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The Invisible Borders of Europe: *Why a Passport Cannot Buy Inclusion*

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While conducting field research in a rural town in Latvia, I spoke with an elderly woman whose eyes held the heavy memories of a fractured continent. When asked about her European identity, her answer was not wrapped in the grand rhetoric of Brussels, but in a deep feeling of being left out. “Brussels is too far away”, she said and “to them, we are still just the East”. She holds a burgundy European Union (EU) passport, walks freely across Schengen borders, and resides in a country sustained by EU funding. Yet, on paper she is a citizen; in her soul, she remains a stranger in her own house. This reveals a harsh reality. While an EU passport grants legal equality, Western institutional arrogance and mismanaged migration policies have created a crisis of belonging that alienates both Eastern Europeans and naturalized refugees, ultimately fuelling the rise of the far-right.

This silent tragedy echoes across the post-Soviet periphery, from the plains of Hungary to the shores of Bulgaria. The EU promised unity after the fall of the Iron Curtain, but today, millions of citizens still feel like outsiders looking in. This profound crisis of belonging comes from a hidden hierarchy where wealthier Western countries often treat their Eastern neighbours not as equals, but as a provincial periphery that must be constantly “civilized”, a hierarchy dressed up as partnership. This hierarchy is economic and political, but it is also epistemic, determining whose experiences of Europe counts as knowledge and whose is dismissed as grievance.



This illusion of European equality shatters even more violently for another marginalized group, the naturalized citizens of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent. These are people who successfully navigated the European bureaucracy, learned the languages, and finally earned their citizenship. They believed they were entering a sanctuary of human rights. Instead, they found a garden surrounded by invisible, racialized walls.

For these new Europeans, the passport does not shield them from daily discrimination. FRA's (2024) report on Muslims in the EU found that nearly half of respondents, 47%, had experienced racial discrimination, and more than a third had been unable to buy or rent a home because of it. This relentless prejudice acts as the primary fuel for Europe's rising far-right. Here too, the exclusion is epistemic before it is legal. These citizens navigated every formal requirement of belonging, yet their testimony about daily life in the Union rarely reaches the institutions that claim to represent them.

This far-right surge has found its strongest foothold back in the post-Soviet periphery, in countries like Poland and Hungary. The causes are deeply intertwined. When citizens in the East feel that their cultural dignity is mocked by an arrogant core, they turn their backs on the European dream. This sense of being spoken over by Brussels and by wealthier member states has hardened into a deeper distrust of the Union's institutions themselves. Populist leaders weaponize this genuine sorrow. By shifting the blame, they redirect the public's frustration toward migrants. An Ipsos (2025) survey found that Hungary recorded the most negative net sentiment of any country surveyed toward refugees' contribution to society, with only 19% agreeing refugees make a positive contribution against a much larger share disagreeing, while Poland has seen rising support for closing its borders to refugees entirely since 2024.

Why does a union built on the ashes of war fail so badly at building a shared heartbeat? The root cause is the chronic mismanagement of the European institutions themselves. The European Parliament and national governments have consistently failed to build a functional migration and integration architecture. Rather than admitting their mistakes, politicians have found it easier to scapegoat the marginalized. The Standard Eurobarometer 104 reveals that the European public now views immigration as the second most critical threat to the union. This fear is heavily fed by disinformation. A 2022 Eurobarometer survey found that 68% of Europeans overestimated the number of immigrants living in their country, and 47% believed that integration had not been successful at the national level (European Commission 2022). When politicians treat migration as an eternal crisis to mask their own administrative incompetence, they normalize xenophobia.

A union cannot survive on treaties and trade agreements alone. It must be bound by a shared sense of human dignity. If an Eastern European grandmother and a newly naturalized citizen in the West look at the blue flag and feel nothing but bureaucratic exclusion, the foundations of the European project are rotting. The true borders of Europe are no longer drawn on maps. They are etched into the hearts of its people by institutional arrogance and unkept promises. Rebuilding that dignity will mean rethinking Europe otherwise, redistributing resources and, more fundamentally, whose voice gets to define what Europe is. Until Europe learns to treat all its citizens as equals, the passport will remain a booklet of empty pages.

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Professionally, Baran is currently completing an internship at the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey (DEİK) within the Directorate of Europe Business Councils. Beyond his academic and professional pursuits, he serves as the Head of Corporate Communications for the Bakırköy branch of Genç Kızılay, having previously managed operations as the Blood Unit Head, and has also gained experience in human resources through a recruitment and talent sourcing internship at Pernet.



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