

Opposition in Greece to European Union refugee policy

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On Wednesday evening, about 2,000 refugees and aid workers demonstrated in Athens against the recent agreement between the European Union and Turkey. The agreement finalizes the closing of the Balkan route and allows thousands of refugees in Greece to be deported to Turkey. A law spelling out the implementation of the agreement is now being discussed in parliament so that the first 500 deportations can begin as soon as April 4.

The movement “Unified against Racism and the Fascist Threat” called the demonstration. The demonstrators, including many refugee families with children, marched from Omonia Square through the downtown area, past the Greek parliament building, and ended at the offices of the European Commission. Some 700 refugees from the Piraeus port alone had made the trip to the centre of Athens to take part in the demonstration. The demonstrators chanted, “Open the borders” and condemned “fortress Europe” and the “Greek prison” on a banner.

Some of them carried signs with the demand “Human rights and no discrimination” to bring attention to the war situation in their home countries. Residents and passers-by reacted to the demonstration with solidarity, according to the daily paper *Ethnos*.

In the past few days, opposition has developed among refugees in Idomeni and on the Aegean islands. They are desperately defending themselves against the closing of the borders and insisting on their right to travel to northern Europe.

In Idomeni, on the border between Greece and Macedonia, refugees have been occupying the railway tracks for 13 days and are blocking freight traffic. On Tuesday they clashed with police units, who sought to clear the tracks. Some refugees hurled stones and they freed a woman who was being detained by the police. On Monday, refugees blocked traffic for several hours with a sit-down strike on the highway near Evzoni.

Every new day serves to increase the despair and anger of the refugees. Last weekend, people travelled in buses to Idomeni after a rumour was spread on social networks that the border would be opened. The rumour turned out to be false and the desperate refugees were forced to turn back or else remain in a muddy tent camp, where some 12,000 have already been living for over a month. As the state television station ERT reports,

the majority of refugees are afraid of imprisonment and deportation and do not want to be brought into another camp.

Karl Kopp, the European spokesperson of the refugee organization Pro Asyl, accused Europe of an inhumane “logic of deterrence,” in an interview with the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel*.

“The people who have sealed the Balkan route want the ugly images from Idomeni in order to deter refugees. To this end, they are willing to accept catastrophes,” he said. People will come anyway because of the war and misery in their own countries. “In practice, Europe only decides whether these people arrive dead or alive,” Kopp added.

He confirmed the concerns of the refugees, who do not want to resettle in another camp. “The so-called alternative camps are also misery camps. Inhumane conditions prevail there as well,” said Kopp. “All of the alternative large camps are de facto extensions of homelessness, with which the refugees are already familiar from Idomeni.”

Volunteers have already given thorough accounts of the horrifying conditions in some of the refugee lodgings and have provided access to them over Facebook to refugees and aid organizations.

For example, in the open Camp Fillipiada in the northwest of Greece, there are only 15 showers and no hot water for nearly 680 refugees, including many children and some pregnant women. The food is insufficient for everyone. There are no NGOs, aid workers, or media present. The tents have no light and no proper floors, so that refugees have to sleep with mats and sleeping bags on the bare ground.

The situation is even worse in Cherso, a camp in a village not far from Idomeni that refugees are only allowed to enter once they have been registered. In this camp, 3,900 people, many of them families, have a total of only 400 tents without floors. The hygienic conditions are atrocious. The refugees share only 30 toilets and five showers. There is no hot water. There are also no interpreters and no media at the location.

Both camps are overseen by the Greek military. Since Internet service is not provided at most camps, refugees are unable to get current information.

In addition to the open camps, there are five “Hot Spots” on the Aegean islands, which are now closed detainment centres.

Aid workers are provided only restricted access to them.

Photographs are forbidden at all of these camps. Paul Oswald, who published a column in the German newspaper *Handelsblatt* about his experiences in the aid organization “Better Days for Moria,” received photos and news secretly sent by refugees at the now closed Moria camp until their cell phones died. The refugees were unable to charge their phones because of the lack of power outlets at the camp.

“We fled from war, and now we are sitting in prison in Greece under inhumane conditions,” wrote one refugee over WhatsApp. “Since then we have to sleep on the ground of the muddy courtyard because there is simply no more space. The police watch and if we ask for water, they say that we should wait for rain.”

The Moria detention centre is on the island of Lesbos, where there are more than 2,200 refugees. In recent days, refugees have protested repeatedly against their internment. The police take refugees in handcuffs for medical exams at the hospital. While the organization Doctors without Borders has to a large extent ended its work in these camps in protest against the conditions there, the relief organization Doctors of the World continues to take care of refugees on the islands.

However, the organization emphasizes that the “continuation of the work” does not mean “that they accept the new mode of operation of the centres.” They see it as their task to help the refugees and to document and condemn the inhumane conditions in the detention centres. In a press release on the agreement between the EU and Turkey, they say that they fear “that people who are fleeing will be viewed increasingly as a mass that can be relocated at will.”

In the Vial detention camp on the island of Chios, there are also regular protests. With more than 1,440 refugees and a maximum capacity of 1,100, the centre is already over full. Mainly Afghan refugees, who have scarcely any chance at all of being granted asylum in Europe, demonstrate almost daily at dinnertime against the EU agreement. In this heated mood, there are conflicts between refugees occurring with increasing frequency. On Tuesday, an individual who was badly injured during a conflict between Iranian refugees had to be taken to the hospital.

Late on Wednesday evening, a harmless incident turned into a violent conflict between Syrian and Afghan refugees at the port in Piraeus. Eight people were injured and the police intervened. These conflicts are the unavoidable result of the brutal EU refugee policy that pushes people to the brink of exhaustion and despair. In this tense situation, all it takes is a spark to ignite open violence.

There are now over 5,800 refugees crowded in Piraeus. There are 1,100 tents all around the port building. The majority of those detained have no access to drinkable running water or adequate nourishment. As a result, the government is trying to resettle the refugees in two new camps in Eleona and Kyllini.

The unbroken solidarity in the population, which is also

expressed in numerous self-organized initiatives, has now become the target of the Greek government under Syriza (the so-called Coalition of the Radical Left). The draft legislation for implementing the EU-Turkey agreement requires all NGOs to register with the coordination department of a new asylum service led by the interior ministry. This measure is a targeted attempt to increase state control over refugees and aid organizations.

“In the last period, the independent and self-organized solidarity structures, which until now have carried the full weight of providing aid, were dissolved. The goal is now to transfer the support of these people to the police and the military,” Efi Latsoudi, a representative of the Lesbos volunteers, told the news outlet *Ethnos*.

The police ordered volunteers at a shelter on the Tsamakia beach near Mytilene to leave the area so that the beach could be rented privately. The Pikpa camp on Lesbos, where mainly sick and weak refugees were accommodated, will also be closed despite the opposition of aid workers.

There is a deep abyss between the widespread solidarity of the Greek population and the policy of the Syriza government, which is playing the role of border police for the European Union. Syriza is working closely with the German government to fulfil the agreement. “The refugee crisis has led to friendly overtures between Prime Minister Tsipras and the chancellor,” said the *Handelsblatt*. It talks about a “German-Greek spring.” The two governments are in constant contact.

Over the weekend, Vice Foreign Minister Dimitris Mardas demonstrated the extent to which Syriza has travelled to the right. On Skai TV, he recommended the creation of an economic profile for all refugees. Anyone who had savings of €250,000 abroad and wanted to invest this money in Greece would receive better lodgings. Mardas justified his perfidious proposal for a social selection of migrants on the basis of a 2014 law passed by the right-wing coalition government of PASOK and New Democracy.



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