

Jan Trnka, Grüne Tschechien, Rede am 08.11.2015 in Schirnding

Europe is an idea. An idea of freedom, solidarity and of a shared peaceful future. An idea that grew from the horrors of two world wars. An idea of living together without borders between states, between nations, between people.

Borders were born from wars, from conflicts. The victorious ruler drew a line and said “this is mine and this is yours” and the people had to get used to it.

When the EU removed internal borders through the Schengen Treaty it expressed a belief that Europeans, that humans can live together as one people.

Now some Europeans want borders back and some rulers are more than willing to listen to them.

They want borders to be a fortress to protect them from whatever terrifying things may lurk in the distance. They want borders back in a hope to lessen their fear from the unknown.

Some politicians see fear as a useful tool. Fear can make people focus less on a government’s mistakes, on corruption or incompetence and can make voters look to government ministers to save them from the threats they feel they face. But fear is not easily managed and can quickly get out of hand. Politicians who feed or at least do not prevent fear are playing with fire. What happens when people decide that current politicians don’t do enough to protect them from the imagined threats and that other, more extreme protectors are needed? Is there a point where our fortress is strong enough?

I was born in the 1970s in Czechoslovakia which was then a fortress. Our rulers told us that our heavily guarded borders with electric fences were there to protect us; to prevent the bad people to come in and destroy our glorious society... But everyone knew the fortress was there NOT to keep others out but to keep us in.

Fear is what divides people. As you may know our Czech government, our Czech President do nothing to prevent fear. They speak of refugees as “a wave engulfing our region”, as “masses of people threatening to run Europe over”. Our President calls refugees “criminals” and our interior minister expressed his happiness that the Czech Republic has such a bad reputation among refugees that they avoid entering our country at any cost. Our politicians speak of security risks, of diseases, of a lack of resources. Who can be surprised that people are scared?

But fear can be overcome.

Couple of months ago in the Croatian town of Tovarnik we were cooking some lentils and rice for hungry people coming across the border from Serbia. The kitchen was improvised, put together with cookers, pots and ingredients brought in by Germans, Poles, Czechs, Croatians and others. One Syrian man walked past, stopped and told us he used to be a cook back home. He starting telling us what spices he used to use and how we can make our meals taste a little more like home he had left behind. We followed his advice and people really loved the food afterwards. How can you fear such a man?

To overcome fear we need one crucial thing: we need to see refugees not as waves and masses but

as individual human beings in a difficult situation. Those of us who've met refugees face to face and spoke with them can no longer see them as aliens. We see them as mothers, brothers, sisters, grandfathers, students, pharmacists, farmers, footballers and cooks.

In Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia politicians are failing us. But hundreds, thousands of volunteers don't listen to the fearmongering of their ministers and presidents. They gather money, medicines, food and warm clothes and in their spare time go to Greece, Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and other places to help. People who've not met each other before in real life organise themselves on social networks and through sheer enthusiasm rival and in some places substitute services that should be provided by government agencies. They meet refugees face to face and they need not fear them.

We Greens take global justice as one of our guiding principles and recognise the moral responsibility of the wealthy countries towards the poor ones. While current migrations are caused by a variety of reasons we cannot forget about the deep-seated residues of colonialism and the progressively more dramatic effects of climate change in the countries of the global south.

Some say we should first take care of our poor and only then start helping the foreigners. It is interesting that those who say that often only just noticed there are poor people around who need help.

Europe was built on the principles of freedom, solidarity and peace. Solidarity requires that we help the poor, the disadvantaged, the unlucky. We cannot limit solidarity to our own people, we cannot divide solidarity by borders.

Solidarity divided is the end of solidarity.