

Syriza continues immigration policy of previous Greek government

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Prior to its election victory, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) had promised to close Greek deportation detention centres and provide more humane treatment for immigrants. But about eight weeks after the government takeover, this has been exposed as an empty promise. Instead, Syriza and its right-wing coalition partner, the Independent Greeks (ANEL), are continuing the inhumane immigration policy of the previous government almost seamlessly.

Deportation centres continue to exist, despite the minister responsible for migration issues, Anastasia Christodouloupolou, and the vice minister of the Interior Giannis Panousis promising to release the detained immigrants within a hundred days. Christodouloupolou also promised the new Greek government would respect all EU guidelines on refugee policy.

In February alone, four refugees died in detention due to the country's barbaric refugee policies. On February 10, 23-year-old Afghan Sayed Mehdi Ahbari died as a result of a lack of medical treatment in the notorious Amygdaleza refugee detention centre. A few days later, 28-year-old Pakistani Mohammed Nadim hanged himself there in his cell, where he had been incarcerated for 25 months. Another suicide followed shortly afterwards in the Thessaloniki police station, whose cells are used as a detention centre.

The death of 21-year-old Mohamed Camara from Guinea casts a spotlight on the inhumane treatment of refugees in Greece. Camara had fled to Greece in 2012. He was detained there immediately, and spent eight months in the Corinth deportation centre. In January 2015, his request for asylum was rejected; on February 7, he was arrested again and sent to the deportation centre at Kifissia police station in Athens. Camara, who suffered from diabetes, complained about his poor

health, but was denied medical assistance and medicines. It was not until he fell unconscious on February 20 that he was taken to a hospital, where he died shortly afterwards.

In the Amygdaleza deportation centre, riots broke out after news of the suicide of Mohammed Nadim became known. The refugees held there protested against the intolerable conditions and against constant abuse by the guards. Only then did the vice minister of Citizen Protection, Giannis Panousis, who reports to the Interior Ministry, visit the detention centre for the first time. He promised to release the imprisoned refugees and close Amygdaleza and the other four major deportation centres and several dozen refugee facilities inside police stations within 100 days.

"I am ashamed," Panousis said, after he had seen the disastrous accommodation in Amygdaleza. "We are finished with refugee centres. We just need a few days. We will do what we said before the election and what we have said in parliament."

In fact, however, the government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has no intention of closing the detention centres completely. While it is true that refugees have been released gradually from detention in the last four weeks, this mainly concerned only minors, the elderly, the sick and refugees who were stranded in the cells for more than six months.

Although the refugees released were granted a six-month residence permit, they received nothing beyond that. They were taken from the detention centres by bus to the centre of Athens, given the addresses for homeless shelters and soup kitchens, and then left to fend for themselves. They did not get any additional help or even the possibility of receiving medical treatment. Most are now homeless and completely destitute since they have not been given work permits.

They face re-incarceration unless they report weekly to the local police station and provide proof of residence. Refugees who are first picked up in Greece continue to be arrested and taken to the closed refugee camps.

A document from Giorgios Nitsshe, major general of immigration police, has caused an uproar. According to this order, refugees apprehended at the borders should no longer be imprisoned but given papers that ask them to leave Greece within a month. Citizen Protection Minister Panousis immediately disagreed with this directive, calling it a “figment of the imagination”, and gave the order to continue to detain refugees.

The deportation centres were erected in 2012 by the conservative government of Antonis Samaras. Of the 30 centres originally planned, only five have been erected, with Amygdaleza being opened first. This camp consists of 250 shipping containers that were originally meant for disaster relief, and is ringed with barbed wire. The containers are less than 30 square meters in size and provide accommodation for eight refugees. Instead of the 1,000 expected, over 2,000 refugees are detained here temporarily.

The refugees are not allowed to leave the centre and have only an hour a day for exercise in the yard, while the rest of the time they spend locked up in a container. The sanitary facilities are woefully inadequate; some detainees have to urinate into bottles. There are not even sleeping places for all detainees. An employee of Doctors Without Borders described the centre as “hell on earth”.

The unbearable situation in the Greek detention centres has been repeatedly condemned by refugee organizations and led to the European Court prohibiting the deportation of refugees from other EU countries to Greece. In the past, it was common practice to deport refugees under the Dublin II agreement to the country where they first entered the EU, and which is responsible for their asylum application in accordance with EU regulations.

The Samaras government had increased the period of detention for refugees apprehended in Greece from six to 18 months. With its reduction to six months detention, the Tsipras government is thus back at the situation before 2012, although then there were still no detention centres and the imprisonment of refugees who were detained at the external borders was the

exception rather than the rule.

Despite their hollow phrases about more humane treatment of refugees, the Syriza government is working closely with the European Commission in the relentless rejection and persecution of refugees. Syriza has kept the 12 kilometres-long barbed-wire fence on the land border with Turkey, which was built with EU funds. Vice Minister Panousis has announced that a 300 metre-long section that was destroyed by a storm will be rebuilt. “We will not allow illegal immigrants to cross the border,” he stressed.

The Syriza government supports all the instruments that the European Union has developed in recent years to ward off refugees at the external borders. It continues to cooperate with the EU border agency Frontex. Christodoulopoulou, who describes herself as a radical activist, emphasized that she feels “committed to European rules on refugee policy”. The Greek government had not the slightest intention of taking unilateral steps that could contravene the Schengen Treaty, the Dublin III Agreement or the Eurodac Regulation, she said.



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