

Germany and France demand the reintroduction of border controls

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The interior ministers of France and Germany, Claude Guéant and Hans-Peter Friedrich, are seeking to reintroduce border controls inside the European Union. In a letter to the EU Commission in Brussels, dated April 17, and leaked to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, they demand that national governments receive “the power of a 30-day temporary reintroduction of internal border controls.” The decision on such action, which Guéant and Frederick have described as a “last resort,” is ultimately to be made by the respective states.

The letter from Guéant and Friedrich, which appeared just a few days before the first round of the French presidential election, was obviously intended as a boost to the campaign of Nicolas Sarkozy on the part of the German government. Under pressure from the extreme right National Front, Sarkozy has been trying for some time to increase his election chances by stirring up xenophobia and resorting to law-and-order slogans.

At a campaign rally in early March, Sarkozy threatened that France would leave the EU Schengen Agreement and abolish the free movement of people in Europe if the EU did not take steps to stem the flow of immigrants across the continent’s external borders. The letter to the EU Commission represents official support for Sarkozy on this issue from the government led by Angela Merkel.

The letter, however, has an importance that goes far beyond a mere electoral tactic. It is another warning that the old national divisions within Europe that led to two world wars in the last century are returning, under conditions where living standards are being hammered by austerity measures.

The Schengen Agreement came into force in 1995 and largely removed border controls inside Europe to allow the unimpeded flow of capital, goods and individuals. At the same time, extensive measures were undertaken to strengthen the continent’s external border in order to restrict the movement of immigrants from eastern Europe and non-EU countries. According to human rights organisations, an estimated 15,000 immigrants trying to enter the European Union have died at borders since the introduction of the Schengen Agreement.

The treaty also increased the powers of the border police to control railway stations and main roads in order to hunt down refugees and illegal migrants.

Under conditions of growing poverty across Europe, France and Germany now want to restore their internal borders. There is widespread agreement on this question within the European Commission, with differences limited to the distribution of powers. The EU Commission has made a proposal for an amendment of the Schengen Agreement to be discussed on Thursday. It also wants to allow various Schengen states to reintroduce border controls for a limited period of 5 to 30 days. Contrary to the wishes of Friedrich and Guéant, however, this measure is to be subject to the approval of the Commission.

A similar procedure already exists. Under Article 23 of the Schengen Agreement, a country can close its borders for a limited period “in the event of a serious threat to public order or internal security”. For the past year, however, there have been repeated disputes over this provision between Brussels and national governments.

As a result, the French government unilaterally, and in open violation of the Schengen Agreement, introduced checks at its border to Italy following the outbreak of the revolution in Tunisia and the NATO-led war against Libya, which resulted in numbers of refugees crossing the Mediterranean and landing on Italian shores. At the same time, the former centre-right government in Denmark re-established checkpoints on its border with Germany.

At the council meeting of EU interior ministers on March 8 of this year, seven EU countries called on the Greek government to strengthen its borders with Turkey. In a joint statement, the interior ministers of Belgium, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden accused the Greek government of showing a “lack of political will” and allowing its border to be “open like a barn door.” The respective interior ministers also threatened to reintroduce border controls to Greece if the latter proved unable to

“effectively protect” its external border.

Guéant and Frederick also justified their latest initiative by referring to the alleged spectre of “uncontrolled immigration” in the EU, which endangers “security and public order.” Alongside Greece, other alleged offenders include Italy, Spain and Portugal.

“I’m for freedom of movement and travel, but if individual states do not do their homework and the crooks come, we need to briefly reintroduce checks at the borders,” Frederick told the security conference of the Christian Social Union last weekend.

German media took Frederick’s assertions at their face value. *Spiegel Online* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported that more than 1 million immigrants were lurking in Greece waiting for a chance to enter central and northern Europe.

In fact, the group referred to consists of about 800,000 registered migrants, who come mainly from Albania, Macedonia and Turkey, and who were welcomed in Greece as a cheap labour force until the drastic austerity measures of the EU left them unemployed and without an income. The research network Clandestino estimates that there are an additional 200,000 migrants without valid immigration status in the country.

The main reason many of these desperate people are driven to emigrate once again to western and northern Europe is the cynical politics of the European Union itself. Migrants are particularly hard hit by the savage austerity measures dictated by the EU, which have led to a steep rise in unemployment and poverty.

In order to defuse the growing rebellion on the part of the Greek population against social cuts, the government in Athens is also trying to scapegoat immigrants and blame them for the economic crisis, unemployment and welfare cuts. The EU-backed government of Lucas Papademos has permitted daily raids against immigrants in which hundreds have been detained, fingerprinted and given deportation papers. Many end up in prisons and detention centres. “Operation Broom” is the name of this anti-immigrant scheme headed by Citizen’s Protection Minister Michalis Chrysochoidis (PASOK).

Health Minister Andreas Loverdos (PASOK) has also demanded the arrest of all persons “who are suspected of transmitting disease.” This accusation is directed at anyone involved in prostitution, which is in and of itself regarded as justification for the suspicion of HIV infection.

Human rights organisations and the European council have drawn attention to the inhumane conditions prevailing for

refugees and migrants in Greece. There are no genuine asylum procedures. Police patrols use live ammunition in their pursuit of refugees on the border with Turkey. Those seeking protection are subject to arbitrary detention in overcrowded camps with totally unacceptable hygienic conditions and without adequate food. Those avoiding captivity are denied any help from government agencies and must live by begging and without shelter.

For the governments in France and Germany, even this is not enough. They are continuing to pressure the Greek government to intensify its campaign against migrants. In addition to greater scrutiny of the border regions, the Papademos government has also undertaken to transform abandoned military barracks into another 30 detention centres for migrants. So far, there are 1,000 refugees locked up in these camps. The plan has been supported by the EU with €250 million to finance three rows of protective fencing for the camps, each one of which is guarded by 150 police officers.

The proposals of Guéant and Frederick are not only directed against foreign workers. They are directly related to the fiscal pact that has been enforced by the German and French governments, forcing European governments to make huge budget cuts at the expense of the working class. The pact is driving much of Greece and southern Europe into bitter poverty. There are growing fears that the social division of Europe could trigger massive new migrations. The German Office for Migration and Refugees has already noted a sharp rise in immigration from Greece and Spain to Germany.

This is why Guéant and Frederick are now pushing for the reintroduction of border controls in Europe. They want to transform Europe into a prison of core countries with the aim of keeping out workers and youth who want to escape unemployment and poverty from countries such as Greece, Spain and Ireland. In this respect, the workers from the latter countries will be treated with the same contempt as those from North Africa, hundreds of whom have already lost their lives in the attempt to enter Fortress Europe.



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