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European Union decides on massive intensification of assault on refugees

On February 9, the 27 heads of state and government of the European Union (EU) met in Brussels to decide on a massive tightening up of the common asylum and immigration policies. Another key topic was the escalation of the Ukraine war against Russia.

In contrast, the devastating earthquake disaster that had devastated the Turkey-Syria border region just two days earlier was not a topic of discussion. The EU, ostensibly founded on freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, human rights and human dignity, has no response to the devastation occurring on its periphery, which has affected some 23 million people. Hundreds of thousands have lost their loved ones, their homes and everything in the Turkish-Syrian border region. But European governments stubbornly stick to their murderous deportation routine.



Refugees at the Greek-North Macedonian border (2016) [Photo by Tim Lüddemann / flickr / [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/)]

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The following points were decided at the EU refugee summit:

- A further enhancement of the EU border agency Frontex to seal off “Fortress Europe” even more
- Mass deportations of refugees without a permanent right to remain
- Close cooperation with authoritarian regimes in the countries of origin

At the press conference after the special summit, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen clarified the plans for the EU’s asylum and immigration policy. She explained that the EU’s external borders must be strengthened, and irregular migration prevented through “border management.” An “integrated package of mobile and stationary infrastructures” is to be provided for this purpose. Its content, which is to range “from vehicles to cameras, from watchtowers to electronic surveillance,” would impress any fascist ruler.

The summit’s conclusions on immigration say the EU will strengthen its measures “to prevent irregular departures and loss of life, reduce pressure on EU borders and reception capacities, combat smugglers and ensure more returns.” With countries of origin and transit, the EU wants to strengthen “mutually beneficial partnerships.”

Behind the EU’s Orwellian terminology are dirty deals with authoritarian regimes and smuggling gangs to prevent people from leaving their home countries, rather than dying first in European waters. To prevent people from entering the Schengen area, Frontex checks are to be tightened and illegal pushbacks expanded. The EU also wants to expand mass deportations from its countries and make them even more brutal.

“Adequate resources” are to cover “all migration routes” and thus block any escape route from hunger, war and suffering. To this end, financial resources had already been pooled in 2021 through the EU’s Neighbourhood, Development Cooperation and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI–Global Europe). A total of €79.5 billion is available through the NDICI until 2027.

To ensure the “improvement” of mass deportations from the EU to third countries, the European Council emphasizes the use of “diplomacy, development, trade and visas.” Behind this are measures to put political pressure and economic blackmail on the governing powers in the countries of origin to make them compliant to the dictates of the EU. Those who suffer are the workers and poor of their respective countries.

The concept of so-called safe countries of origin is also to be used more intensively so as to be able to “legally” reject and deport even more asylum applications.

EU leaders want to control their external land and sea borders even more comprehensively. To this end, they are planning “full support for the European Border and

Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).” The latter is to receive massive financial support from member states to ensure the “development of border management capacity and infrastructure, means for surveillance, including air surveillance, and equipment.” In other words, Frontex is to be armed to the teeth to seal off Fortress Europe.

In addition, there are apparently plans to give Frontex mandates that extend beyond the EU and its external borders. The summit announced negotiations on “new and revised status agreements between the European Union and third countries on the deployment of Frontex.”

The conclusions also speak of the “specificities of maritime borders” in terms of “the protection of human lives,” indirectly confirming that countless people have already drowned miserably off its borders as they flee to a supposedly better future. According to the International Organization for Migration (IMO), more than 25,000 refugees have drowned or gone missing in the Mediterranean since 2014—the number of unreported cases is likely far higher.

A look back at the 2022 refugee numbers in the EU

One pretext for the special summit was the increased number of asylum seekers in 2022 in the EU, reportedly up by a dramatic 46 percent compared to the previous year. In total, according to figures presented by von der Leyen at the summit, 924,000 people had applied for asylum. Compared to the population of the European Union (447 million), that’s just 0.2 percent. This does not include the more than 4 million Ukrainian war refugees who have come since the Ukraine war.

The EU is using the figures for a targeted propaganda campaign. According to *Mediendienst Integration*, an information platform of the Council for Migration e.V., the number of refugees in Europe in 2022 has indeed increased compared to the previous year. However, these are predominantly people who have fled the war in Ukraine. Since February 2022, some 8.05 million Ukrainian refugees have been registered (as of February 2023).

Based on the EU’s so-called mass influx directive, 4.8 million Ukrainians received temporary protection status. Ukrainian war refugees are largely not included in official EU statistics under this measure. Ukrainian nationals are also automatically granted humanitarian residence permits in EU member states, giving them access to education, employment, social benefits and medical care.

At the same time, according to *Mediendienst Integration*, in the period from February to October 2022, around 111,000 refugees arrived in Europe via the main Mediterranean

escape routes. It goes on to say that in the first half of 2022, a total of just over 400,000 people applied for asylum in the EU (excluding refugees from Ukraine). This is about 63 percent more than in the same period in 2021.

The reason for this is that due to the coronavirus pandemic and associated travel restrictions, the number of asylum applications had fallen sharply in the previous two years, 2020 and 2021. Especially in comparison with the figures for 2015, when numerous refugees from war-torn countries poured into Europe, the absolute numbers are still comparatively low.

The European ruling class is running its propaganda machine at full speed in this regard: Allegedly, the number of irregular border crossings has reached an all-time high since 2016. Frontex reports that there were around 230,000 such border crossings in the first nine months of 2022 alone. However, in the fine print, Frontex notes that all “attempted border crossings” are counted, resulting in multiple counts.

The pitiless measures against refugees that the EU heads want to push through with their special summit in Brussels are an expression of a sharp turn to the right by all European governments.

Sweden holds the presidency of the European Council until June 2023. The country is dominated by a coalition of three right-wing parties: the Moderates, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. The Sweden Democrats, a far-right party with neo-fascist roots, are currently the second-largest faction in the Swedish parliament; it was only with their help that Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson (Moderate) was elected to office in September 2022. Since then, the Swedish government’s policies have been characterized by harsh attacks on refugees. For example, there are calls for “asylum transit zones,” or reception centres for asylum seekers.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni from the openly far-right Fratelli d’Italia governs in Rome together with the right-wing parties Lega and Forza Italia. One of the Meloni government’s first decisions was to make sea rescues in the Mediterranean more difficult. This involves, for example, forcing ships belonging to non-governmental organizations with refugees on board to divert to ports in the north such as Ancona or Ravenna, Ravenna being closer to Germany than to Sicily. Ahead of the special summit, Meloni had called for the EU to “intervene in the defence of the external borders.”

In Austria, Chancellor Karl Nehammer of the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) had called for an EU “rejection directive” shortly before the special summit. According to this, people with no prospect of asylum should be able to be deported while still at the

border. Nehammer's idea means legitimizing illegal pushbacks. In Vienna, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said the demand was a "blatant violation of refugee law."

Nehammer also spoke out in favour of expanding border fences and called for additional border guards, saying any fence was only as good "as it is monitored." Hungary, Poland and Greece also spoke out in favour of border fences financed by European funds. In the meantime, 2,000 kilometres of border fencing has been built at the EU's external borders. Ten years ago, the figure was 300 kilometres.

Other EU member states are also increasingly implementing far-right policies. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrat, SPD) rolled out the red carpet for fascist Meloni in early February and is implementing the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) refugee policy in his coalition with the Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens. At the EU summit, Scholz explained that on the one hand, immigration was necessary to combat the shortage of skilled workers, but on the other hand, it was necessary to ensure that people without the right to stay were deported. His government was working on this, he said.

The European Council summit ended with the typical EU "agreement to disagree" on the implementation of the measures decided. But at least on one point, the 27 EU heads did agree: they will drastically tighten measures against refugees—whether in combination or at the national level. The only exception will be if they can exploit the victims of hunger, suffering and war for their own economic and war policies.

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