

European Union steps up measures to ward off refugees

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The European Union Commission has declared its readiness in principle to conduct a trial reform of the Schengen Agreement, reintroducing border controls between EU states as proposed by France and Italy. With the governments of the Netherlands, Malta, Greece and Germany indicating their consent to the proposal of French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, another pillar of European integration—following the euro—is now being undermined.

The planned dilution of the Schengen Agreement through the renationalisation of border controls also constitutes an admission of the failure of the so-called common European asylum and migration policy. Instead of pursuing such a policy, each EU member state will once again compete against all the others in the sordid business of walling off refugees. Berlusconi and Sarkozy's demand for a strengthening of the European border agency Frontex is intended to support this closed-door policy.

The roughly 25,000 refugees from North Africa who have landed on the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa in the recent period triggered this reform of the Schengen agreement. After Italian authorities gave the refugees temporary residence permits allowing them to move freely inside the Schengen area, the French government unilaterally suspended the Schengen Agreement and reintroduced identity checks at its border with Italy. Train services between the border towns of Menton and Ventimiglia were temporarily interrupted. Border controls were also tightened in Germany, where a dragnet was organised to hunt down fugitives in Bavaria.

Meeting in Rome, Sarkozy and Berlusconi declared: "We want to continue observance of the Treaty of Schengen. It will therefore have to be reformed". In a letter to the EU Commission, they called for the opportunity to test the reintroduction of border controls by member states. The measure was said to be particularly appropriate in relation to the EU states' "extraordinary difficulties in handling common borders". The EU Commission would have to "rapidly advance [a] political" tightening of the Schengen regulations.

Commission spokesman Olivier Bailly said: "The letter is constructive and points in the right direction". He added that "the rules of the Schengen Agreement are in need of clarification". On May 4, the commission intends to make proposals for discussion at a May 11 meeting of EU interior and justice ministers.

Sarkozy and Berlusconi's initiative was met with approval in the

Netherlands, where immigration minister Gerd Leers said he welcomed "the debate on tightening and improving the Schengen rules to combat illegal immigration".

The German government also signaled its basic agreement. Government spokesman Steffen Seibert initially said the government wished to adhere to the principle of freedom of travel, but both Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party) and Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich took up the initiative from Rome.

Frederick told the *Die Welt* newspaper that he was open to "substantial further development" of the Schengen Treaty. The official line from Berlin is that the Schengen instruments require "fine-tuning", and a return to border controls in exceptional situations—such as mass arrivals of illegal immigrants from third countries—is conceivable.

Erosion of the Schengen Agreement, a fundamental pillar of the European Union, thus seems to be already settled. The agreement to gradually phase out border controls stems from a 1985 treaty between the Benelux countries, France and Germany, which only came into force in 1995. The Schengen accord lifted controls between the borders separating signatory states. In 1997, the Treaty of Amsterdam integrated the Schengen Agreement into EU law, rendering it binding on all member states of the European Union. Only the UK and Ireland were granted an exceptional status.

The Schengen Agreement within the EU was designed to promote economic integration. At the same time, the external borders of the EU region were massively reinforced and hermetically sealed. Another consequence of the Treaty of Amsterdam was that the domains of interior and justice policy became the responsibility of the EU, and asylum and migration policy were therefore harmonized.

The main developments behind the current move are the Dublin II Regulation of 2003 (governing responsibility for asylum application), the Prüm Convention of 2005 (promoting closer cooperation on the levels of law enforcement and the judiciary), as well as the establishment of the European border agency, Frontex, which has been operational since 2005.

The Schengen Agreement thus laid the foundation for the establishment of Fortress Europe. After the militarization of the EU's external borders and the establishment of various databases for the

identification, control and deportation of refugees—such as the Schengen Information System (SIS), the Eurodac fingerprint data base, and the Visa Information System (VIS)—the state’s repression and surveillance apparatus was dramatically upgraded. The states involved in the Schengen Agreement all relied on the EU’s external borders being hermetically closed to any unwanted immigration, each state assuming responsibility for “its” refugees.

Borders between EU states are now to be closed again. Deterrence of refugee entry into a country will not only occur at the EU’s external border; it is now to be primarily a national concern. In scenes reminiscent of the German author B. Traven’s novel *The Death Ship*, each EU country will attempt to avoid responsibility for incoming refugees by foisting it onto the others. It can also be anticipated that European governments will try to outdo each other in subjecting refugees to hardship and repression.

The reason for these developments is only superficially the recent flight of the 25,000 refugees from North Africa. Their number is relatively low, amounting to fewer than 1,000 per EU member state. In the 1990s, some 600,000 refugees came to Western Europe from Bosnia alone.

The true reason for the Schengen Agreement’s decay has much more to do with increasing political conflict within Europe itself. The introduction of the euro and the free flow of capital, goods and people have not led to a harmonization of corporate economic power and the living conditions of most Europeans. Disputes over financial and economic issues are mounting, and even the future of the euro is now in question. Pursuit of national interests has once again become the top priority.

The refugee issue is also being exploited on the domestic level. European governments are fueling fears of a wave of refugees in order to divert attention from social unrest at home. European countries such as Germany, Austria, France and the Scandinavian countries have made clear that they will not accept, under any circumstances, refugees who manage to enter through the EU’s Mediterranean countries.

In addition, a surge in refugee flows is expected due to the escalation of the war against Libya. Until recently, the Tunisian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi had done the dirty work for the EU, brutally preventing African refugees from reaching Europe. Since 2003, North Africa has been the location of an inhuman system of refugee camps, supported by European governments and funded to the tune of millions of euros. Owing to the fall of Ben Ali in January and the war against Gaddafi, this system can no longer operate. Existing repatriation agreements have been largely suspended, and coastal surveillance greatly reduced.

However, while European powers falsely invoke “humanitarian” pretexts to justify their imperialist war against Libya, the alleged concern for humanity is nowhere to be seen when African refugees, Tunisian job seekers or Libyan war refugees set foot on European soil.

The erosion of the Schengen Agreement goes hand in hand with the bolstering of the European border agency, Frontex, as demanded by

Sarkozy and Berlusconi. Although the media reported that no concrete proposals were submitted at the meeting in Rome, the EU Commission does in fact have before it a draft resolution for a renewal of the Frontex regulation. It is to be adopted at the next meeting of the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs in early May.

Frontex will then not only be upgraded financially and in terms of human resources; it will be accorded new far-reaching powers, necessitating a complete revision of the Schengen Agreement. It is envisaged that Frontex personnel will conduct inspections in ports of the Schengen region—something incompatible with current EU law.

Furthermore, the EU border agency will be able to establish its own computer bank for storing the personal data of migrants, as well as a register of deportees. Frontex will be granted powers from Europol (European Police Office) to do this and access immigrants’ files. The border agency will thus increasingly become a European immigration police force, preying on immigrants throughout the EU.

However, the core of the reorganization will be the upgrading of the EU’s land and sea borders. To this end, the EU will pour hundreds of millions of euros into the networking and coordination of existing surveillance systems. Frontex’s headquarters in Warsaw will then become the main operations center for analyzing data supplied by unmanned drones, land robots, radar and satellite systems. Frontex will even use NATO surveillance systems in its attempt to achieve total control of external EU borders.

During the first debate on the new Frontex ordinance, some members of the European Parliament argued that the text should mention the “priority of maintaining human rights”. But the governments of the EU countries rejected the phrase, dismissing it as unnecessary frills that would have “unreasonably overburdened the ordinance text”.



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