Slovenia begins construction of border fence against refugees

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After Hungary erected a fence last month on its border with Serbia, several kilometers of barbed wire fence have now been completed along the border between Slovenia and Croatia. The Slovenian government has also sent soldiers and reservists to the borders in order to “channel” the flow of refugees.

The two-meter-high, several-kilometer-long barbed wire fence was built over the Rigonce border crossing, one of three crossings with Croatia. A little bit further to the south is the railway line that has served as part of the so-called “Balkan route” for two months. Several thousand refugees make their way along this route in trains every day. Their destination is a reception center in Dobova on the Slovenian border.

The refugees, who have already travelled for weeks or months, have to get off a train on the Croatian side and then travel through Rigonce on foot in order to reach Dobova. This is why the Slovenian government ordered the building of the fence in the middle of last week. According to the official explanation, it wants to “channel the flow of refugees”.

These “temporary physical barriers” are a prelude to the total cordoning off of the Slovenian-Croatian border. The right wing government of Miro Cerar is working out plans to block off the entire 670-kilometer border. Currently, in spite of the fence, refugees can travel into the country and then into neighbouring Austria.

The conditions faced by refugees in Slovenia are catastrophic. In the outskirts of the village of Dobova is a large tent camp. According to media accounts, on a quiet day about 3,000 refugees arrive here, often more than 7,000 per day. Families with children and infants lack the most basic necessities. The majority of them cannot wash themselves daily and adequate nutrition is not available. In the reception center, police and the military are everywhere. Supplies come almost exclusively from private donations.

Until recently, travel from the nearby train station proceeded relatively quickly. Since the attacks in Paris, however, the registration process has become more stringent, with much longer waiting times.

The erecting of the border fence in Slovenia serves not only to deter refugees. It is also an expression of increasing tensions between the Balkan countries. Croatian political scientist Zarko Puhovski called the fence a “symbol of nationalism”.

Sociologist Drago Zuparic-Iljic likewise explained “the building of the fence on the Slovenian-Croatian border and the possible building of additional fences in the West Balkans lead to new tensions between the countries in the region.” In his opinion, the “diplomatic complications” will only intensify and there is a danger of “conflicts between border troops”.

Cerar himself said that the refugee crisis could reignite conflicts between the former Yugoslavian countries. “If the migrant crisis is not adequately controlled as agreed at the summit in Brussels there is a possibility of conflict situations between the states of the Western Balkans,” he said at a press conference.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has warned that the eruption of conflicts in the Balkans could have repercussions all over Europe. Referring to the Balkan wars in the early 1990s, she said: “I do not want a situation where military conflicts are necessary again.” She said she did not want to be pessimistic, but warned that scuffles could escalate more quickly than one might imagine.

The situation has enormously intensified since Hungary closed its border with Serbia in October and forced refugees to follow a route through Slovenia instead.

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Cerar models himself on the refugee policy of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. The two heads of state had a meeting recently on the occasion of the “day of the Hungarian minority” in the Slovenian border city of Lendava. At the meeting, Orban blustered in his habitual repulsive manner about “Europe’s Christian roots” and the responsibility of both countries to protect them.

Slovenian President Borut Pahor, a Social Democrat, said that one has to protect the Schengen agreement area, comprising most of the EU member states, which allows free movement among them. Pahor said that he wants to prevent the border of the Schengen agreement area from shifting from Slovenia's southern border to the Austrian border in the course of the movement of refugees. The countries of former Yugoslavia accused one another of not registering refugees according to regulations.

Several European states declared their full support for Slovenia erecting barbed wire fences. Austrian Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner remarked: “In this way, our neighbors are proving that they are acting responsibly toward our common borders and they have our full support in this.” Angela Merkel also spoke positively about Slovenia's actions.

Under pressure from Germany, France and the EU, so-called economic refugees have been deported without delay since November 20. Macedonian and Serbian authorities have restricted the entry of refugees since last Wednesday. Slovenia and Croatia had decided on a similar measure before this. From now on, only refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria will be permitted entry. A Slovenian police spokesperson said that only refugees from countries in which “armed struggles” are taking place would be permitted entry.

Most refugees fear more harassment and a tightening of asylum legislation after the terror attacks in Paris. “We are afraid that they will close the border now. But we don’t fear terror much anymore. Every village in Syria is worse than Paris … we don’t have much to lose,” a 17-year-old Syrian named Mossa told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network .

The deportations have also stoked tensions with neighboring countries. Slovenia’s announcement that it would deport the first refugees back to Croatia received no reply. It is expected that refugees will be stuck in the “no man's land” on the border.

This is why Slovenia has now mobilized reservists and the army to guard the border. Ales Sila, spokesperson for the Defense Ministry, said last week that approximately 200 out of the 900 total reservists will be deployed to the border.

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