

# Austrian-led conference closes Balkan route for refugees and divides Europe

By Martin Kreickenbaum  
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A conference of West Balkan states organised by the Austrian government ended with a decision to effectively close the borders for refugees on the so-called “Balkan route,” blocking their entry to Macedonia from Greece. The move will unleash a humanitarian crisis in Greece and intensify tensions throughout Europe.

In an unprecedented move within the European Union (EU), the Greek government recalled its ambassador from Vienna to protest the conference.

Under the title “Managing migration together”, ministers from EU members Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria met in Vienna with their colleagues from the Balkan countries of Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia. Neither representatives from the EU Commission, nor ministers from the states on both ends of the Balkan route, Greece and Germany, were invited.

In the subsequent press briefing, conference participants sharply criticised the EU’s refugee policy. They maintained that the EU had backed open borders and a policy of “waving through” refugees, while propagating a national solution of closing borders.

Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz declared on the German television channel ARD that “those who campaigned for open borders [had] certainly not solved the refugee crisis, but definitely intensified it.” This criticism was clearly aimed at the German and Greek governments.

Austria “was overwhelmed,” Kurz continued, and the Balkan states could not be left to deal with the refugee situation by themselves. “Therefore it is now about ending the passage to the north,” he concluded.

Austrian Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner added, “The flow of migrants through the Balkan route must be massively reduced. We want a chain reaction of reason.”

This chain reaction of inhumane deterrence of refugees was initiated by the Austrian government last week, when it announced its intention to accept only 80 asylum applications per day and to allow just 3,200 refugees per day to travel through on their way to Germany and other northern European states.

The Austrian announcement was a welcome pretext for the Balkan states to immediately close their borders, and only

allow Syrian and Iraqi refugees with valid travel documents already registered in Greece to pass through. On Monday, when hundreds of Afghans stranded at the Macedonian border post of Gevgelija protested against the decision, the Macedonian government temporarily shut the border completely. Thousands of refugees subsequently gathered on the Greek side of the border, camping in the open air.

Although the border was opened again on Tuesday, it was only for refugees from Iraq and Syria. As a result, hundreds of refugees, mainly from Afghanistan, are currently stranded on the Balkan route. More than 600 are stuck in Serbia and can neither continue their journey nor return, along with more than 700 in Macedonia. At the same time, the Greek government has begun brutally herding refugees into buses and transporting them away from the Macedonian border to hastily established camps near Thessaloniki and Athens.

According to Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reported that the Greek police “beat and kicked Afghan refugees, including women and children, when they refused to get in the bus that was to take them to Athens.”

MSF also observed that refugees stranded at the border had “received no information about their further journey and no or very limited humanitarian help. They were exposed to violence and abuse without protection.” An MSF statement declared, “We have repeatedly described the humanitarian consequences of this domino effect, but the European governments continue to invent new and arbitrary criteria with the sole aim of reducing the flow of people—at any price and in complete disregard for humanitarian requirements. The utter failure of the European governments to find a joint and humane solution, produces only chaos, arbitrariness and discrimination.”

Gemma Gillie, spokeswoman for Doctors Without Borders, added that if the closure of borders was continued, “Greece’s ability to accept will reach capacity within eight days.” Although only a few refugees are arriving at the western end of the Balkan route—in Slovenia no refugees were registered on Monday, and in Germany only 103 on Tuesday—the movement of refugees fleeing over the Aegean Sea continues unabated.

Despite it being winter, between 2,000 and 4,000 refugees continue to arrive on the Greek islands daily. More than half of

them are Syrians, and 1 in 5 comes from Afghanistan, for whom further travel is blocked.

Although the UNHCR reports that more than 70 percent of Afghan refugees state they are fleeing war and violence and 70 percent of these refugees were accepted into the EU last year, they are now described as “economic migrants” who are denied all rights to come to Europe and seek protection there.

According to the figures of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 102,457 refugees have arrived in Greece since the beginning of the year, while 321 did not survive the journey across the ice-cold Aegean. However, Greece only has capacity for a few thousand in search of protection. Huge camps, planned to house over 50,000 people, are still under construction. A large percentage of refugees thus find themselves homeless on the streets of Athens, without any assistance or medical care.

However, Greece was sharply criticised in the statement from the West Balkan conference in Vienna. The statement declares that it is necessary “to return to a state of affairs in which all Schengen states stick to the Schengen regulations and refuse entry to those from third countries at the external borders if they do not meet entry criteria or have not filed an asylum application despite having the opportunity to do so.”

For its part, the Greek government responded very sharply to not being included in the conference, describing it as a “hostile” meeting. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras threatened that his government would block European Union decisions if border closures are not halted. Minister of migration Ioannis Mouzalas stated, “Greece will not accept becoming the Lebanon of Europe.” In Lebanon, with a population of 4 million, more than 1 million refugees from Syria are living in temporary camps.

Then on Thursday, Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias recalled Greece’s ambassador from Vienna. Kotzias justified the move by saying that only in this way “can the friendly relations between the Greek and Austrian states and peoples be maintained.” This is diplomatic double-talk for recognising that relations between the two states are in a deep freeze.

In the European Union, Austria’s initiative to close the borders has provoked criticism and hectic activity. In its invitation to yesterday’s meeting of EU interior ministers, Dutch Interior Minister Klaas Dijkhoff and EU Commissioner for migration and the interior Dimitris Avramopoulos insisted that a joint European solution was required. At the same time, they are working on an emergency plan to deal with the mounting humanitarian crisis so as to maintain a semblance of humanitarianism.

In diplomatic circles in Brussels, the consequences are being referred to much more openly. The online newspaper *euobserver* cited an EU diplomat as saying, “We cannot allow Greece to become a massive open-air internment camp.” He added that “the maintenance of the integrity of the Schengen zone was decisive.” Another source from “an influential EU

state” told the same newspaper with reference to the €85 billion bailout for Greece’s banks, “We don’t want 500,000 migrants to destabilise the Greek government and Greece itself. We will never see our money again and the entire EU would fall apart.”

The EU’s response, led by Germany, consists of the further militarisation of the EU’s external borders. This includes the deployment guidelines for the NATO fleet in the Aegean Sea to trace refugee boats and turn them back from the Greek coast.

“We will participate in the international efforts to combat people smuggling and illegal migration in the Aegean,” said the Secretary General of the military alliance, Jens Stoltenberg, after a NATO council meeting. Stoltenberg remained silent about the fact that the refugees being targeted are seeking to flee the horrific crimes perpetrated by precisely the same imperialist powers who are now sending warships to prevent them from doing so.

There were disputes until the last minute between the Greek and Turkish governments about in which waters the ships should operate. The government in Ankara withdrew an agreement at short notice to accept refugees rescued at sea.

However, German Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen made clear that the entire NATO operation would succeed or fail on the promise to repatriate refugees to Turkey. The utter cynicism of the European powers was expressed in Von der Leyen’s statement, “The alliance certainly does not want to involve itself in an Aegean intervention which makes the Aegean route into Greece and thereby the EU more safe.”

However, history shows that the refugees will not be deterred by the military closure of borders. They will find more dangerous routes and depend increasingly on the mercies of unscrupulous smugglers, who the EU and NATO allegedly want to combat.

Smugglers will profit above all from the border closures in the Balkans. Switzerland’s *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* reported that “the uncertainty about existing and future border regimes is transforming the Balkan route into a wild free-for-all.”

Even in Hungary, which thought that with the construction of a massive fence and the deployment of the army it could firmly seal itself off, the number of refugees received has increased sharply. During the first three weeks of February, 1,200 refugees were detained for “illegally entering.” The refugees are convicted in emergency legal proceedings, and, because deportation to Serbia is seldom possible, detained indefinitely in internment camps.

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