

Croatian government and EU intensify violence against refugees

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Croatia's border with Bosnia and Herzegovina has become a place notorious for violence against migrants and asylum seekers for years now as part of the EU's policy of fortress Europe. While the Croatian authorities have categorically denied that this is taking place, particularly at the hands of their own police force, an investigative report by *Der Spiegel* magazine has now detailed migrants' horrific accounts of being brutalized in the area.

The report outlines sadistic beatings, torture involving electric shocks, simultaneous kicks to the body by multiple officers, among other things. It also makes clear that not only the refugees themselves fear repercussions, but so do other witnesses who help them. There is video footage of the immigrants' ordeal from when a migrant hid his cellphone in his clothes. *Der Spiegel* and the media group Lighthouse Reports verified its authenticity. The officers filmed are wearing black balaclavas on their faces and cannot be identified.

The article in *Der Spiegel* focuses on the story of a young Pakistani migrant Ibrahim. He suffered a number of serious beatings while trying desperately to escape into Italy with many others who shared a similar fate. They dubbed the bloody process of trying to outmaneuver the men at the Croatian border "the Game." Ibrahim has tried to accomplish this dangerous task dozens of times, before being able to escape to Slovenia, where he and the others waited to no avail for smugglers to take them the rest of the way. Days went by without food or drink before they surrendered to Slovenian authorities. The migrants asked for asylum, but they were instead taken back to the Croatian officials, who tortured them again.

Ibrahim later managed to make it to Italy, but the many months on the Croatian border devastated him. He still has headaches and problems with his knee, but

the psychological damage is far greater.

After these barbaric acts of violence against defenseless migrants became public, the EU felt obliged to criticize the Croatian authorities. European Union commissioner Ylva Johansson has reportedly sent a letter to the Croatian Interior Ministry, in which she pressed it to investigate the allegations made by the migrants. She added publicly that "the violence at the border cannot continue" and that "this will not help Croatia in its efforts to join the Schengen area."

This is just hypocrisy. As much as they continue to deny it publicly, the European ruling elite in Brussels, Berlin and elsewhere is directly responsible for not only the violence at the Croatian border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also the countless migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. This is the true EU policy toward the refugee crisis. It is also their policy towards the working class as a whole.

Croatia, a member of the European Union since 2013, is a key country in the EU's "fortress Europe" policy. The violence against refugees has been organized at the direct behest of the EU, which pays the Croatian security forces well for this inhumane service. "Over the years, Amnesty International and other organizations have documented numerous violations, including beatings and torture of migrants and asylum-seekers by Croatian police, whose salaries may have been paid for by EU funds," the director of Amnesty International's European Institutions Office Eve Geddie said.

The EU's weak public attempts at feigning concern will only further embolden ruling circles in Zagreb to continue to give their border police a free rein to commit these violent acts. It is certainly meant to be understood that way as well. In other words, all parties involved know that there will be no real consequences

for the Croatian government once the bad publicity from this story has died off.

While Croatia's police chief and Interior Minister, the Social Democrat Ranko Ostojić, believes that retired officers currently part of the reserve are to blame for the so-called push backs, high-ranking officials of the Croatian government, such as Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić Radman, continue to vehemently deny any wrongdoing by their men at the border. As for the Interior Ministry, it issued a statement responding to the report. It claimed that migrants either have accidents that cause their documented injuries, or even more outrageously, they accuse the migrants of harming themselves, in order to blame Croatian border police.

The country has a long and dark history of extreme right-wing politics. During World War II, (long before the current nation gained its independence from former Yugoslavia in 1991), the Ustaše led by Ante Pavelić, formed the fascist puppet regime known as the Independent State of Croatia (NDH).

After the war, Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia was formed using the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union as a model. During that time, the regime crushed any pro-Ustaše sentiments. But after the violent and bloody breakup of Yugoslavia and Croatian independence, these fascist tendencies resurfaced and have been prominent ever since.

Franjo Tuđman, the most prominent figure of Croatian independence and its first president, started his political career in Tito's Communist Party, like many other reactionaries in the region. Later, he founded the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which has been in power once again since 2016 under Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.

In Croatia, much like the rest of the Balkans and indeed beyond, the political establishment has moved sharply to the right after the restoration of capitalism. Various governments have pushed through brutal austerity measures and privatizations for years, causing unemployment and suffering which is now intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. As with their Western European counterparts, the Croatian government and other Eastern European regimes have refused to take serious measures to contain the virus and kept schools and factories open. As a consequence, infections and deaths are mounting. In Croatia, a country with a

population of just over four million, over 163,000 people have been infected with COVID-19, and 2,420 people have died so far.

In the final analysis, the war against refugees at Europe's external borders is part of the deadly offensive against the entire working class. In order to defend its interests and wealth the ruling class is resorting more and more openly to fascist violence and dictatorship.



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