

Tsipras acts as gatekeeper for Fortress Europe

By Katerina Selin
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After reaching agreement with European Union (EU) representatives at a March 7 summit in Brussels, the Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government of Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras is playing a key role in safeguarding Fortress Europe.

One day after the Brussels summit, Tsipras travelled to Izmir, Turkey, to meet with Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Izmir lies on the Aegean Sea coast, a few hundred kilometres from the Greek islands of Chios and Lesbos, in the centre of the refugee routes.

Tsipras and Davutoglu praised each other for their unified position in the refugee crisis, sounding like two old friends as they spoke of “dear Alexis” and “my friend Ahmet.” With beaming faces, they handed out roses to female journalists in honour of International Women’s Day.

The agreements between the two countries are nothing to laugh about, however. They focus on a stipulation that “irregular” migrants be deported with greater speed back to Turkey. In 2001, Greece and Turkey adopted an agreement that took effect in April 2002 on deportation of “illegal” immigrants back to Turkey. But until now, Turkey only sporadically fulfilled the terms of the agreement. In 2014, it refused 90 percent of some 9,700 Greek requests for repatriation.

As part of a dirty deal with the EU, repatriations will now be rushed through. For every Syrian refugee sent back, another will be permitted entry into the EU. Final discussions in the EU on this controversial proposal will occur this week. Tsipras declared it was “unacceptable that countries with high-tech systems at their disposal had been unable to put a stop to the smugglers.”

Concealed behind the phrase “fight against smugglers” is an inhumane policy primarily directed

not at traffickers, but at refugees. It serves as a justification for NATO’s mission in the Aegean and the Mediterranean to close refugees’ escape routes, forcing them into even more dangerous and costly detours.

In Izmir, Tsipras again warned North Africans not to travel to Europe. He thus openly endorsed attempts to keep refugees from the Maghreb out of Europe. In Germany, these countries were only recently classified as “safe countries of origin,” so that refugees and migrants from there can be deported more easily.

Tsipras would not be Tsipras, however, if he did not cloak such extreme right-wing resolutions with empty humanitarian phrases. What was taking place in the Mediterranean, said Tsipras, was a “disgrace to our culture.” Standing side by side with Davutoglu, he announced, “Greece and Turkey will serve as models of humanity and hospitality.”

In reality, the agreement on the repatriation of refugees into Turkey has been classified as a violation of international law by several organisations. Following the legal studies of ProAsyl, Human Rights Watch and Statewatch, the UN has also now designated the deal between Turkey and Greece as illegal.

Nonetheless, Athens has begun to implement these policies. Zacharoula Tsigotli, the head of the Hellenic Police General Staff announced the rapid implementation of the Izmir agreements in collaboration with the Frontex border agency and the Turkish police. Between Thursday and Monday, 240 “irregular” migrants from North Africa had already been transferred to Turkey. They were handed over to Turkish police in groups of 80 at the customs office in Kipoi, Greece, near the Turkish border.

At present, there are more than 44,500 refugees in Greece. Over the last year, the number of arrests by

police have shot up along with the number of refugees. According to Greek police, in the year to January 2016, 70,623 people were arrested “for illegal entry and residence.” The year before, 4,002 had been arrested. Most people picked up in the last year came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq over the Aegean Sea to Greece. They are referred to as “illegal foreigners” in the statistics.

The police are also increasingly involved in refugee policy. Prior to Monday’s EU summit, they cleared out Victoria Square in Athens. Seventy refugees who had slept in the square for several days were sent to refugee shelters euphemistically known as “welcome centres.” Police immediately began guarding the square to stop other refugees from camping out there.

Police patrols will also be stepped up in other public spaces to prevent camping. Four refugee families who had left Victoria Square intending to stay in the large Pedion Areos Park were also brought to the Elliniko camp by police. Police are posted at Athens’ central Larissis train station to prevent refugees from travelling north. The railway service OSE was instructed not to sell refugees tickets to the northern border.

While up to now officials have not resorted to force and have been aided by translators, these operations place serious limitations on the freedom of movement of refugees and have increased the police presence throughout the Athens area. The Greek police force is penetrated by right-wing and fascist organisations. In the 2012 and 2015 elections, half of the country’s police officers cast their votes for the fascist Golden Dawn party.

The partial reintroduction of the notorious DELTA force is a warning to all refugees, workers and youth. Until last October, DELTA police units patrolled Athens in small groups of motorcyclists and were known for their brutal treatment of migrants and left-wing demonstrators. The Syriza government disbanded the groups and incorporated them into the regular police. In February, they reactivated a group of at least 65 former DELTA officers under the new name “Omicron,” however.

At the Macedonian border, the government has hesitated to use the police to destroy the large makeshift refugee camps. In the coming days, people in the village of Idomeni are to be brought by bus to other shelters. While approximately 1,000 refugees have left

the provisional camp voluntarily, more than 12,000 people still live there in the mud and overflowing tents.

The scenes there are like those typically associated with disaster areas. On Friday, state-owned news broadcaster ERT showed clusters of people forming around food distribution trucks. Desperate people shouted and raised their arms, fighting with each other for bags of basic foods like potatoes and milk.

Many refugees now try to avoid Idomeni, risking other paths across the border. On Sunday night, two men and a woman drowned trying to cross a river on the Macedonian border. A further 23 people from their group were rescued and taken to the Macedonian town of Gevgelija.

More than 1,000 refugees, including many women and children, left Idomeni yesterday morning after news spread of a border crossing to Macedonia a few kilometres away that was unprotected by fences. They passed on foot through the village of Chamilo and crossed a torrential stream near the border with the help of a cable fastened on each side. Greek police were unable to stop the people and followed them.

After many hundreds had crossed at an unsecured point on the border, Macedonian police arrested more than 30 photojournalists who had accompanied the refugees. The aim of the arrests was to exclude witnesses as the Macedonian police moved in and savagely attacked refugees. Bruised and bloody refugees told reporters after the assault of being kicked and beaten by police.

In accordance with the new EU agreements, the men, women and children, who had endured a dangerous, exhausting and costly journey, are to be deported to Turkey, a country in which not even the minimum standards for asylum policies are met.

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