

Closure of Balkan Refugee Route Deepens Rifts in the EU

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Diplomatic tensions between the EU member states are intensifying in the run-up to the meeting of heads of state and governments this week. The issue of what measures can better seal off Europe against refugees is further inflaming these conflicts.

While the countries of the “Visegrad Group,” consisting of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, together with Austria, are insisting on the complete closure and militarization of the Macedonian-Greek border in order to strand refugees in Greece. Germany, France and Italy, above all, reject such a step, which would mean the de facto exclusion of Greece from the Schengen Area.

The German government, which is also supported by the European Commission, is pursuing the plan to seal off the Mediterranean passage between Greece and Turkey, using NATO warships and the prompt deportation of refugees who still land in Greece back to the Turkish mainland.

In return, the EU countries are ready to receive fixed quotas of civil war refugees from Turkey, which has taken in more than 2.5 million refugees from Syria. The aim is, in the medium term, to return to the Dublin process, under which the state where a refugee first arrives in Europe is responsible for processing their asylum application.

A meeting of Eastern European government leaders in Prague last Monday refused any further admission of refugees based on quotas. By sealing off the border at the Macedonian town of Gevgelija they are attempting to create a fait accompli.

For days, soldiers on the Greek-Macedonian border have been building a massive border fence some 37 kilometres long. A Macedonian officer said, “The message to the immigrants is: Give up trying to cross the border illegally.” The Hungarian government had already provided the NATO barbed wire, concrete pillars and the necessary construction equipment in December.

The Visegrad Group have recently received support in their endeavours from Austria. The government in Vienna had agreed a few weeks ago to take no more than 37,500 refugees this year. Since they will have reached this quota in a few weeks, the coalition of the conservative Austrian Peoples Party and Austrian Social Democratic Party is now looking to seal off the border.

Austria’s Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz told *Die Welt*, “I support the considerations for a civilian-military mission at the Greek-Macedonian or Serbian-Macedonian border. Macedonia must be the first country to be ready after Greece to stop the influx.” Kurz described it as

the “duty” of Austria to help the Macedonian government with border security.

Austrian Defence Minister Hans Peter Doskozil sang the same tune when he announced the dispatch of soldiers to Macedonia to deter refugees there. “We can’t wait for an EU solution, we must rely on border security measures both nationally and on the Balkan route,” the Ministry of Defence told the news agency APA.

On broadcaster TA3, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico accused the German government of “trying to impose dictates against all those holding other views on refugee policy.” Fico also reported that the German government had even protested against the meeting of the Visegrad Group through an official diplomatic note. “What allows the Visegrad Four, together with Bulgaria and Macedonia, to speak on the protection of external borders?” the note said, according to Fico.

The approach of the Visegrad Group, unauthorised in the eyes of the EU, met with unusually sharp reprimands from parts of the German government. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in an open letter to the Social Democratic government leaders and foreign ministers in Europe, German Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said, “a formal expulsion of a member state from Schengen or its de facto exclusion are false solutions that poison the European debate. Europe’s external borders cannot be simply redefined, and especially not over the heads of the member states concerned.”

The criticisms from the German government are not directed against the humanitarian consequences of the closure of the Balkan route, but represent an attempt to preserve EU institutions. The German plans for repelling refugees are no less militarized.

The plans of Chancellor Merkel to use NATO in sealing off the Aegean also include the illegal rejection of refugees. Such “pushbacks”, as the measures on the high seas are called, would mean that the crossing becomes increasingly dangerous for refugees, leading to a rapid rise in the death toll on the Aegean.

Immediately before the EU summit Thursday, Chancellor Angela Merkel is gathering together what the media has dubbed a “coalition of the willing”, a group of government leaders to negotiate a quota solution with Turkey.

According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the proposal involves taking in some 240,000 specially chosen refugees from the Syrian civil war. However, the Turkish government wants to move this figure upward if faced with a further growth in refugee numbers, while the EU is insisting on a penalty mechanism. If the number of so-called “illegal” border crossings from Turkey to Greece rises above a predetermined value, the quota that the EU wants to take will automatically fall.

In this way, while Turkey is made Europe’s guard dog in deterring refugees, and the border to Syria is simply closed, as at Kilis, the EU Commission is increasing the pressure on the Greek government to strengthen border controls and to register all refugees who land. The government in Athens has received an ultimatum from Brussels to work through a list of 50 measures to deter refugees within three months. Otherwise, the country will be excluded from the Schengen Area.

The Syriza-led government under Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras supports the EU’s brutal

methods to deter refugees. It has now ordered the army to the Aegean islands of Kos, Chios, Lesbos and Leros to construct the so-called “hotspots” (internment camps where refugees are registered) ordered by the EU Commission.

But the closure of the border with Macedonia would bring the entire system down like a house of cards. Each day, despite the cold and dangerous seas, more than 2,000 desperate refugees risk the crossing from the Turkish mainland to the Aegean islands. Since the beginning of the year, the Greek authorities have registered more than 80,000 new refugees, an increase of about 20 times compared with the same period last year. According to official figures, at least 366 have drowned trying to cross the Aegean. Within a month, the newly created asylum structures in Greece will be completely overcrowded.

Under these conditions, calls are increasing within the ruling coalition in Germany for Greece to be expelled from the Schengen Area, and for the sealing off of the Balkan route. All the refugees are to be held in this small country.

The general secretary of the Christian Democratic Party’s influential economic council told *Die Welt*, “The basic conditions for completely open borders within Europe are no longer guaranteed at the moment in all member states.” Speaking of Greece, he added, “If a country fails to meet its obligations, then Schengen must move toward central Europe.” The cost of temporary border closures was less than continuing the “open door policy”, Geiger added.

Similar voices can also be heard from the Social Democratic Party.” We need the shutdown of the Balkan route”, the deputy chairman of the party’s parliamentary group, Axel Schäfer, told *Der Spiegel*, adding, with twisted logic, “Those who want to keep open borders in Europe, must also close borders.”

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