

European Union divided over refugee question

Martin Kreickenbaum
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The landing of North African refugees on the Italian island of Lampedusa and on Malta has unleashed a series of violent disputes within the European Union. The authorities in Italy and Malta say they are overwhelmed by the need to accommodate and provide for some 20,000 refugees, and are demanding help from other EU states.

The governments of Germany and France in particular are refusing to take any refugees, and say that Italy will have to deal with this “problem” itself. In the latest escalation of the crisis, France closed its southern border at the weekend to prevent North African refugees crossing by train from the Italian side.

When the Berlusconi government announced a week ago that it would grant limited residency rights to the Tunisian refugees, enabling them to travel throughout the Schengen area, it resulted in heated exchanges at the meeting of EU justice and interior ministers on April 11. Press interviews with the various parties to the dispute then poured oil on the fire. The interior ministers of France, Germany and Italy made mutual accusations of breaching EU law and the Schengen Treaty.

Since no agreement could be reached, Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni from the racist Northern League threatened to leave the EU. In the end, it was only possible to reach a minimum consensus on conducting joint patrols off the Tunisian coast, and to step up measures aimed at stopping the flow of refugees.

The dispute has been unleashed by the arrival since February of some 25,000 refugees, who have landed on the tiny island of Lampedusa, which is only about 100 kilometres from the Tunisian mainland. These are mostly young Tunisians, who have continued to leave the country after the fall of the dictator Ben Ali, seeing no future for themselves. They do not trust the transitional government and are seeking to escape unemployment and the catastrophic economic conditions. They are taking advantage of the fact that the transitional government in Tunis has temporarily lifted the bilateral agreement with Italy regarding the return of refugees and has reduced coastal patrols.

From the beginning, the Italian authorities have instigated a humanitarian drama in order to frighten off any further refugees. Initially, the reception centre on Lampedusa remained closed, with Interior Minister Maroni declaring instead a state of emergency on the island. Refugees are forced to camp out in the open, and are reliant on local inhabitants for support. In February, other EU member states refused to take refugees from North Africa.

The Italian authorities then proceeded to relocate refugees from Lampedusa to camps on the mainland. The reception centre on Lampedusa, which was then opened, is now full to bursting. Designed to accommodate about 800, it is now housing 2,000 refugees, who are

under a strict police and military guard.

The refugees are a thorn in the side for the Italian government, since it uses the witch-hunt against refugees to divert attention from the social misery and cuts, making migrants into scapegoats. In recent years, Berlusconi’s right-wing government has sharpened the laws against illegal immigration and carried out a pogrom against Roma. The government wants to get rid of the refugees from North Africa as quickly as possible. That is why they have issued temporary residency permits—which are valid throughout the Schengen area (comprised of 25 European countries) and are comparable to a tourist visa—in the hope that the Tunisians will above all travel on to France. Many of the refugees speak French and have friends and relatives there.

Together with the Maltese government, Berlusconi is pushing for the EU Commission to activate a 2001 EU directive on temporary protection, according to which all EU states are obliged to take refugees in the case of a mass immigration. So it is no accident that Maroni and Berlusconi are talking about an “exodus of Biblical proportions” and of a “human tsunami” that has engulfed the Italian coast. Berlusconi made his dramatic call for help from the EU on the eve of the EU ministers’ conference. He said, “Europe is either something that is real and concrete, or it is nothing. And in that case, it would be better if we all went our own way, and each was left to follow his own policy and his own ego.”

However, this blatant threat that the European Union faces another crucial test did not have its intended effect. Instead of solidarity, the EU member states responded by announcing that border controls with Italy would be reintroduced. EU Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström did not yet see the conditions being met for implementing the EU directive.

The French interior minister, Claude Guéant, instructed the regional police authorities to reinstate border controls with Italy and only allow people to pass who possessed valid travel documents and had sufficient financial resources. He justified the measures by saying that “no signal should be given that we accept irregular migration into the EU”. In France, nearly 3,000 refugees have already been apprehended.

The Austrian interior minister, Maria Fekter, spoke in similar terms, warning of a “huge vacuum effect” if “word spread that Italy is handing out visas to illegal immigrants, in order to get rid of them quickly.” According to Fekter, the arrival of refugees from North Africa would “prepare the ground for criminality”.

This slandering and criminalisation of refugees, who are being denied their fundamental right to travel freely and for protection from persecution, poverty and misery, is motivated by domestic political considerations. The rhetoric of the Berlusconi, Sarkozy and Merkel governments differs only in degree. It also obscures the enormous

tensions that have arisen in the EU as a result of the refugee question. The validity of the central rules of European integration is being placed in question. The reestablishment of border controls is just a symbolic expression of this process of the drifting apart of national interests.

Although the Italian government has issued temporary residency permits to refugees in accordance with current EU law, Guéant in France and the German Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich (Christian Social Union, CSU) have declared that the permits cannot be recognised and falsely accuse Italy of breaching the law.

In response, not only have border controls been reinstated by France, but by Germany as well. Although state governments are not responsible for controlling borders, the Bavarian state interior minister, Joachim Herrmann (CSU), and the Hesse interior minister, Boris Rhein (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), announced the introduction of border controls. CSU expert on interior affairs Hans-Peter Uhl described the actions of the Italian government as a “glaring breach of European law. Illegal refugees are being legalised, so that they can continue their journey to Germany and France.” Uhl even suggested re-imposing controls on air travel from Italy.

Germany and France are consciously breaching the Schengen Treaty, negotiated in 1985 and adopted into EU law in 1997. This guarantees the complete freedom of travel of EU citizens and migrants with valid papers. Inside Europe, border controls were thus abolished and can only be reintroduced in exceptional circumstances. The last time this happened was during the football World Cup and European Cup, and also in the run-up to the G8 summits in Genoa in 2001 and Heligendamm in 2007.

The sharpening verbal disputes were accompanied by the abandonment of the usual diplomatic reserve. Social Democratic Party (SPD) interior affairs expert Birgit Sippel condemned the granting of residency permits as an “attempt at extortion by the Italian government”. The vice chairman of the CDU parliamentary group, Günter Krings, even accused the Italian government of using “blackmail methods”, such as are “known only by the Mafia”.

Italy’s Interior Minister Maroni reacted sharply and said, “We have asked for solidarity, and we were told, help yourselves. I wonder if it still makes sense to stay in the European Union. It is better to be alone than in bad company.”

At first glance, the ferocity of the dispute might appear surprising, since it “only” concerns the fate of 25,000 refugees. If they were dispersed between all 27 member states, it would be less than 1,000 for each country. But Rome, Paris and Berlin are not concerned with the fate of the refugees. They are merely the means of stoking up nationalism and chauvinism.

In the background, processes are at work that are driving forward the division of the European Union, processes which have increasingly come to the surface since the finance crisis of 2008. The emphasis on national interests has further increased with the debt crisis in Greece, Ireland and Portugal. The German government only agreed to the euro rescue arrangements and financial aid for the affected countries when it could dictate the conditions for imposing harsh austerity measures and social cuts.

The recent interest rate rise by the European Central Bank was also at the behest of Germany. In particular, this has put pressure on Spain and Italy, whose economies will suffer as a result of the interest rate rise, and which could yet undermine the creditworthiness of these countries. It is no accident that the refugee crisis has put the German and Italian governments at loggerheads.

Insidiously, this conflict is being conducted on the backs of the refugees from North Africa. They are slandered as “economic refugees” who have no right to be in Europe. While the European governments make mutual recriminations of breaking the law, the refugees are being denied their fundamental right to protection and social security.

The state secretary at the Italian Ministry of Infrastructure, Roberto Castelli, a member of the Northern League, even said that he would prefer if the refugee boats were “shot down”, because “all means are allowed to prevent an invasion”. Castelli pointed to Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero, who has ordered the shooting of immigrants.

In the meantime, the Berlusconi government has tried to conclude a new bilateral treaty with the Tunisian transitional government. On April 5 it was agreed that Italy would provide Tunisia with €300 million in aid for its border controls, and would supply patrol boats and off-road vehicles.

However, this agreement only covers refugees from Tunisia reaching Italy after April 5, and not the approximately 23,000 Tunisian migrants who have already arrived in Italy.

Since Tunisia itself has become a destination for refugees from Libya, currently having taken in up to 200,000 people, the agreement with Italy is being met with fierce popular resistance. The president of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, Abdeljelil Bedoui, said, “We have asked our authorities not to agree to the dictates of the Italian authorities, and to wait, and not to agree to any mass return of migrants, as was the case under the readmission agreement with Italy signed by the dictatorship of Ben Ali, which showed no respect for human rights.”

Meanwhile, EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso has stepped up the pressure on the Tunisian government. At a meeting last Tuesday in Tunis with Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi he demanded that Tunisian authorities undertake comprehensive measures to halt the emigration to Europe. Moreover, Tunisia should readmit refugees. Barroso threatened that the promised €400 million in aid would only be forthcoming in case of cooperation.

Barroso’s intervention was aimed mainly at alleviating the sharp conflicts within the EU on the question of the Tunisian refugees, which has become political dynamite.

The dispute over the refugees ultimately resulted in a consensus in areas where national interests were not affected, but where it concerned the common cause of preventing further migration. The Berlusconi and Sarkozy governments have agreed to joint patrols off the Tunisian coast. In addition, the Frontex mission in the Mediterranean is to be expanded. The EU interior ministers said nothing about the fact that since the beginning of the year, 600 refugees have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean. Another 560 who set off from Libya some time ago are still missing.



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