialised hierarchies of belonging

Colonial continuities aren't limited to EU asylum policy, but are embedded within the very architecture of its internal freedoms. Nowhere is this clearer than in the vaunted principle of freedom of movement. The EU's foundational tenet exposes how its policies have been crafted to benefit a specific, privileged group, while reinforcing exclusion and suffering for those who are racialised, displaced, or economically disadvantaged. While EU citizens move unencumbered by borders, non-European, non-white migrants are traumatised and terrorised at the borders by the twin threat of state violence and Frontex border externalisation. Nowhere is this more starkly illustrated than in the recent cases of Palestine solidarians, in Greece and Germany, targeted for deportation as national security risks. These discussions have been widely covered in mainstream public discourse, where this unbalanced outcry at the morality and the legality of this treatment of 'Europeans' came even

through the 'radical' voice of Yanis Varoufakis last year in Greece, with a statement that focused on the "unprecedented" nature of the threatened deportation of Europeans without any acknowledgement of the fates of thousands of others incarcerated in Greece's deportation camps.

'What about the value of freedom of movement, a cornerstone of the EU itself?' comes the repeated cry, without care or consideration for the lives of so many people who are not European, whose mobility is not framed as a right, but as a criminal act. These individuals are denied the privileges of even the most temporary statuses of 'belonging'. They are routinely incarcerated, stripped of their rights, detained, deported, or most tragically of all, left to die alone in police stations, in squalid conditions in camps. Where is the public outcry for them? We fail to confront, or in some cases even to acknowledge, the deeply ingrained hierarchies of belonging that shape us. We accept, both tacitly and explicitly, that it is more shocking to criminalise an EU citizen taking autonomous action in Berlin than a Libyan teenager handed a rudder and forced to steer an overloaded, sinking boat to safety. This is not a new or anomalous phenomenon, but the continuation of a racialised geopolitical programme of suffering as a deterrent strategy.

We all have different tolerances for uncomfortable truths and different strategies for confronting, rationalising or deflecting them. Some of us do not want to face the truth that Bihać, Lesvos, and Calais are places where pain is instrumentalised by design. Some of us refuse to accept that certain lives have never been seen as worth mourning. Unavoidably, though, we must meaningfully engage with the fact that the freedom of movement we hold so dear is built upon a system of marginalisation at its peripheries, as a starting point for reshaping attitudes and policies. Until then, the idea of European solidarity will remain a myth.

The European Union polices the fortress that brick by brick, policy by policy, expands in its hypocrisy. To "defend" the borders of the member states, it is the countries on the fringes, on the periphery of the European continent, whose borders are moving ever further east — the western Balkans, Greece, Bulgaria and finally the gateway to Europe in Turkey; or south, in the concentration camps in Libya, in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, in Tunisia where the military sells migrants to Libyan militias, and in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where the world's largest refugee camps are located. And while in the halls of European power there is talk of a re-armament race, migrants are being used as weapons, to which EU countries respond with ever greater restraint and criminalisation — the very people who are fleeing the global conflicts in which the EU is complicit, through its funding and the cultural hegemony inherited from the colonial system of oppression.

The rise of the far right and the falsehood of a 'civilised' Europe

Opposition to this kind of meaningful engagement is being actively reinforced by political shifts across the continent. The rise of the far right has coincided with an unsettling tightening of civic space, particularly for activists, journalists, and collectives focused on human rights and migrant solidarity. Across the continent, a fog of repression is spreading; we see this reflected in our working areas — for example, in Serbian protests against the

government's increasing authoritarianism, or in Greece, where the new Migration Minister has begun his role in a frenzy of anti-migrant rhetoric. The discourse around solidarity and human rights is being reshaped, with an ever-expanding notion of those who 'don't belong', whether they are people on the move at the EU's borders, marginalised groups within states, or local activists silenced by global political and financial pressures.

We must resist framing these developments as either aberrations or manifestations of 'evil.' Europe's 'civilised' identity has long been shaped by entrenched prejudice towards the 'other' within its internal borders as well as its external ones; whether this be within the continent, where all too often exclusionary attitudes towards non-EU countries within Europe persist — attitudes that fail to treat, for example, countries of the Balkan region as equal partners deserving of shared responsibility and solidarity — or within the bloc itself. The previous decade's solutions to financial crises, including austerity measures imposed on southern European countries, revealed a fractured solidarity within the EU; the narrative of 'bailout' versus 'austerity' speaks once again to the way in which European solidarity is selectively applied.

The quiet violence of benevolent exclusion

Within this context, the 'benevolent exclusion' of centrist and liberal parties can be seen as a softer form of violence, maintaining the same structural exclusions while presenting itself as the necessary, 'humane' alternative to the cruelty of the hard right. Consider the UK's Labour government, who present live-streamed deportation raids as pragmatic solutions to the UK's so-called migrant 'crisis' to a supporter base who were horrified by the Rwanda plan of the Conservative administration which preceded it. These kinds of actions are often framed as a 'middle ground' to buffer against the excesses of the right wing. But in reality, these policies are often just as exclusionary, perpetuating systems of border violence and suffering that the far right seeks to exacerbate. These forms of 'soft power' violence may be less visible, but they are no less harmful; they bring further entrenchment of exclusionary frameworks. Again, what we are witnessing today is not a breakdown of European ideals, but rather the continued evolution of those ideals. This pattern of always selecting who belongs and who does not goes beyond any particular political ideology. It is rooted in the violence that both sustains and is perpetuated by this concept of 'European' identity.

Our complicity in perpetuating harm

The same logics shape the work of those of us who seek to resist them. At Collective Aid we must reckon with our own complicity, and the uncomfortable fact of our positioning as a majority Northern European NGO operating in regions where our team composition does not sufficiently reflect the communities we work within and alongside. We must constantly be alive to this imbalanced power dynamic and prepared to actively challenge it to minimise harm. Sometimes, we get this wrong. We have failed, before, to engage with vital cultural nuances in the contexts we work in. We have fallen too short, on previous occasions, by relying on crisis-mode ways of working that offer limited resources as an excuse to disregard sufficiently careful or sensitive practice. In doing so, we have caused harm.

Earlier this year, we published the first part of a blog intended to explore the river Drina from multiple perspectives. We acknowledge that organising the series thematically was largely a practical choice to fit our writing and operational schedules. However, by presenting one perspective first without sufficient consideration of another, we risked giving the impression that we were prioritising or comparing different experiences of pain, particularly for those from Bosnia and Herzegovina with lived experience of genocide.

Similarly, processes of "taking" testimony or "curating" content for our communications channels are not exempted from carrying extractive properties, simply because they exist for advocacy or solidarity purposes. Others hold the weight of experience of the issues we work on; theirs should be the clearest voices in the conversation. In a crowded landscape where visibility often translates into funding and legitimacy, we are trying to be better at supporting, redistributing, and contributing where we know we can be useful, as opposed to taking up space without meaningful dialogue. This year, we have made it a collective priority to better reflect this awareness in our practice, through steps such as more inclusive hiring, participatory budgeting, and actively creating space for affected voices in our work. Building and resourcing autonomous, grassroots movements led by affected communities themselves is essential — not just inviting them to be 'included in' NGO frameworks, but ceding space, resources, and decision-making power entirely. This means materially transferring funding and leadership to the communities most impacted. We will continue this conversation in the next blog from Noah, our Director.

Who speaks, who decides, who benefits?

These contradictions are not specific to any one organisation in the sector, but are embedded in NGO frameworks at large. Intentions may be grounded in care, but good intentions do not neutralise harm. All of our actions, however mindful we aim or claim to be, are carried out within structures that are shaped by privilege and hierarchy. As a sector, we must be more willing to confront the ways in which we perpetuate harm: to people on the move, by prioritising actions that might secure funding over what communities actually need; and to our colleagues, particularly those holding multiple marginalised identities, who shoulder the psychological toll of navigating broken systems while trying to change them. These tensions cannot be resolved by language alone. Across the sector, being 'late to the conversation' is too often remedied with symbolic gestures such as calls to 'amplify voices' or 'centre affected communities', without the material redistribution of power that real accountability demands — such as access to funding, decision-making power, and media space.

We recognise we have at times failed to catch mistakes that can cause harm — such as a recent example where a map we used in social media communications included an inaccurate outline, despite using a correct version elsewhere. Mistakes like this are not just technical oversights; they can be harmful and damaging, especially in contexts marked by histories of violence and division. We acknowledge that such errors — totally wrongly — often do not carry the same weight or risk within organisations largely made up of people from countries that have colonised, rather than those with lived experience of the pain and legacy of colonial borders. We are also less aware of this pain, and less familiar with the history, than we are with places like the UK or France, which makes us less alert to

recognising and addressing these kinds of issues. We take seriously the responsibility for better self-education, so that we become more attuned and accountable in our work. We are grateful to those who take the time to hold us accountable, even though it should not be their responsibility. We are also aware that we are in no way immune to the criticisms we level at 'the sector' more broadly.

Towards transformative solidarity and dismantling structural violence

We also recognise that our own reflection and reform are not enough. The structural violence we work within and around — from border militarisation to capitalist extraction and imperialist wars — cannot be dismantled through NGO reforms alone. Real solidarity demands material redistribution of resources and power, and an active commitment to supporting grassroots and abolitionist movements led by those most impacted, even when their demands challenge the very systems that make our own work possible. Without confronting capitalism, imperialism, and state violence directly, we risk turning solidarity into a performance, rather than a practice of resistance. In a moment of widespread funding crises across the humanitarian and human rights sector, how can organisations meaningfully commit to this redistribution? The metrics of impact that dominate our field can erase slow, relational work, community trust-building, and deep political alignment in favour of scalable outputs and acceptable critique.

Can an NGO ever truly escape the structures that make its existence possible? In many cases, NGOs decide which criticisms of power are allowed to be heard, and which are too 'political' or 'radical' to support, effectively policing the boundaries of dissent. These questions aren't easy, and we know these reflections may challenge the assumptions that fund our field — but they are necessary if we are to claim solidarity without reproducing the same systems we oppose. Our discomfort and self-awareness should not remain at the level of moral or symbolic gestures but must translate into concrete, transformative actions that materially shift power. Dismantling Frontex, defunding violent border regimes, and advancing reparations for colonial harms are essential steps toward dismantling the structural violence underpinning Europe's border and migration policies.

Real solidarity is not a performance, but a practice. If European unity is to mean anything, it must be remade through the eyes and demands of those our systems exclude. By building a culture that allows for disagreement, reflection, and repair, we may come to understand that discomfort is not failure, but a sign we might finally be listening in a way that is long overdue.

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