Tougher asylum law in Greece criminalises refugees

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Refugees will in future be treated like criminals in Greece. That is the essence of the tougher asylum law that the Greek government, under the right-wing New Democracy (ND), pushed through parliament a week ago.

Those seeking protection who are denied asylum and remain "illegally" in the country now face heavy prison sentences and fines. These people have usually endured a life-threatening escape route and often given up their family's entire savings to flee war, persecution and poverty in their homeland. Now, in Europe, they are not only treated like cattle, but also imprisoned if they do not "voluntarily" return to the misery from which they have just fled.

The new law was passed overnight September 2-3 with the votes of the ruling party, which has a majority in parliament. In July, the government had already decided to suspend all asylum applications from refugees from North Africa for three months, completely nullifying the right to asylum.

The pseudo-left opposition party Syriza criticised the toughening of the law, while carefully concealing the fact that during its own four years in government it had implemented the EU's inhumane policy against refugees, thereby paving the way for today's government.

The asylum reform includes a whole package of measures designed to deprive refugees of their rights, terrorise and persecute them:

• The deadline for voluntary departure is reduced from 25 to 14 days, meaning a rejected asylum seeker has only two weeks to leave the country.

• If they remain "illegally" in Greece, they face imprisonment of two to five years without parole as well as fines of at least €5,000 and up to €10,000 for illegal re-entry.

• Migrants without papers will no longer receive legal status after seven years of residence in Greece, as was previously the case. In practice, this means they can be arrested at any time as "illegal" migrants and remain excluded from the health system, labour market and housing market.

• New arrivals without valid documents will be locked up in closed facilities. This administrative detention is extended from 18 to up to 24 months.

• Rejected asylum seekers will be monitored by electronic ankle tags during the departure period so that they can be immediately arrested if they do not leave.

• The list of so-called "safe" countries of origin will be expanded so that people can now also be deported to third countries in which they first applied for asylum.

• For the first time, the law establishes an entry ban for people classified as a "threat to public order and security"—a regulation that can be broadly interpreted and arbitrarily applied.

These attacks directly affect the great majority of refugees, since ever fewer of those seeking protection in Greece receive a proper asylum procedure, let alone asylum itself. According to figures from the EU asylum agency, the recognition rate in the EU has fallen to 25 percent—the lowest level ever recorded. There are no exact figures for Greece, but the rate is likely to be even lower.

It is no coincidence that Thanos Plevris, the new migration minister since June, is pushing through this brutal law. Plevris is a notorious far-right figure with close links to neo-Nazis. Until he joined ND in 2012, he was a member of parliament for the far-right party Laos (Popular Orthodox Rally). His father, Konstantinos Plevris, whom he once defended in court as a lawyer, is an antisemite and considered an ideological forerunner of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn.

What Plevris is now implementing as migration minister has long been on his political agenda. In 2011 he openly called for the killing of refugees. At an event, to the applause of his fascist supporters, he declared: "There is no border protection without deaths." Migrants had to be deterred from entering Greece: "Hell should look like paradise to them, after what they have experienced here!"

The country's refugee policy of recent years—from pushbacks at sea to concentration camps—has long since turned Greece into a hell for most refugees. But that is not enough for Plevris. He also wants to jettison the last remnants of human rights, which, at least on paper, still

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existed for refugees.

In his parliamentary speech last week, Plevris boasted, “I say this with great pride: I am glad to be a minister of this government that criminalises illegal residence in the country.” He addressed the refugees with a direct threat:

> If your asylum application is rejected, you have two options. Either you end up in prison or you return to your homeland. The Greek state does not accept you. You are not tolerated because you entered illegally. You have only one choice: to return. You are not welcome.

With his rabid rhetoric, Plevris emulates the anti-immigrant tirades of Donald Trump, whom he openly admires. After Trump’s election in November 2024, Plevris congratulated the new American president on X for his “great victory,” citing among other things his stance against illegal immigration. He described his election as an “important message for the EU” and invoked Greece’s “good cooperation” with Trump.

Like Trump, Plevris has no interest in cloaking his criminal migration policy in humanitarian concerns. Rather, he brags about setting the tone in the EU. He dismissed criticism from many human rights organisations of his plans as “irrelevant” in a television programme in August: “Migration policy is determined by the government. Returns, both forced and voluntary, are the great concern at both national and European level. And Greece plays a leading role in this debate.”

Indeed, the latest toughening of the law is not a unilateral national measure by the ND government, but an integral part of European anti-refugee policy. At a meeting of EU interior ministers in Copenhagen at the end of July, where further attacks on refugees were discussed, Plevris promoted his plans.

According to a report by *Politico*, he held several bilateral backroom talks with EU representatives. The newspaper quotes a Greek government official, who wished to remain anonymous, as saying: “The new Greek legislation has attracted particular interest among ministers, as it is considered the strictest ever presented at EU level.”

Plevris met with his counterparts from Austria, France and Germany, as well as with representatives of the EU border protection agency Frontex, to discuss sealing off the external borders and further deterrent measures against refugees.

The European bourgeoisie fully supports the toughening of asylum law in Greece and has already begun implementing similar far-right attacks on migrants in their own countries.

Last Wednesday, shortly after the vote on the Greek asylum law, the German government cleared the next hurdle in toughening its refugee policy: Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt (Christian Social Union, CSU) pushed two laws through the cabinet to implement the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) in Germany. This allows for even stronger EU border fortification, faster deportations and the detention of refugees in camps at the external borders.

Germany has also resumed deportations of refugees to Greece this year. In previous years, there had been a de facto halt to deportations due to the devastating situation faced by refugees in Greece. Although the situation has further deteriorated, the Federal Administrative Court ruled in a landmark decision this April that there were no inhuman or degrading living conditions for refugees there.

In Britain, a far-right campaign is currently being waged by the government and establishment media against so-called “asylum hotels” in which refugees are accommodated. Tory politician Robert Jenrick, who could become the next leader of the Conservative Party, recently welcomed the proposals of far-right figure Nigel Farage to herd asylum seekers into concentration camps, but then tried to outflank him from the right: these camps should be “rudimentary prisons,” Jenrick said.

The attacks on refugees serve the ruling class in all countries to undermine democratic rights and prepare a broad offensive against all the social gains of the working class. Parallel to the latest asylum law, the Greek government is pushing ahead with military rearmament and toughening capitalist exploitation with the new labour law.

In order to divide and set workers against each other, the weakest and most defenceless—the refugees—are being targeted first and made scapegoats for social problems that are in fact the result of the capitalist crisis.

The working class must oppose the outright war on refugees with its own programme: the consistent defence of its immigrant colleagues and neighbours, and the international unification of all workers in a socialist movement.

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