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Who's welcome? Refugees, yes, economic migrants, no. This is one of the mantras repeated time and again by the majority of European heads of government and state. In early September at the Moncloa Palace, Mariano Rajoy and David Cameron jointly asked for a distinction to be made between refugees and economic migrants. According to Rajoy, "Spain will not deny anyone their right to asylum, but there is a different issue: that of irregular migration for economic reasons". Weeks later, the German interior minister, Thomas de Maizière, gave out a similar message: "We are clearly committed to integrating those who are worthy of protection, those who are not will have to leave".

What is the difference between a refugee and an economic migrant? While refugees are defined as forced migrants fleeing war or persecution, economic migrants are those who leave in search of a better life. The reality, however, is much more complex. As Yolanda Onghena pointed out in her *Opini3n CIDOB* article,¹ motivations are always diverse and a single story tends to combine elements of forced flight and desires for a better life. Nevertheless, whether a person does or does not apply for asylum, and whether they are or are not recognised as a refugee are significant differences. While the 1951 Refugee Convention obliges states to guarantee protection of refugees, issues relating to economic migrants are national prerogatives. Guaranteeing protection of refugees means not returning them to the dangers they have fled, giving them access to fair, efficient asylum processes and providing them with safe, dignified living conditions. In the European context, the Asylum Procedures Directive (2013) and the Reception Conditions Directive (2013) establish the procedures to be followed, as well as the conditions of accommodation, food, health, employment, medical and psychological attention.

The current refugee crisis casts doubt on the extent to which "those who are worthy", those whom we say we welcome, we really do. On the one hand, they have to risk their lives in the Mediterranean to be able to enter. On the other, within the European Union, we are seeing reinforced concrete walls and barbed-wire fences put up to prevent their entry. The images speak for themselves: on one side, the national police, on the other, thousands of people (including children) begging to be allowed through.

1. Yolanda Onghena. "Migrants or refugees?". *Opini3n CIDOB*, no. 355 (October 2015).

After crossing seas, walls and fences, countries like Denmark, the Netherlands and, more recently, Germany are limiting aid for asylum seekers and refugees. At the beginning of September, the Danish government published an advertisement in Lebanese newspapers informing of a reduction by half of the social benefits given to refugees, along with the toughening up of the conditions of family reunification and the acquiring of residence permits. They are “policies of disintegration” that seek to put up more walls, invisible but no less real, against those who arrive and, above all, those who might think about coming.

Those who, despite it all, manage to seek asylum in a European country have long months of waiting ahead of them, normally in reception centres and without being able to work, without learning the language and without being able to leave. All of this – or, better said, none of it – while waiting to hear the outcome of their asylum application. It is worth recalling that in 2014 more than half (55.3%) of the asylum applications made in the European Union were rejected. If, finally, they are recognised as refugees, with the residence permit they will (now, finally) have the chance to restart their lives. If not, they will be deported as quickly as possible. Or this is what is repeated time and time again in the majority of member states. In practice, it is well known that most stay in Europe, among other reasons because they have nowhere to go back to. They do so as irregular immigrants, now definitively without access to housing, work and healthcare.

And, if all of that were not enough, remember that public discourses are not always welcoming. Increasingly, more and more diverse voices accuse them of seeking a better life (as if that were illegitimate and incompatible with forced migration), of being jihadi terrorists or of wanting to Islamise “the old continent”. Remember, for example, the statements made by the cardinal and archbishop of Valencia, Antonio Cañizares, wondering whether “this invasion of migrants and refugees brings only good apples” and “where Europe will be within a few years”. To these declarations others are increasingly added, warning that Europe cannot take “them all”. But, what would one or two million refugees mean in a Europe of 500 million citizens? To put it in context, we are talking about 0.2% or 0.4%.

Alongside this kind of statements, the number of attacks against refugees is growing, as well as against the politicians accused of welcoming them. Though it should not be forgotten that xenophobic movements and political parties remain a minority, it is also true that citizens’ support for the refugees is gradually diminishing. A survey carried out recently by the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP) shows that only 12% of those surveyed in France are in favour of implementing programmes of help and reception for the refugees. In Germany, the percentage of those interviewed who consider that there are too many foreigners has risen from 33% to 44%, and 80% want the refugees only to stay a few months or years.

So, who’s welcome? Asylum seekers and refugees, increasingly less: there is talk of externalising aid for refugees to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, strong border controls inside and outside the European Union are increasing, social aid and rights to residence are being cut

back and the voices that cast suspicion on them are ever more frequent. With the current refugee crisis we are placing the right to asylum in Europe at risk. If we do not want it to be “collateral damage” in this crisis, we need more discordant voices, voices from cities, social organisations and citizens’ movements but also other voices from within the institutions of the European Union and the various national governments themselves. We need other voices that recall that receiving refugees is not only a moral obligation but a legal one, and no policy is more dangerous than a failed one, or the absence of one. Europe can take them in and must do so without hesitation.

