An eventful summer (Syria and the teething of Europe)

Summer is over. But what an eventful couple of months it was. I am not speaking on a personal level, although discovering the first two teeth of my five-month old daughter was quite something. I am of course referring to the international agenda.

Traditionally, summertime is rather quiet. Ministers, parliamentarians, diplomats, journalists and think tankers can enjoy a healthy vacation, and perhaps even read a book or two. But this summer was not your typical summer. Among the many events that made the news and sometimes even forced policy-makers to shorten their break – or at least to open a newspaper – were the Greek bailout, the historic deal concluded with Iran (in which the EU played no small part) and a major explosion in Tianjin, China.

Two events, however, proved particularly dramatic for Europe: the continuous influx of refugees from war-torn countries, with particularly shocking images emerging in the past few weeks, and the terrorist attack on the Amsterdam-Paris Thalys, which was miraculously thwarted by vigilant travellers.

If you don't deal with Syria, then deal with the consequences

Even though both terrible events are completely different, they nevertheless have one thing in common: Syria. Whereas most of the refugees arriving in Europe these days are fleeing from the Syrian conflict, Ayoub el-Khazzani, the young Moroccan arrested in the Thalys, is said to have travelled to Syria a few months before the attack, either for training or to get in contact with local terrorist groups.

The problem is that Europe – i.e. the EU and its Member States – does not have a clear Syria policy, besides the adoption of a few sanctions, and the cooperation in a mediation process piloted by the UN Special Envoy for Syria. Contrary to other cases of conflict, such as Afghanistan or Libya, the use of force has been eschewed rapidly – for good or bad.

Syria is not an easy case for European foreign policy. The crisis is too near to Europe to be ignored, but it seems too complex to be dealt with. Europe argues that the solution must come from Syrians themselves. This sounds mildly optimistic. But even if that worked, it would likely take months, years or even decades. In the meantime, more refugees will come and more young Europeans will be tempted to join terrorist groups in Syria or, worse, to import violence to Europe. Syria is Europe's neighbourhood. When your neighbours' house is on fire, either you

help extinguishing the fire or you provide them shelter – you don't just stand and watch from behind closed windows.

Moral and identity crises

Confronted with these terrible crises, the reaction of a number of politicians was instinctively defensive. Refugees must be stopped at the border, they said. Fences have been built or are being erected all along the southern European periphery. In the North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla by Spain, at the border with Turkey by Greece and Bulgaria, and now Hungary just finished a new wall along the border with Serbia. The Mediterranean Sea itself is a giant fence, which is further secured by maritime patrols. The facts that such walls are known to be entirely ineffective – or even counterproductive as they play the hand of criminal groups by making refugees' routes more complicated and dangerous – does not seem to permeate politicians' discourses. In addition to the reinforcement of external EU borders, politicians argue that internal borders should be reinforced as well. Border controls, it seems, could be reinstalled within the Schengen area.

What is striking, among many things, is the total incompatibility of some of these measures with European values, such as 'respect for human dignity', 'solidarity' or the promotion of 'human rights' – which are all inscribed in the Lisbon Treaty (article 21), and have been agreed by all Member States. To be sure, Europe is in a deep – deep – moral crisis. With the questioning of the Schengen area, it is not only European values that are endangered, but the whole European project. There is a fundamental identity crisis overlapping with a moral one. What a mess!

The summer Schengen almost died

For me, Schengen has always been one of the flagship projects of the European Union – one of those tangible achievements that make me feel 'European'. I used to look at the vestiges of former border checkpoints thinking that this was the old days. But as I was driving back from holidays, crossing three countries and two international borders, without slowing down, I wondered whether the old days might be coming back. Then I looked into the rear mirror at my daughter, marvelling at her two splendid teeth. She had to endure long and painful nights for it, but what a beautiful smile she has now. This makes me wonder: Could this be Europe teething? Or is it something more serious?