

Tentative notes on the reactionary developments around immigration, refugees and the border regime of the European Union

The situation in Greece after the EU-Turkey agreement

Almost four years have passed since the imposition of the EU-Turkey agreement which attempted to prevent the uncontrolled entry of undocumented immigrants/refugees within the EU and, more broadly, to reconstitute the mechanisms for the regulation, control and disciplining of their movement, which had completely broke down between 2015 and the beginning of 2016 – when more than one million immigrants/refugees managed to cross the continent and reach Germany and other countries of the developed European “center”.¹

Initially, this “deal” led to a significant reduction of arrivals: between April 2016 and December 2016 only 22.000 immigrants/refugees crossed the borders of Greece.² The situation remained the same in 2017, with 30.000 arrivals, and started to change in 2018 with more than 50.000 border crossings. The escalation of war and violence in Syria and Afghanistan in 2019, on the one hand, and the deterioration of the Turkish economy in the same period (with the GDP of Turkey growing only at a rate of 0.3% according to the estimation of the European Council), on the other hand, led to a significant increase of arrivals, with 75.000 people crossing the borders in 2019. The greatest number of the latter (56.000) arrived in Greece after the election of the right-wing party of New Democracy, whose one of the main points of its electoral campaign was to “close the borders”.

In the period between March 2016 and July 2019, when the country was still governed by the left-wing SYRIZA party, the number of immigrants/refugees that were confined in the islands grew very fast: In May 2016 8.500 people were held in the islands vs. 50.000 in the mainland; in February 2017 the corresponding numbers were 14.500 and 48.000; in September 2018, 17.600 vs. 65.000; in July 2019, 19.000 vs. 64.100. The situation became even worse during the last months, with New Democracy in control, as 41.200 people were confined in the islands vs. 74.400 in the mainland in the end of January 2020, according to the UNHCR data. The situation in the island camps is completely horrible due to the fact that all the island camps together have a planned capacity of 5.400 people whereas more than 35.000 people live in improvised shanty towns around the camp sites.

Initially, the reason behind the confinement of the immigrants/refugees in the islands by the government of SYRIZA was to stem the flow of arrivals through the creation of a miserable situation in the island camps that would discourage border crossings. At the same time, in the mainland, more than 15.000 people who stayed in the self-organized transit camp of Idomeni, in their attempt to continue their journey towards the northern EU countries, were forcibly evacuated by the police after the 24th of May 2016 and were transferred to former military camps in isolated areas.³ As we wrote in our text from 2016: *“The abjection and the cruelty of this operation were unprecedented. Entry to the camp was forbidden completely even to the accredited volunteers of the NGOs. In this way the*

¹ A more detailed analysis of the events of that period is provided by our text [“Vogelfrei. Migration, deportations, capital and its state”](#).

² All the data have been collected from the UNHCR database (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) unless otherwise mentioned.

³ https://el.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ειδομένη_Κυκλίας (in Greek).

distribution of food and the cleaning of the sanitary facilities were obstructed so that the immigrants would be forced to board the police buses that transported them to the isolation centers. As far as the press coverage of the police operation is concerned, entry was permitted only to the state media, the National Television of Greece (ERT) and the Athens News Agency. In other words, even the freedom of press was violated! Immigrants who boarded the buses by force didn't know where exactly they were heading to, an incident showing that some of the practices of the so-called totalitarian regimes such as, for example, the forced displacement to an unknown destination, may well be applied in a democratic capitalist regime governed by a left democratic party".⁴

Subsequently, the SYRIZA government in cooperation with UNHCR and IOM (International Organization for Migration) reinforced divisions between the immigrants/refugees as "asylum seekers" were selected for transfer from the islands to the mainland according to the so-called "vulnerability" criteria. Even in this case, the number of provided apartments, hotel rooms and camp dwellings, was not sufficient and the procedure was really slow. There was no effective plan and effort to alleviate the horrid living conditions in the islands, since the main aim of the EU-Turkey deal was exactly to make the life of immigrants/refugees extremely difficult. However, the increase of arrivals in 2018 and 2019 created conflicts within the island camps between the immigrants/refugees and extreme tensions with the racist part of the local population. That's why on October 2018, the SYRIZA government implemented a "decongestion project" in cooperation with the IOM through making contracts with hotels in Attica, Peloponnese, Evia, Serres, Grevena, Thessaloniki, Kilkis, Kastoria and Asprovalta which by April 2019 housed 6.300 people.⁵

From the 70.200 immigrants/refugees that were living in the mainland at the end of November 2019, 22.200 resided in camps, 21.000 were housed in rented apartments by UNHCR and 8.500 were accommodated in hotels which were leased by IOM in cooperation with the Greek government.⁶ The government of New Democracy faced enormous pressure from the (more-often-than-not politically affiliate) local authorities in the islands that denied and tried to prevent through mobilizations the further increase of the number of immigrants/refugees staying in the island camps. In the beginning of October 2019, the prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced that 40.000 immigrants/refugees till the end of 2020 would be transferred to the mainland and accommodated in hotels and that 16.000 of them would be inserted in the labour market through employment programs.⁷ At the same time, he announced the creation of closed detention camps in the islands, for immigrants/refugees seeking asylum.⁸

The plan of the government to implement the transfer of immigrants to the mainland was met with strong reactions by the local authorities and a significant part of the local population in peripheral municipalities such as Naoussa, Asprovalta, Serres, Skydra and

⁴ Antithesi, *op. cit.*

⁵ "Structural Failure: Why Greece's reception system failed to provide sustainable solutions", *Report of Refugee Support Aegean*, 18 June 2019, available at: <https://rsaegean.org>.

⁶ T. Georgiopolou, "New centers for controlled accommodation in the mainland", *Kathimerini*, 2 December 2019 (in Greek).

⁷ *Naftemporiki*, 4 October 2019, <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1520713> (in Greek).

⁸ News portal *news247.gr*, 4 October 2019 (in Greek). Mitsotakis also announced that 10.000 immigrants/refugees would be returned to Turkey till the end of 2020, a number that is almost equal to five times the total number of returns since 2016 (2.117 according to the UNHCR database).

elsewhere, regions where New Democracy, and the (extreme) right-wing in general, have been traditionally strong. In some cases, the motives behind the reactions had to do with a perceived “threat to the touristic status” of the area, such as in the case of Asprovalta and were led by local capitalists (owners of small hotels). In other cases, the motives behind the reactions were purely racist and fueled by conspiracy theories about “population substitution”, “islamization of the country” and so on. In the case of the islands, the concentration of so many young immigrant and refugee men in the shanty towns outside of the camps and in the public space of the towns contributed to the rise of racism, due to the inevitable creation of tensions with the local population. The transfers to the mainland were delayed but were not completely stopped by the reactions of the local population in the mainland. More specifically, between the beginning of 2020 and the 1st of March 2020, 6.174 transfers from the islands to the mainland have taken place.⁹

However, the rate of transfers to the mainland has been very slow in comparison with the increasing rate of border crossings since 2018. The right-wing government decided to create new closed camps in the islands in order to be able to control the increasing influx of the people, as the option to let them freely move within the country would contradict its much propagandized policy of “closed borders” as well as the EU-Turkey “deal” and the prevalent political consensus within the leadership of European Union for curbing migration. In order to create these camps, the government announced the requisition of land in relatively isolated parts of the islands and attempted to begin the works with the protection of riot police squads transferred from Athens on the 25th of February 2020. The result was explosive: a significant part of the island population participated in road blockades and very violent conflicts with the riot police. Three days later, on the 28th of February, the government was obliged to temporarily retreat and recall the special police units from the islands.

A few comments on the recent social reactions and on the response of the Greek state

The social and political composition of the mobilizations against the creation of the new closed camps in the islands was mixed. Both (extreme) right-wing and left-wing protesters and even antifascists and anarchists participated in the clashes and in the blockades. Regarding their class composition, small farmers, self-employed workers and native workers did participate. As far as we know there was no participation of refugees/immigrants and no attempt of communication with them on the part of the “natives”.¹⁰ Regarding the political content of the mobilizations, the blockade at Mantamado was dominated by the Communist Party (CP) which condemned the transformation of Lesbos into a “prison and a concentration camp for immigrants” and called for the abolition of the EU-Turkey agreement and for the transfer of immigrants to the mainland. On the contrary, the blockade of Diavolorema was dominated by right-wing and fascist elements.

⁹ *To Vima*, 5th March 2020 (in Greek).

¹⁰ However, demonstrations were organized by immigrants/refugees during those days in Lesbos with the demand for their transfer to the mainland. According to some comrades from the island, the police took measures in order to prevent any contact of the immigrant/refugee demonstrations with the Greek protesters.

It must be noted that, one month before the clashes against the requisitions and the creation of the “closed camps”, in the really massive mobilizations that were organized by the municipal authorities on the 22nd of January demanding the “decongestion” of the islands, the prevalent discourse was calling for the “closure of borders” referring even to the racist trope about the alleged “substitution of the local population by immigrants” and the “islamization of the country”. The regional governor of the Northern Aegean Moutzouris, who was supported by New Democracy in the regional elections, did not refrain from circulating anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the alleged role of George Soros in bolstering the “sinister role of the NGOs”. Furthermore, fascist/racist vigilante groups had been formed and had already made a number of attacks against members of NGOs, leftists and immigrants in Lesvos and Chios in the previous year. The result of the retreat of the government after the clashes of the local population with the riot police at the end of February was the actual strengthening of the right-wing discourse and practices, despite the influence of the Communist Party in Mantamado and despite the participation of leftists and anarchists in the blockades. As some comrades from Lesvos have noted, the defeat of the riot police put the wind in the sails of the racist vigilante groups that felt that they could do whatever they liked with no repercussions.

When the government of Turkey decided in the beginning of March to encourage immigrants/refugees to cross the borders in Evros in order to exert pressure on the European Union to support its military campaign in Northern Syria against the forces of Assad and Russia and in order to renegotiate the EU-Turkey “deal”, so that it could wrest more funding from the EU for the management of the 3.6 million immigrants/refugees that are stranded within its territory, the reaction of the Greek government was to militarize border control, to open fire, injure and kill immigrants/refugees both in the land and the sea borders and to suspend asylum applications in violation of the Geneva Convention and the International Law. At the same time, it gave free reign to fascist vigilante groups to engage in attacks against immigrants/refugees and journalists at the borders and against members of NGOs, journalists and leftists in the islands.¹¹ This move was supported (and probably pre-approved) by the leadership of the European Union. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, visited Evros to inspect their troops enforcing border control. It is clear that the leadership of the European Union is completely aligned with the efforts of the Greek government to close the borders with Turkey and to prevent any possibility for the repeat of the 2015 influx of immigrants/refugees into the EU. In this context, the EU provided to the Greek government with an extra aid of 700 million euros to enforce border control and with an additional force of 1.500 Frontex border guards.

At a first glance, it seems that the line of the Visegrád group (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland) and of the far right parties for the closure of borders has become dominant within Europe due to the electoral gains of the latter at the expense of the parties of the centre-right. It must not be forgotten, however, that the closure of borders is also supported by left and centre-left parties such as SYRIZA. Their main disagreements regard

¹¹ Members of extreme right-wing and fascist groups from Europe (such as members of the German group “Identity Movement”) gathered at Evros and in the islands to support their Greek fellows and to participate in the attacks. Such elements were most probably involved in the arson attacks against migrant facilities in Lesvos and in Chios.

the unleashing of the far right vigilante groups and the attempt to envelop the curtailment of the right of asylum with a cloak of legality and humanitarianism, as in the case of the EU-Turkey deal. The left-wing of capital and its state opts for the exclusive control of immigration by the institutions of the state and of the EU, in order to prevent a possible political destabilization that an autonomization of the fascist activities would entail.

No end to the bad days on the immediate horizon?

The New Democracy government utilized the move of the Turkish government in order to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, it imposed the militarized closure of borders and temporarily reduced the burgeoning influx of immigrants/refugees with the complete support of the leadership of the EU. On the other hand, it managed to rally the far right part of its electoral base around itself, despite the clashes of the previous week in Lesbos and Chios with the riot police. Through the nationalist anti-Turkish propaganda that misrepresented the attempts of the immigrants/refugees to cross the borders as a “hostile invasion”, it managed to promote the spectacle of “national unity” against an alleged but non-existent “foreign enemy” which is incarnated in the figure of the immigrant proletarian.

However, such a policy is by default unstable and precarious as it has been shown by the events of last February in Lesbos and Chios. It is, indeed, true that New Democracy has bolstered up such a reactionary social bloc since the days of the “Macedonian rallies” in the previous years, aiming, initially, at its electoral support and, consequently, at its support to the continued attack on the direct and the social wage and, more generally, on the livelihood of immigrant/refugee and local proletarians – an attack which could possibly lead to an actual proletarian revolt involving both local and immigrant/refugee proletarians. In this sense, it is a sort of a “preventative counter-insurgency” policy.¹² But, Greece is not a fascist state, let alone the rest of the European Union. After the initial supportive announcements, the president of the European Commission von Leyen commented regarding the reports on the violent attacks at the Greek borders against immigrant/refugees that: *“as a principle, all responses must be proportionate. Alleged violent incidents need to be investigated, and excessive use of force is unacceptable. This is a standing principle”*.¹³ It’s therefore possible that the Greek government will not be able to keep the far right on a leash and under control. In such a case, its probable autonomization as a political force will then destabilize the political situation and its rule.

Certainly, the escalation of far right violence creates a very difficult situation for the refugees/immigrants, for the activists of the far left, for the anarchist/anti-authoritarian milieu, for the members of NGOs and, even, for people simply expressing their solidarity to the immigrants/refugees. **It is crucial to organize our self-defense and our counter-attack against the far right vigilante groups.** However, we should not forget, within our **necessary**

¹² L. Fabbri, “Preventative Counter-Revolution”, available at: <https://libcom.org/library/preventative-counter-revolution-luigi-fabbri>. We use the concept of “preventative counter-insurgency” because as the recent movements in France, Chile, Ecuador, Lebanon, and elsewhere have shown, proletarian revolts may erupt out of the blue at any point in time due to the protracted attempt of capital to transfer the costs of the protracted capitalist crisis on the shoulders of proletarians.

¹³ H. Der Burchard and D. Herszenhorn, “Von der Leyen wants ‘workable agreement’ with Erdoğan on migration”, *Politico.eu*, 3 March 2020.

activities against the fascists and the police, that SYRIZA opened the way for the current attack on immigrant/refugee proletarians by the right-wing.

As the anarchist communist Luigi Fabbri wrote in 1921: *“The fight against fascism can only be waged effectively if it is stricken through the political and economic institutions of which it is an outgrowth and from which it draws sustenance. Moreover, revolutionaries aiming to bring down Capitalism and the State, if they were to allow themselves to be drawn out by fascism like a lightning bolt diverted by the lightning rod, and to devote all of their efforts and exhaust themselves on the fight against fascism alone, would be playing into the hands of the very institutions that they would like to see demolished. Using the fascists as a bogeyman, the capitalistic state would not only succeed in protecting itself and living an easier life, but would also succeed in persuading a segment of the proletariat to work in cooperation with it and to take its part. Even today, whilst on the one hand capitalism uses fascism to blackmail the state, the state itself uses fascism to blackmail the proletariat, giving out the message: ‘Give up on your dreams of political and economic expropriation and order your leaders to cooperate with me in strengthening the institutions of state, or I will stand by as you are beaten and killed by the fascists and, if they are not up to the task, I will lend them a helping hand myself!’. As long as the proletariat is accustomed to viewing fascism as its special enemy, against whom it has a special fight, the government’s blackmail ploy can always succeed; and for as long as that blackmail does its job, the government has an interest in the continued survival of fascism”*.¹⁴

Antithesi, 10th of March 2020

¹⁴ L. Fabbri, *op.cit.*