

European Union increases border controls against asylum seekers

By Martin Kreickenbaum
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The response of the European Union to the asylum-seeker tragedy in Lampedusa has been to further intensify immigration controls and delegate responsibility for deterring refugees to non-EU states that are notorious for their ruthless methods.

In just a few days, the EU has introduced three new measures aimed at more effectively blocking the entry of refugees into Europe. They have instituted a readmission agreement with Turkey that obligates the latter to take back refugees who try to flee across the Bosphorus to Europe. They are planning a “migration partnership” with further EU-neighbouring countries, which will obligate these to prevent migration and take back emigrants. And the EU has set up a surveillance system called Eurosur to facilitate these measures.

On December 4, the EU commissioner for justice and internal affairs, Cecilia Malmström, and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu announced the resolution of long-term negotiations between the EU and Turkey over the readmission of asylum seekers. The resulting agreement was officially signed on December 16.

The agreement obligates Turkey to receive back all asylum seekers who have migrated into the EU over Turkish territory. This will primarily affect the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing from Syria and Afghanistan. In return, the EU promises to reconsider Turkey’s application to join the EU, offering the future possibility of making it easier for Turkish citizens to travel within EU member countries without visas.

The cynicism of the EU commission’s approach is breath-taking. After the Gezi Park protest had been brutally suppressed by the Turkish police, the EU suspended discussions with the Turkish government regarding EU entry on the grounds that it was trampling on human rights. Barely six months later, the EU is formalising an agreement with this very same government in order to deport asylum seekers to Turkey.

In so doing, there can be no guarantee that Turkey will protect the returned refugees, let alone allow them the chance to build a decent life. The Turkish state has no established laws to uphold the rights of asylum seekers. Amnesty International reports regularly about Turkey’s arbitrary mishandling of refugees, who are either incarcerated for months or dumped in areas far away from all major metropolitan centres. And yet the

EU is treating Turkey as a safe haven for asylum seekers.

The EU’s cold indifference to the fate of hundreds of thousands of refugees is particularly nauseating because this wave of refugees results directly from its own policies. The civil war in Syria, that has driven 3 million people to flee their country, has been deliberately engineered by the major EU states and the US, together with their lackeys in the Persian Gulf. In Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and other neighbouring lands, hundreds of thousands of Syrian nationals are subsisting in appalling, wintry conditions under flimsy tents or even out in the open. Furthermore, in these countries they are mostly tolerated because they are seen to be temporary visitors.

The trade sanctions imposed on Syria have destroyed the livelihoods of millions of Syrian families. The British newspaper the *Independent* reported in September that Syria’s once exemplary health care system had completely broken down as a result of the sanctions. Food and heating oil prices have exploded and are unaffordable for most people.

Fleeing to Europe is seen by many to be the only escape from this tragedy. But the European Union is refusing entry to refugees. Germany will only allow in 10,000 from Syria, and the Home Affairs minister Hans-Peter Friedrich portrayed this as an exemplary act. At the same time, the German government has erected such high bureaucratic hurdles for them that only a tiny fraction of them have yet made it to Germany.

In their desperation, the Syrian refugees who are stranded in Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey are scraping together all their remaining funds and taking on horrendous debts to pay smugglers to ship them to Europe. A dangerous sea crossing to Greece on barely seaworthy boats is their only way out and last remaining hope. Now the forthcoming “readmission agreement” will mean that any who have reached the EU can be sent immediately back to Turkey as soon as they are apprehended by border control officers.

This new agreement conveniently pulls the EU border control agency, Frontex, out of the spotlight of criticism. Allegations of massive human rights violations by Frontex officials have particularly focussed on their activities on the border between Turkey and Greece. Pro Asyl, the organisation for refugees, has published comprehensive documentation detailing the illegal “push-back” actions of the European border police. It describes

the arbitrary mistreatment and incarceration of refugees by masked special officers. Boatloads of exhausted refugees were abandoned to their fate in Turkish waters, drifting about without fuel or food or water. Their requests for asylum were never registered, let alone processed.

Under the readmission agreement, refugees can now be pushed back into Turkey perfectly legally.

At a recent conference, the EU interior minister decided to make similar agreements with transit states in North Africa and Asia. EU commissioner Malmström suggested for this purpose a “mobility partnership”, resembling those she recently negotiated with Tunisia and Azerbaijan. Her sights are set on Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Egypt. They will be offered a little financial help in return for being obligated to act more aggressively against refugees seeking to enter Europe.

The “mobility partnership” is the next step in the EU’s long plan to outsource the policing of border controls to non-European countries. This plan includes readmission agreements and the setting up of “regional protection programmes”—meaning the construction of refugee camps reaching as far as the Sahel region—and a closer collaboration with these countries over the detection of refugees throughout the Mediterranean coastal areas.

Cecilia Malmström has the barefaced cheek to present this EU policy of outsourcing responsibility for refugee welfare as being a humanitarian response to the Lampedusa refugee catastrophe three months ago, in which more than 600 refugees drowned over several days. She declared that this was “a unique opportunity to show that the EU was based upon values of solidarity and practical humanitarian actions.”

The European external border surveillance system (Eurosur) commenced operation on December 2. It represents a further important building block in the construction of a “Fortress Europe” that is intended to be an insurmountable barrier against asylum seekers.

A surveillance system costing €250 million (US\$340 million) protects the EU borders against “illegal” immigrants, using drones, satellite-based search systems, offshore sensors and biometric identity controls. Countries participating in the information network already include Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, with the Spanish national control centre . Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt are expected to join soon.

All information gathered by Eurosur is transferred to the central command centre of the European border control agency, Frontex, in Warsaw, where operations are coordinated, such as the detection of refugee boats long before they reach European waters, in order to intercept them and force them to return to Africa.

Nevertheless, EU Commissioner Malström has announced that Eurosur’s contribution would be “to rescue migrants from overloaded and unseaworthy boats and thus avoid future refugee tragedies in the Mediterranean.”

Karl Kopp, European representative for Pro Asyl, is of the different opinion that the people smugglers will react to the harsher sea and coastal surveillance measures by choosing even deadlier routes: “People will then no longer die near Lampedusa, but in seas outside European waters.”

The fact that Eurosur’s purpose is not to rescue those in peril at sea, but purely to implement border controls against refugees, also reveals the underlying reality that the Mediterranean states Italy, France, Spain, Greece and Malta are reluctant to recognise any new legal prescriptions requiring them to actively rescue asylum seekers.

The EU Commission has already set aside an additional €50 million for further border control operations to be carried out by Frontex. These sums are for the deployment of warships in the Mediterranean and for the reinforcement of Turkish border controls.

These refugee tragedies do not result from a lack of information about boats getting into trouble at sea, as Malmström seeks to maintain. They occur because of a sheer lack of concern for the rescuing of shipwrecked refugees and an unwillingness to offer them any help. To illustrate this, the Italian journalist Fabrizio Gatti has established that the death of 260 refugees only a few days after the catastrophe at Lampedusa was overwhelmingly attributable to intentional official negligence.

The boat in question started foundering on October 11, after being fired upon by the Libyan coastguards shortly after putting to sea. At first the Italian authorities ignored their satellite-transmitted SOS and re-transmitted it to Malta, even though Italian coastguard ships were in the vicinity. The director of Italy’s coastguard justified this course of action by asserting that the refugee boat had remained in the Maltese sea rescue zone. Hours later Malta requested help from the Italian coastguard, but when the rescue ship eventually arrived, it was too late to save the lives of half of the 450 refugees on board the ailing vessel.

The reactionary character of the European Union is graphically exposed by its inhumane politics regarding asylum seekers. Its sole response to the deaths of 25,000 refugees on European borders over the last 20 years is to increase repressive measures. Behind the terms “mobility partnership”, “readmission agreement” and “regional protection programme”, terms that could come straight out of Orwell’s Newspeak, lurks the ruthless politics of Fortress Europe, where the deaths of thousands of refugees are seen as a cheap price to pay.

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