

Refugees deported from the EU, imprisoned in Ukraine

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Refugees illegally refused entry by the European Union are detained for months in Ukraine, abused and tortured. According to research by the German television station ARD's news magazine *Report Mainz* and the weekly publication *Der Spiegel*, the prisons are financed with millions of dollars from Brussels.

Hasan Hirsi, who fled Somalia more than three years ago, told reporters he was tortured with electric shocks in Ukraine. "Hirsi's hands trembled as he spoke of his ordeal in the detention center," wrote *Der Spiegel*. For days the refugees were given nothing to eat. They were beaten repeatedly and tortured again and again with electroshocks. "I realized that the situation for me in Ukraine was terrible. I couldn't stay," said Hirsi. He was still a minor at the time.

But Hirsi's escape to the European Union, in order to petition for asylum there, was blocked. Refugees in Ukraine were placed under police surveillance and arrested. If they did manage to cross the border into the EU countries Hungary or Slovakia, they were immediately deported back to Ukraine.

Refugee Ali Jaga, who also comes from Somalia, explained: "They captured me in Slovakia and then in the middle of the night simply took me back to Ukraine. They never once said that they were sending us back to Ukraine, which is the same as saying: We're bringing you to a refugee camp. But then we saw the Ukrainian flag."

Such actions, known as "pushbacks," are serious violations of international law under the Geneva Conventions, which state that asylum applications must be heard and reviewed. The rejection of refugees at the border is a clear break with a central component of international refugee law. The Hungarian and Slovakian border guards, who have deported Hasan Hirsi and other refugees to Ukraine, are thereby

carrying out illegal acts.

But the EU Commission pleads ignorance. With respect to the *Report Mainz* report, they declare that they are unaware of any "cases of specific or widespread pushbacks." That is simply not credible.

As early as 2011, the refugee relief organizations Border Monitoring Project Ukraine (BMPU) and Pro Asylum, documented dozens of cases of refugees whose right of access to asylum procedures in Hungary and Slovakia were refused. Even minors were ruthlessly deported to Ukraine in a matter of hours.

The UN Refugee Agency of the United Nations (UNHCR) also acknowledges the illegal Pushbacks. Ilja Todorovic of the UNHCR Bureau in Kiev told *Report Mainz*: "There are reports available to us about refugees, who for good reason do not want to remain in Ukraine, trying to make it to the EU. But on the EU side of the border they are stopped and sent back. One can say unlawfully sent back, because they are not allowed to submit an application for asylum in the EU."

The European Union, which is sealing itself off from refugees ever more rigorously, actually finances the inhumane prison system for refugees in Ukraine. As part of the "European Neighborhood Policy," the EU allocated €30 million to Ukraine between 2007 and 2010 for the establishment of detention centres for refugees. Last year, the EU called for the building of further prisons at the cost of an additional €20 million. From 2000 to 2006, the EU had already transferred €35 million for the building up of border security.

The funds are provided so that Ukraine can take over the dirty work of the EU regarding refugees. The country acts as a frontline deterrent to block the entry of refugees into the European Union. In addition to financial support, Ukraine receives in return visa privileges for its own citizens.

Human rights organizations indicate that severe violations of the rights of refugees have been going on for years in Ukraine. In 2010, Human Rights Watch reported on the abuse and torture of refugees by Ukrainian border guards. “They beat me in the head with a pistol. I lay on the floor, unconscious. They dragged me through the snow. They kicked me in the neck,” reported one refugee from Pakistan.

Other refugees described what it was like to be tortured with electric shocks: “They strapped me to a chair. They placed electrodes on my ears,” said a refugee from Afghanistan. A Somali complained that he was robbed by Ukrainian security forces who threatened to kill him.

Marc Speer, who works for the project “bordermonitoring.eu” in Ukraine, told *Report Mainz*: Whoever is caught here, attempting to flee, generally spends a year in a prison built with the help of the EU. That is the kind of punishment received for the irregular crossing of the border or even for an attempt at crossing it.”

In the year 2012, 80 Somali refugees carried out a weeks-long hunger strike due to inhumane conditions in the prisons. After several weeks, the hunger strike was ended by a special armed unit of the Ukrainian police. Refugees were physically abused and a number of them force fed.

Beyond the prisons, the circumstances facing refugees in Ukraine are catastrophic. Their daily food rations are worth less than €1. Medical treatment is unavailable and there is no chance of finding work. Almost all refugees report experiencing violence. The random detention of refugees is a daily occurrence.

In light of the intensification of the political situation and the strengthening of nationalist and openly fascist forces, the situation facing refugees in Ukraine will only worsen. Along with this comes the social impoverishment of the entire Ukrainian population as a result of massive austerity programs imposed by the European Union.

The EU Commission turns a blind eye to the growing misery and distress of refugees. A request by the reporting team from *Report Mainz* received the terse reply: “The EU supports Ukraine so that it is able to manage irregular migration and the handling of asylum seekers according to the best European standards.”

It is scandalous that the European Union continues to

recognize Ukraine as a stable third status country. In addition to its illegal pushback operation it deports refugees, whose asylum requests are rejected in line with an EU treaty of 2010.

Ilja Todorovic of the UNHCR in Kiev declared: “The EU uses neighbor states in the East, sends money and other things, only then to assert: Refugees in Ukraine have it good. We work here, however, and know: That’s not true. If one uses that as an excuse to slow the flow of refugees then that has nothing to do with human rights. The refugee problem is outsourced.”

The hypocrisy of the European Union is boundless. The last time the EU raised the human rights situation in Ukraine was the occasion of the European Soccer Championships of 2012, when the EU demanded the prompt release of the pro-Western oligarch and politician Yulia Tymoshenko. By contrast, they have nothing to say about the situation of refugees in Ukraine.

The human rights violations against refugees in Ukraine make a mockery of the claims by the EU that the overthrow of President Victor Yanukovych has led to the creation of a democratic state. Günter Burkhardt, the managing director of Pro-Asylum, told the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*: “It cannot be that the EU supports Ukraine in the current conflict while at the same time accepting human rights violations by Ukraine against defenseless refugees.”

The situation in Ukraine is not an isolated case. The European Union is using force to erect a buffer zone around the EU in order to keep out refugees as much as possible. Serious human rights violations are consciously accepted in an effort to deter refugees.

In an interview with the radio program Deutsche Welle, the director of the German office of Human Rights Watch summed up these cynical politics: “The EU has financed refugee camps for years in different non-member states. Even such undemocratic countries as Libya and Belarus have received funding, so that refugees can be prevented from entering the EU. That testifies to a definite callousness in Brussels.”



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