

# EU powers treat refugees as pawns

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The conflicts within the European Union on the distribution of refugees continue to escalate. While the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has said that the refugees were “not a European problem, but a German problem,” because the German government “had invited the Syrians to the dinner table,” the German government is insisting on compliance with European asylum rules and is exerting massive pressure on the government in Budapest to prevent the refugees from traveling to western and northern Europe.

At the insistence of the German authorities, the Italian government too has decided to reintroduce border controls at the Brenner Pass on the Italian-Austrian frontier. At the same time, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière announced that the constitutionally enshrined right of asylum will continue to be pruned and further measures submitted to deter refugees from traveling to Germany.

On Thursday morning there were tumultuous scenes at Budapest’s Keleti railway station. At first, the police withdrew from the barriers, enabling refugees waiting outside the station to gain access to the concourse. The Hungarian railway operator then announced, however, that all international connections had been cancelled.

The refugees then stormed a local train heading for Sopron on the Austrian-Hungarian border, but 40 kilometres outside Budapest it was halted by police near the village of Bicske, where there is one of the most notorious detention centres for refugees.

In addition to a massive police presence, 20 buses and interpreters waited for the refugees, who were forcibly dragged out of the train.

The refugees beat frantically against train windows shouting, “No camp! No camp!” Some threw themselves onto the tracks and were removed by the police. In Budapest, one volunteer told Agence France Presse that the opening of the railway station had only been a manoeuvre. “Come hell or high water, they wanted the people here gone and put in the camp. I think that was a very cynical ploy.”

Hungarian Prime Minister Orban, who was at a meeting with the president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz, EU Council President Donald Tusk and European

Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in Brussels, said that his country would do its duty, and register the refugees properly. “Everybody would like to go to Germany. Our task is to register them, and we do that, as Angela Merkel has called for.”

The diplomatic tensions between Berlin and Budapest have been triggered by the sharp rise in refugee numbers, as a result of which the so-called Dublin Regulation has virtually collapsed. Under this rule, the state where a refugee first enters European soil is obliged to register and accommodate them.

But since the beginning of the year, nearly 300,000 refugees have crossed the Mediterranean to Europe. The states at the external borders of the EU, such as Italy, Greece and Hungary, have felt increasingly overwhelmed and been left to deal with the refugees, and have let many continue their journey without being registered.

Since then, in a sordid competition, almost all EU countries have tightened their asylum laws and repressive measures against refugees. The government in Hungary has not only built a 175-kilometre barbed-wire fence along its border with Serbia, but has also created an internment camp for refugees and drastically increased the penalties for illegal entry and assisting refugees. The Hungarian government has announced a further package of measures for mid-September, which, *inter alia*, include the deployment of the army at the border in order to cut off the influx of refugees.

Officially, the Hungarian government is being criticized for these draconian measures against immigration, but behind closed doors the actions of the Orban government have the full support of the EU and its member states.

In an interview with broadcaster ZDF, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière praised the Hungarian government for “doing something, as opposed to other countries, but [it] is on the verge of being overwhelmed.” De Maizière suggested a “hotspot” be set up in Hungary, as is already planned for Italy and Greece. This refers to huge internment camps for refugees, who would be looked after jointly by the EU and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and where applications for asylum would be processed in fast-track procedures.

Shortly beforehand, de Maizière announced a package of measures for Germany, including amending the constitution. For example, he wants to remove the derisory so-called pocket-money allowance for refugees of 143 euros a month and replace it with benefits-in-kind and vouchers. Asylum-seekers required to leave Germany would have all support removed. In addition, the obligation to stay in a camp would be reintroduced. Refugees would have to remain locked up in huge initial reception centres until the end of their asylum procedure, and not, as previously, be distributed to cities and municipalities as quickly as possible. The standard of accommodation would also be drastically reduced in the camps.

In addition to these repressive measures, he proposed to introduce an amendment to the constitution replacing the previous regulation regarding “safe countries of origin.” If the acceptance rate for refugees from a country falls to less than 1 or 2 percent, a shortened procedure is to be applied. Going forward, the authorities will deny asylum seekers from such a country automatically.

It is no coincidence that the government is considering a constitutional amendment in the face of the increasing number of refugees. That was the case in 1992, when hundreds of thousands fled from Yugoslavia due to the civil war. With a constitutional amendment, Germany surrounded itself with safe third countries and introduced the category of “safe countries of origin.” Since then it has become virtually impossible to obtain political asylum in Germany. The “asylum compromise” between the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats at that time was preceded by a months-long witch-hunt against refugees, which led to the pogroms in Rostock-Lichtenhagen and Hoyerswerda and the deadly arson attacks in Mölln and Solingen.

Once again, the attempt is being made to mobilize the population against asylum seekers. Above all those being targeted are mainly refugees from the Balkans, who are denounced as “asylum abusers” or “welfare tourists.” De Maizière repeated this slur in the interview with ZDF, claiming, “we have a system of incentives when it comes to asylum standards that act as an attraction.”

In fact, the latest figures from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees show that only a small portion of the refugees who have been recorded in July and August came from the Balkans. The vast majority come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea, and thus from countries where the interests of the imperialist states, including Germany, have led to bloody conflicts.

In an interview with the magazine *SuperIllu*, de Maizière went one step further and indirectly defended the racist attacks on refugees and their accommodation, stating, “But I think it is also true what many say, we cannot solve the

social problems of the entire world under the heading ‘asylum’ on German soil. Therefore it is important to differentiate between those who are in need of protection, and those who are not. It is also legitimate that we think about how we in Europe and also in Germany can reduce the number of [asylum] applicants.”

This is not very different from the statements made by the Hungarian Prime Minister Orban, who stated at the Brussels meeting, addressing the refugees: “If we have given you the impression that you are welcome, that would be a moral defeat. We must make it clear, do not come, remain in Turkey, which is better for you and your children.”

Under pressure from the German, French and Italian governments, the EU is to negotiate a quota system for the distribution of refugees. EU Council President Donald Tusk has proposed to resettle 100,000 refugees from Italy, Greece and Hungary based on defined quotas. The Eastern European countries, however, are opposed to accepting any refugees. “Quotas do not stop any migrants, they do not prevent them perishing in trucks or on ships,” Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak said to the tabloid *Bild*.

European Parliament President Martin Schulz warned that the refugee issue could tear apart the European Union, if “national egotism” prevails. After the meeting with Orban in Brussels, he declared, “If we do not find a common solution, then a split in the European Union is a real danger that we cannot rule out.”

In a guest commentary in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Orban accused the European Union of having a failed immigration policy, and declared the protection of borders at any cost to be the supreme principle. Of any other question regarding the refugee crisis, he said, “it is only worth speaking about it when the flood has been stopped.”



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