

Macedonian government cracks down on refugees

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The Macedonian government opened its border with Greece on Sunday after several thousand refugees broke through the police barricades there on Saturday.

Prior to this, a state of emergency had been imposed in the border region. For three days, Macedonian police and military had cordoned off the border with Greece using barbed wire fences, employing stun grenades and rubber bullets against the refugees assembled there. The police also deployed tear gas and used their batons against the crowds.

According to eyewitnesses, several people were injured, including children. Thousands were forced to spend their nights alongside the border without food in open fields.

On Saturday night, the refugees then succeeded in overcoming the police barricades at the border and were able to walk to the railway station in the border town of Gevgelija. According to the Macedonian online news site *Telegraf.mk*, it was not possible for the police to keep back the onrush of refugees. The situation only calmed down once the border was reopened.

Emina, a Syrian refugee described the brutal actions of the Macedonian security forces: "It was very hard in Macedonia," she told *WirtschaftsWoche*. "I have not slept for three days and did not eat. Just as we arrived at the border, they closed it. It was horrible."

Serbian state television reported that many refugees were ill or had been injured by the police at the weekend. One woman gave birth under appalling conditions.

Macedonia is a transit country for most of the refugees from the Middle East, who travel on by way of Serbia to Hungary and thus into the European Union (EU). Most of them are fleeing from the consequences of the destructive policies of the US and the European powers in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, and arrive in

Greece via Turkey. More than 160,000 refugees have arrived via this route this year. In the past two months, about 45,000 refugees have crossed into Macedonia.

The brutality of the right-wing government in Skopje is a sharp expression of the inhumane policy that all European governments follow against refugees. A veritable competition has opened up between the various governments in dealing with refugees as abhorrently as possible so that they move on to other countries. The refugee crisis is also deliberately exploited to mobilize right-wing forces and distract attention from domestic and foreign policy crises.

This assumes particularly repulsive forms in the Balkans, where the governments operate as stooges of the EU. The Macedonian government of Prime Minister Nicola Gruevski and his right-wing VMRO-DPMNE are in a deep political crisis. Like many parties in the former Yugoslavia, VMRO-DPMNE is deeply involved in criminal activities, has no social base in the population and ingratiates themselves with the EU in order to benefit economically.

The analyst Fejzi Hajdari from Skopje located the motivation for the border closure in both domestic and foreign policy interests. On the one hand, the government is trying to force more resources and help from the EU through the closure of borders to refugees. On the other hand, Premier Gruevski is "a master" in the art of diverting public attention at home and abroad from his own problems with surprising manoeuvres. "The EU's pressure is great, so that the agreement achieved in June by the government with the opposition to prepare new elections is also implemented," Hajdari said.

In other Eastern European countries too, the measures against refugees are particularly dramatic. The Slovakian government recently announced it would not

accept Muslim refugees.

Ivan Metik, spokesman for the Slovak Interior Ministry, justified this with the fact that there were no mosques in the country. "How can they be integrated with us, if they don't feel good here?" he asked cynically. One day later, the government backtracked and said that migrants from Muslim countries could apply for asylum in Slovakia, but the government's rejection is clear.

The situation is similar in other Eastern European countries. Government officials in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Estonia speak out publicly against the admission of refugees. The ruling politicians, whether Conservative or Social Democrats, reject a quota system and refuse to accept the distribution of refugees across the various EU countries.

The Hungarian government is acting particularly harshly in undertaking the "management of external borders" in the EU's interest. The government in Budapest is currently building a four-metre high border fence, which is designed to prevent refugees from Serbia entering into the EU. This is being done with the tacit consent of the EU. "The European Commission is against the construction of border fences in Europe as a matter of principle," said EU Commission spokesman Christian Wigand, but would not interfere with Budapest's decision.

Manfred Weber, Christian Social Union politician and leader of the European Peoples Party group in the European Parliament, called on his parliamentary colleagues to declare all the EU candidate states collectively as "safe third countries", and therefore anyone arriving from these countries into the EU could be denied a claim to asylum and be deported as quickly as possible.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius warned on Sunday of the need for a quick fix in the refugee crisis on the Greek-Macedonian border. The Czech foreign minister Lubomir Zaoralek spoke of an "extraordinary burden" for the government in Skopje, and expressed understanding for the brutal repression against the refugees.

The refugee issue will also be a topic at the Western Balkans conference on Thursday in Vienna. Thirty government leaders are meeting in the Austrian capital to discuss the large surge of asylum seekers from the

region to Germany, Austria and other EU states. Among others, government heads from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo will participate.

The Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP) travelled to Macedonia on Monday in order to obtain a picture of the situation in advance of the conference. In addition to meeting with his counterpart Nikola Poposki, a site inspection at the border with Greece was also planned. Kurz said that "more activity by the EU [was] needed" because of "huge challenges."

What the government in Vienna means by "activity" was made clear just a few months ago, when the Foreign Ministry initiated a large-scale campaign in Kosovo to deter potential asylum seekers already there from entering Austria.



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