

Austria closes its borders to refugees

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Europe is firmly in the grip of winter, and the Balkans are covered in snow with temperatures below freezing. Nonetheless, one government after another is closing its borders and sending hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees back to war zones that they have risked their lives to flee.

The Austrian government closed its borders last Wednesday. Already at the beginning of the week, it made clear its intention to send more refugees back to Slovenia. Then on Wednesday, a conference was held on refugees between leading Social Democrat (SPÖ) and conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) politicians to impose an upper limit for refugees. Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) justified the decision by stating, "A joint European answer cannot be expected".

Austria is the first European Union (EU) country to impose an upper limit for refugees. This was in no small part a response to measures taken by Germany. Also on Wednesday, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democrats, CDU) extended border controls for an undetermined period of time. Germany has already refused entry to 2,000 refugees this month at its border with Austria.

In Vienna, Austrian Chancellor Werner Feymann (SPÖ) told the press that in 2016, Austria would only accept 37,500 asylum seekers. Including the 90,000 refugees who remained in the country last year, an upper limit of 1.5 percent of the population would be reached.

The Social Democratic chancellor embraced the arguments of the notorious anti-immigrant ÖVP interior minister, Johanna Mikl-Leitner, announcing a strict review procedure at the border.

"If we undertake more controls, we will find out more", Feymann bluntly told Austrian broadcaster ORF. If people cannot credibly explain why they want to come into the country, they would not be allowed in.

Feymann had ordered a report by the foreign, interior and defence ministries to determine "everything that is legally possible" at the border.

At the Spielfeld crossing on the Austrian-Slovenian border, a 4-kilometre-long border fence is being constructed. Last Sunday, the government deployed 200 soldiers to the Slovenian border. Their task is to examine the refugees and their luggage and deport all of those unable to provide valid travel documents. In the first three weeks of the year, Austria has already deported over 1,000 refugees.

Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia are also in the process of closing their borders. In a rapid domino effect, one country after another is re-establishing posts at its borders. Slovenia closed its borders at the beginning of last week and also announced the introduction of an upper limit for immigrants.

The Serbian government immediately adopted measures to make it more difficult for immigrants to enter the country. A government spokesman stated that Serbia would in the future accept refugees on its territory only if they were seeking to claim asylum in Germany or Austria. "From today onwards ... no more migrants can travel through Serbia unless they explicitly state an intention to claim asylum in the territory of Austria or Germany", Prime Minister Alexander Vulin told Serbian news agency Tanjug.

Croatia's interior minister also announced that his country would from now on ask every refugee if they intended to apply for asylum in Germany or Austria. In the Balkan country, the government of Tihomir Orešković has just begun its period in office. Since the highly indebted country is heavily dependent on the EU, it will seek to do everything demanded by the EU, including stricter measures targeting refugees.

Macedonia responded on Wednesday morning by rejecting 600 refugees at the Greek border, including many children. The AFP news agency cited a police

spokesman in Skopje, who said that Macedonia was reacting to a request from Slovenia. The blockade was lifted again on Thursday evening, but not for all refugees.

Those people arriving at the border already have behind them the grueling journey of crossing the Mediterranean through Turkey and Greece during the winter. The Greek coastguard reported that on Thursday alone, it had saved 73 refugees from the Aegean Sea. For one young child, help came too late: the child died a few hours after arrival on the island of Lesbos. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 87 people have already drowned in the Mediterranean this year.

The chain reaction of border closures has completely undermined the Schengen agreement between EU states. Introduced in 1985, Schengen is a key element of the European Union and meant that border controls between European countries were eliminated. On Monday, EU interior ministers met in Amsterdam to discuss extending border controls for two years.

EU Council President Donald Tusk warned last Tuesday that the Schengen agreement could fail entirely. He called upon all heads of government to back a joint EU concept before the Brussels conference scheduled for March 16-17. The content of this concept would be negotiations with African states about “repatriation”, military action against so-called smuggler bands, and better securing of the EU’s external borders—all measures that will put the lives of refugees at greater risk.

In addition, “combatting the causes of flight” is being used as a justification for military interventions in the Middle East and North Africa, and the expansion of wars in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and North African states.

What is to happen to the refugees shut out because of the new upper limits is unclear. The EU has already announced plans to build detention centres and so-called hot spots along the Balkan route and distribute refugees across all EU countries. But Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary have firmly opposed the quota system, and many other countries have silently boycotted it.

The plans are equally bureaucratic as they are inhumane, since refugees often try to travel to countries where they have relatives or friends. They are not only

denied this option on organisational grounds: the EU countries, led by Germany, are creating miserable conditions to deter refugees from coming.

On Thursday it was revealed that not only Denmark and Switzerland, but the German states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, would search refugees arriving at the border and confiscate money and valuables. This was confirmed by Bavaria’s interior minister Joachim Hermann (Christian Social Union, CSU) to the *Bild* newspaper, who said, “Cash and valuables can be secured if ... a claim for reimbursement exists or is expected against the person”.

In Bavaria, refugees will be permitted to retain €750, and in Baden-Württemberg only €350. Such measures recall the Nazi era, when the National Socialist regime robbed the Jewish population of all their possessions.



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