

STOP WAR ON MIGRANTS

The “new immigration policy” is not a breakthrough, but a continuation and intensification of the anti-immigration policy of the greek state that was implemented in spring 2016, alongside the EU-Turkey refugee agreement. The purpose of this policy of the present and the previous greek government is to close the cracks on the walls of Fortress Europe that were opened in the spring/summer of 2015, and return to the former status in Greece, which has been a continuous policy of the greek state during the previous 20 years.

The method of “bloody integration” of migrants from Albania and other former “communist” countries in the 1990s (achieved through brutal exploitation and societal racism) was replaced by a different policy in the early 2000s. The beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan coincided with the structural changes in the Greek economy (de-industrialization and shrinkage of agricultural production). A new state policy on immigration was established, which was not anymore based solely on the exploitation of cheap labor, but mainly on the fact that crossing the greek borders was a necessary stage for the migrants aiming to go to richer EU countries. Greece became a filter, which not only reduced the cost of migrant labor but also the very value of human life. This policy got worse after the 2009 capitalist attack that was called the “greek crisis”.

The official justification (then and now) for devaluing the lives of immigrants is to “deter” them - to make their life in Greece a living hell and stop them from coming. This tactic, in addition to worsening the lives of immigrants due to official state policies, additionally creates a large black economy zone, which further deteriorates the lives of immigrants as they are exposed (and pushed to get involved) in many kinds of criminal networks (illicit work, trafficking, smuggling, forced prostitution, drug trade, human organs trade, etc). Finally it acts as a ‘filter’ for people’s movement: only the most capable reach the richest EU countries. EU is in need of cheap labor, free of social security costs, because of the usual capitalist greed, but also as a result of population ageing. Illegal labor of immigrants is necessary in the EU (and in Greece of course) because it squeezes the costs of “legal labor” of migrants and locals. At the same time, the devaluation of the lives of immigrants creates an apartheid society with perpetual factors for reinforcing both state authoritarianism and populist far-right extremism.

Illegalization, ghettoization, exclusion and death have been and still are the necessary tools for the implementation of the above described policy.

In 2015, hundreds of thousands crossed the EU borders. “Civilized Europe” could not stop them by raw force (not within European territory that is) and this ruptured the status quo that was until then imposed by the greek state’s anti-immigration policy. The SYRIZA government first adopted a humanitarian rhetoric. Then the NGO industry was created (as a way of “smooth control” over migrants and at the same time a way to get EU funding). Finally, the SYRIZA government launched a “return to normality” policy, which is now implemented in a more harsh way by the new ruling party (which wants to pose as a “law and order” government).

Illegalization

More obstacles in the Asylum process

Some days after the launch of the EU-Turkey Agreement, the greek parliament passed a law foreseeing a fast-track asylum procedure for migrants arriving at the Aegean islands. In practice, only the reaction times of the asylum applicants were shortened. In the Aegean islands, the deadline to submit an appeal against a negative decision is 5 days from the notification of this decision, while in mainland Greece the deadline was and still is 30 days.

In addition, in the islands the asylum claim is not examined “in its essence”, but the categorization that takes place is based on nationality, discriminating the population according to their “refugee profile” among people with possible access to human rights that will be violated and people without rights and who are to be deported. At the same time, the “lucky ones” who will not end up in detention in the hot spots will feel the geographical limitation in their skins, ending up confined in a bigger cell, that of the island itself.

Examination of applications, however, remains a slow process, during which applicants are trapped in the islands, stacked in the awful “Hot-Spots”. This is in practice the implementation of the agreement: those who pass through the Aegean are subjected to hellish conditions, so that others will not take this route. The initial fast-track asylum agreement was foreseen to last just for 6 months, but the SYRIZA government has repeatedly amended the duration of the fast-track border procedure. In the meantime, Moria and the rest of the Hot-Spots were periodically “relieved”, so that the situation wouldn’t reach a breaking point. Those who had suffered the “Hot-Spot” martyrdom long enough were moved to mainland Greece in groups, so that newcomers to the islands could take their place in the shithole.

In the summer of 2019, the new greek government abandoned the practice of periodically “relieving” the “Hot-Spots”, resulting in the rapid deterioration of the already unbearable conditions. A relative increase in the number of arrivals has also contributed to the deterioration (the rise was caused by various factors, such as the internal situation in Turkey and the vilification of migrants there, the new stage of the war in Syria, and the high death toll in the route from Libya to Italy).

The new greek government’s reaction is, in theory, intended to speed up returns to Turkey, as the EU-Turkey agreement was originally supposed to do. However, the greek Asylum Service received 66,969 new applications in 2018, and less than half of them (30,943) were made on the islands and fell under the Fast-Track Border Procedure. In addition, the implementation of “fast-track” returns requires the agreement of the Turkish authorities. What we can say for certain is that numerous obstacles are currently being introduced into the asylum process, which will finally illegalize a big number of people. Until now, the appeal against the first refusal of an asylum application required a simple photocopied form provided by the services concerned. A lawyer will now need to seek legal action, which will make the process costly or completely impossible for anyone who does not have access to a lawyer. By the end of 2018, there were 31 lawyers deployed under the greek state legal aid scheme and these are the ones intended to offer to tens of thousands of people legal aid for their appeals. Even if we add the 176 lawyers working with NGOs (50 of them in the Aegean islands, January 2019 data), they are still a drop in the ocean.

In addition, Independent Appeals Committees are changing, and instead of two judges and one UNHCR representative, they will now consist of three judges. It could be said that this change seems unnecessary, since judges themselves could already make a ruling by a majority. The point is that judges have little information about the conditions in the migrants’ countries of origin, conditions which could constitute reasons for asylum to be granted. This information was provided by the UNHCR-appointed member. Now, all information will be unofficially provided by the cops.

Applicants for international protection could and can lodge an application for annulment of the second instance decision of the Independent Appeals Committees before the Administrative Court of Appeals. The problem is that people whose asylum application is rejected at second instance no longer have “asylum seeker” status (law voted by the former government - 2018).

This means that although you can apply against the decision of the appeals committee, you can still be arrested and/or deported, eg. in Pakistan. and after your deportation the court may decide to accept your appeal against the decision of the appeals committee! Another option is to file another request with the Greek Asylum Service asking them to consider “new essential facts” that it didn’t consider before, but this is a procedure with few chances of success (and you can only file a new request once, as decided by the former gov-

ernment, while previously you could file a new request as many times as you could provide new information).

In addition, there will be a narrower definition of “vulnerable persons”: post-traumatic stress disorder (the most common symptom of a person who has experienced war or persecution) will no longer be a condition that defines a “position of vulnerability”.

Obstacles to obtaining citizenship

Without annulling the citizenship bill, bureaucratic obstacles are being raised to discourage anyone aspiring to greek citizenship. The tests run by the “Naturalization Committee” are getting harder and harder, to the extent that there is no doubt that a significant proportion of greek-born citizens would not be able to pass them successfully. Migrants are tested on their knowledge of the greek language, culture, and history, on whether or not they are integrated in greek society, their participation in social groups in Greece, their knowledge of Greece’s recent political history and values... The process of acquiring citizenship is already a five-year-long bureaucratic maze. And even a long-term residence permit requires a certificate proving knowledge of the Greek language and culture, as well as a gross annual income of 8,500 euros. Migrants from Albania and other former “communist” countries must feel constantly threatened by the prospect of losing their residence permit in Greece and returning to the status of “illegal migrants”.

Announcement of new detention centers

The announcement of new detention centers gives a message of more police repression against immigrants, even without it being sure that they will be funded by the EU (or constructed at all).

All the above changes are justified in the context of accelerating “returns” to Turkey. Given that Turkey has effectively suspended the Greek-Turkish agreement on “returns” through the Evros land border (which has caused an increase in illegal push-backs from the greek side) and that the implementation of its agreement with the EU about the Aegean islands is always a point of negotiation between Turkey and the EU, the only thing we can say for certain is that things are being led to an increased number of illegalized people within the greek borders, who are going to suffer all kinds of exploitation: trafficking/smuggling, and police/racist violence that this entails.

Ghettoization

Police raids in the city centers. Migrants piled up in “refugee camps” in remote and isolated areas (and in police stations).

The media serves us reports of evictions of migrants’ squats on the one hand, and almost daily police pogroms in city cen-

ters on the other. All these police operations are carried out using “overkill tools” (bulletproof vests and machine guns, masks and gloves so that cops don’t have to touch the “unclean”). Beyond the message of “law and order”, there is also the clear message by the greek media that all these people “do not fit in our cities”.

Here in Thessaloniki, we know that a large number of the people picked up by cops during police operations are transferred to camps (for example the one in Diavata), where they are not “registered” as camp residents (i.e. they do not have access to the scarce things provided). They are simply stacked there, ordered to solve their problems on their own and just stay in the camps waiting for their asylum requests to be filed, otherwise run the risk of being moved to a detention center.

The objective is to block access to the city and ghettoize migrants inside inhumane “open structures” in remote and isolated areas, or best case scenario in empty (off-season) hotels, again in distant areas.

Housing the most vulnerable ones in apartments is always done through making them dependent on NGOs (which take full control of migrants’ lives and at the same time extend their “business scope”). Housing in apartments is meant to last for a short time. Not many flat owners will accept to rent their apartment to immigrants on a six-month only contract, as announced by the new government in the new “Helios” housing program, unless of course the apartments are filthy and unfit to be rented otherwise (for Airbnb, for example).

Exclusion

Legal obstacles to migrants’ access to the public health system (no AMKA number provided), practical obstacles to access to public education

The right to public health access for all people living in Greece is protected by the Greek constitution. But without a related law, the implementation of this provision was dependent on the will of the local authorities. The mobilizations that took place in 2016, pushing responsible officials (in “KEP” facilities) to grant AMKA numbers, were successful and granting AMKA numbers to everybody became “semi-official” (without an AMKA number you don’t have free access to public hospitals, except in case of emergency). Just before the 2019 elections, a government decision officially announced that the procedure to get AMKA numbers will be facilitated for asylum seekers and recognized refugees. The same thing happened with the access to education, which is also a constitutionally protected right: on the initiative of politically active teachers, children from the camps were enlisted to public schools, long before the previous government decided to make it official.

The AMKA decision was annulled when the new government took office. A few days ago it was announced that an AMKA number is to be given only to those who have been granted asylum or those who have legal employment, having appealed on a negative asylum decision. However, even today (and for more than three months now) it is still unclear what will happen with the asylum seekers, either they are adults or they are children. This legal “gap” remains creating exclusions for those who are stuck in camps and Hot-Spots waiting for a response to their asylum applications and will not get an AMKA number anymore, for those who appealed on a negative asylum decision but have no legal employment (either being illegally employed or just struggling to survive on the streets) and even for children born in Greece by parents who have not been granted asylum and residence permits. Access to health, with the exception of emergencies, has therefore been ruled out for the vast majority.

Access to education has not been ruled out legally, but through delays in the designation of teachers and not assigning buses to transport children from camps to schools, access has been “un-officially” cut off. What is more, when a child does not have AMKA, she/he cannot do the necessary vaccines in order to be enrolled in school, which means that the child could be denied access to the educational procedures, triggering at the same time the racist discourse of parents regarding the diseases carried by the children of the migrants. Racist discourse distorts reality in one more aspect: children (born by migrants or by locals) have to be vaccinated *for their own protection*, not in order to protect other children (unfortunately, the vaccine against stupidity and racism has not been invented yet). It has to be noted that there are bright examples of solidarity, such as the doctors from the hospital of Kavala who took the initiative to vaccinate all the children from the nearby camp who do not have AMKA.

Death

Drownings in the Aegean continue, the latest tragic one on September 27, with seven dead (two women and five children) in a wreck of a vessel carrying Turkish dissidents (near the island on Oinousses). Near the Evros land border, migrants drown crossing the river, get hit by trains, or are killed on the highways, during police chases: three migrants were killed and 12 wounded in a car “accident” near Lagadas (close to Thessaloniki) on October 9, six migrants were killed on August 26 during a police chase, another lethal car accident happened on September 12, a local resident was killed during a police chase in the streets of Agheios Vassilios village on September 29...

People are dying all the time in the camps: the recent lethal fire in Moria, they die because of lack of health care, they die of the cold weather, they die in fights, suicides, accidents...