

Germany prepares to deport 14,000 refugees to Kosovo

Martin Kreickenbaum**26 April 2010**

On April 14, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democratic Union) and his counterpart in Kosovo, Bajram Rexhepi, signed an agreement that obligates Kosovo to repatriate 14,000 refugees currently living in Germany. In addition to 10,000 Roma, those deported include Ashkali, Kosovo Egyptians and members of the Serbian minority in Kosovo.

With its decision, the German government is ignoring reports by the United Nations Refugee Commission (UNHCR), which has been warning against deportation to Kosovo since 2006. The organisation has warned of dangers to life and limb, in particular for those belonging to minorities. In addition, the desolate economic situation in Kosovo means that repatriated refugees have virtually no chance of a job, health care provision or a proper schooling for their children who are forced to live in miserable slums.

De Maizière defended the agreement by declaring that there was no intention “to deport these persons en masse.” The Kosovo government had requested that not more than 2,500 refugees be repatriated per year, But the agreed-upon contingent is in fact likely to increase because the agreement also includes those refugees living in Germany without a proper residency permit and who are alleged to have entered the country via Kosovo. According to European immigration law, this means that this group can also be sent back to the Balkan mini-state.

Most of the refugees selected for deportation have lived in Germany for 10 years or more. They have undertaken to adapt to German society, and their children attend German schools. Nevertheless, they have been consistently denied a proper residency permit or recognition as refugees fleeing a civil war. They were merely “tolerated” and lacked any proper legal status. A right of residency has been repeatedly rejected by state interior ministers belonging to all of Germany’s main political parties. This also meant they were denied access to the job market and adequate health care coverage.

Instead of being helped to get jobs and housing in Germany, these refugees will now be fobbed off with a token “wage top-up” of €150 per month as part of the deportation package. But the affected persons will often not be able to access this money themselves because the attached conditions completely ignore the realities of life in Kosovo. The payments are only for five months, and many employers will use them as a reason not to pay any further wages. After the five months are up, they will simply sack the workers, leaving them with no hope of further employment.

The Kosovo government’s new agreement to repatriate refugees will serve to put even more pressure on those in Germany to consider returning voluntarily. This is because if they wait for a forced deportation, they stand to lose virtually all personal property and assets held in Germany and are only allowed to take one small suitcase with them. After leaving, they will never be allowed back into an EU member country.

The immigration authorities in Germany had already deported 541 Kosovar refugees in 2009. In the first few months of this year, further deportations followed. In March, the refugee organisation Pro Asyl reported that 150 Roma and Ashkali from North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony were flown out to Pristina in a charter plane.

According to Pro Asyl, this was by no means a deportation of “single people and criminal elements,” as the authorities would like to have us believe, but of families with children, elderly people and invalids—some suffering from traumatisation—dialysis patients and people with heart conditions. And that was before this subsequent recent agreement, which will now likely eliminate all remaining humanitarian scruples left in the deportation machinery.

The negotiations regarding this agreement show every sign of being a result of blackmail, with the Kosovar refugees as victims. Kosovo is only recognised as a sovereign state by a small minority of nations. Only 5 countries offer visas to Kosovar citizens, in contrast to the 22 countries that issue visas to Afghans. By vaguely promising future EU visas, the European Parliament has put enormous pressure on the Kosovar government in Pristina to agree to take back their refugees.

Some EU states reportedly even threatened to break off diplomatic relations with them if they did not agree to take back refugees. Now a deal has been completed with Germany, and similar deals have been made with Switzerland, Norway and Belgium. And Austria and Hungary have started negotiations for similar agreements.

The vast majority of the Roma refugees fled from Kosovo in 1999 during the NATO war against Yugoslavia. While the official NATO doctrine claimed to be protecting the Kosova Albanians against Serb attacks and “ethnic cleansing,” the ethnic nationalism deliberately heated up by NATO and the EU resulted in the Serbian minorities, the Roma and Ashkali, also being driven from their homes. Some went to Serbia, some to Macedonia and Montenegro, but most applied for asylum in western Europe or sought refugee status. From the original 150,000 Roma who used

to live in Kosovo, today only 35,000 are left.

A typical example is what happened to the Mahalla settlement in the town of Mitrovica in the north of Kosovo. The Roma township, that still housed 8,000 people in 1999, was completely destroyed in 1999 and again in 2004. Many were only able to escape to the northern, Serbian part of Mitrovica. They were housed temporarily in two camps, in which they then had to live for another 10 years. The earth in the camps is totally contaminated due to the proximity of a lead mine, but the inhabitants have nowhere else to go. In 2004, the Mahalla settlement once again became the focus of civil unrest. Today it offers housing for fewer than 1,000 people.

For the refugees who are now supposed to go and live there, the situation in Kosovo is completely bleak, without any hope or perspective.

A research study of the living conditions of deported refugees in Kosovo carried out by sociologist Stephan Dünnwald, under commission for Pro Asyl, came to a devastating conclusion. “Voluntary and forced repatriation from Western European nations (to Kosovo) confront the returners with the reality that the small country is at the level of many developing countries: there is widespread poverty, especially in the countryside, the black market dominates, mass unemployment, state structures that can barely deliver basic services because of chronic underfunding, underpaid public service workers leading to corruption and ‘under the counter payments.’”

To add to this, the state of Kosovo is dominated by mafia clans, who are nurtured by Westerners. Their “parties” operate their own secret services, which organise the distribution of funds to control political outcomes.

There are only around 300,000 jobs available in Kosovo for the more than 1.8 million inhabitants. The official unemployment rate is 45 percent—but for the Roma and Ashkali it is 95-100 percent. The agricultural sector is not competitive, and there is no productive industry worth naming. The main export is scrap metal.

After it declared its independence, Kosovo adopted a “modern” constitution, declaring itself to be a multi-ethnic state that guaranteed the protection of minorities. In reality, the security of Serbs, Roma and Ashkali remains precarious. Officially there were no attacks against Roma in 2009, but in reality the Kosovo police force—the majority of whom are Albanians—do not even record crimes reported by Roma, let alone investigate them. The EU Eulex Mission, which is supposed to be responsible for developing the police and justice system in Kosovo, looks away and does nothing.

In place of the avowed multi-ethnic state, sharp divisions along ethnic grounds have arisen in which the members of minority groups suffer from inadequate housing, unemployment and insufficient health care. Social security payments for people over 65 are only €35 to €45 a month; families with children under five years of age get just €35 to €75, which doesn’t even cover the cost of basic foodstuffs. There are no further state benefits.

And even these handouts are often not available to the deported returners, because they may only be paid out by the local authorities in the area where the refugees were registered as living before they fled. But because their houses were destroyed and the neighbourhood torn down, they simply must find somewhere else

to live. In the absence of any chance of making a living, they become entirely dependent upon relatives or acquaintances and from money sent back home from migrant workers still living in western Europe. But after the new agreements over deportations, it is to be feared that this source of income will stop flowing.

Particularly affected by the lack of opportunities are the children, many of whom were born in Germany and attended school there. They often speak very basic Albanian, if they speak it at all. They are often targets of bullying from fellow pupils and have to endure the fact that their destitute parents can never pay for school trips. More than two thirds of deported children stop going to school altogether after their return to Kosovo. Without school leaving qualifications, they have no chance to get even one of the few jobs that exist, leaving them with no future prospects.

What appears at first glance to be a perverse indifference on the part of the German government and its officials towards the fate of thousands of refugees, is actually the result of a cold calculation. All over Europe, nationalist sentiments are being deliberately stirred up aimed at making immigrants and refugees the scapegoats for the financial and economic crisis.

Using the allegation that they show no serious desire to integrate, immigrants are labelled as potential terrorists if they are Muslims, and as potential criminals if they are Sinti or Roma.

The Berlusconi regime in Italy has encouraged full-blown pogroms against the Roma, while in Germany, they are being deported with “bureaucratic correctness.”

In a December 2009 article for the *Süddeutschen Zeitung*, Sanelia Selimagic from the International Organisation for Migrants (IOM) summed up the situation as follows: “The regulations are becoming stricter. The world economy crisis is affecting everyone and social benefits are being cut at the same time as the right of residence is being restricted. The end result is that the Roma will simply have to leave.”



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