

Greek government bans asylum applications from North Africa in collaboration with the EU

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Greece's right-wing New Democracy (ND) government has imposed a three month temporary suspension of all asylum applications from migrants reaching Greece from North Africa. The measure was rammed through Greece's parliament on July 11 with 174 MPs out of 300 voting in favour.

Speaking to German tabloid *Bild*, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis defended the measure stating, "Greece is not an open transit route. The journey is dangerous, the outcome uncertain, and the money paid to smugglers is ultimately wasted. Illegal entries will not lead to legal residence."

The measure is a death sentence on many desperate people who are trying to flee economic hardship, political persecution or escape war, risking their lives in the process. They will be sent back to their country of origin or the country they departed from without an opportunity to file a request for international protection. According to the InfoMigrants news and information service, the majority of those affected are from Somalia, Sudan, Egypt and Morocco.

The suspension comes amid an increase of migrant inflows arriving on the island of Crete from Libya. According to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), more than 16,800 migrants have reached Greece by sea so far this year, with over 7,000 arriving in Crete. Maritime Minister Vassilis Kikilias stated that migrant flows to Crete have increased 350 percent compared with last year.

The suspension of asylum applications is part of a wider set of measures, which form part of a new bill released for public consultation on July 17. The bill aims to increase the time undocumented migrants are detained from 18 months to two years. There are currently over 2,000 people held in detention centres that have no adequate

infrastructure, cleaning or medical staff in inhumane conditions. The bill aims to impose at least a three year custodial sentence with no probation along with a 10,000 Euro fine for refugees who do not leave the country after their asylum application has been rejected. Undocumented migrants will no longer be offered automatic legal status if they can prove they've been in the country for at least seven years.

The bill is the brainchild of Makis Voridis, a fascistic figure who joined New Democracy in 2012 after being expelled from the far-right Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS). Voridis was Migration Minister until the end of June, but was forced to resign after being named in a European Union (EU) investigation over the misuse of subsidies to Greek farmers.

Signalling that there will be no let-up in the government's anti-migrant agenda, Mitsotakis appointed Thanos Plevris to replace Voridis. Plevris is another LAOS defector who joined ND around the same time as Voridis. Son of notorious fascist antisemite Konstantinos Plevris who served as an official in the military junta that ruled Greece between 1967-74, Plevris has called openly for the killing of refugees. In an event hosted by right-wing magazine *Patria* in 2011, Plevris declared "border security cannot exist if there are no casualties and, to be clear, if there are no deaths."

In the same speech he called for brutal measures to deter migrants from entering the country in first place. He declared, "When you're here, there will be no social benefits, you won't get anything to eat or drink, you won't be able to go to the hospital, and you'll be telling others in Pakistan, 'We're worse off here.' They must be worse off here. Hell must look like heaven to what they will go through here!"

Speaking to *Skai TV* last week Plevris was on script

with his fascistic rant a decade and a half ago: “What we say to the Greek people is this: We will not tolerate an invasion from North Africa with a continuous influx of boats. And this is also a clear message to the rest of Europe.”

As for ‘deterrents’ he declared that “from this point on the government will implement a drastic reduction in benefits [for asylum seekers]” while also announcing plans to impose cuts on the food menu at detention centres, which he slammed as “hotel grade”. He stated: “In asylum centres there is currently a choice of three items on the menu four times a day. The Immigration Ministry is not a hotel i.e. ‘I lodge an asylum claim, I eat, sleep collect 75 euros in benefits and if my application is accepted I receive [additional benefits]’. I asked for this to stop.”

The new measures represent a brutal step up of the anti-migrant agenda of successive Greek governments, which for years have carried out illegal push-backs. Just over one month ago a Naval Court in Piraeus found that Hellenic Coast Guard personnel should face criminal charges relating to hundreds of preventable deaths on the *Adriana* on June 14, 2023.

En route from the port of Tobruk to Italy with an estimated 750 on board, the *Adriana* capsized off the coast of Pylos after being towed by the Hellenic Coast Guard towards Italian waters. Over 600 people drowned as a result, including women and children trapped below deck inside the ship.

Greece’s new measures are in line with the EU’s policy on migration. The conclusions document adopted by the European Council meeting on June 26 cited “the worrying situation in Libya, and its possible consequences also in terms of European security, as well as concerning migratory flows.” The document advocated for the “prevention and countering of irregular migration, including through new ways in line with EU and international law”, as well as “efforts to facilitate, increase and accelerate returns, using all relevant EU policies, instruments and tools.”

Citing these discussions, Markus Lammert, spokesperson for Internal Affairs, Democracy, Justice and Rule of Law at the European Commission, endorsed the Greek government’s decision to suspend asylum applications stating that Greece faced an “exceptional situation”. “Any measures taken by Greece must be understood against this backdrop”, he said, adding that “we are ready to step up that support further and we continue to work closely together when it comes to

intensifying the work with partner countries”.

This was corroborated by Plevris, who made clear in an interview to Greek daily *Proto Thema* that the new measures were drafted in consultation with the European Commission: “We are no longer in the era when [former German Chancellor Angela] Merkel was welcoming refugees, now we don’t want them to bother to come.”

There has been an even more draconian shift against asylum seekers and refugees by governments of all stripes since Merkel’s departure. And a plethora of reports over the last decade attests that the EU’s Frontex agency has long been involved in the overseeing of *pushback operations carried out by Greece and other member states as part of its “Fortress Europe” policy*.

The pseudo-left Syriza-Progressive Alliance is posturing against the government’s anti-migrant agenda, with its deputies voting against the suspension of asylum application. Commenting on Plevris’ appointment two weeks ago Syriza leader Sokratis Famellos wrote on X, “It’s provocative for the post of Migration Minister to be held by another ex-LAOS member and one that called for dead refugees and migrants at the border.”

But Syriza was a willing accomplice in Fortress Europe while in government between 2015 and 2019. Tens of thousands of refugees were interned under its watch as part of the dirty deal signed between Greece and Turkey in 2016, which stipulated that all refugees crossing into Greece from Turkey be interned until their cases are processed, before deportation back to Turkey. The brutality of this policy was epitomised by Moria, the internment camp on the island of Lesbos that burned down in 2020. Dubbed by the BBC as the “worst refugee camp on Earth,” Moria’s appalling conditions were routinely condemned by aid groups and described by inmates as “hell on earth.”



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