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# Europe's Border Guards

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## Description:

Last year, the attempt of Greece's newly elected radical-left government to resist austerity policies imposed by the European Union institutions and the International Monetary Fund put the country at the center of world attention. This battle was definitively lost when Alexis Tsipras capitulated in July to the demands of the creditors, signing up to a third memorandum only days after a referendum in which Greeks had rejected a softer EU proposed austerity package. Since that moment, the plight of Greek society has only deepened. But it is now a silent suffering, deprived of the expectation of change and hope that had fueled the mobilizations of recent years. But 2016 again made Greece headline news, this time for a different reason. The laboratory of neoliberal shock therapy is also Europe's entrance gate for the millions of people leaving countries devastated by war and poverty. Syriza's capitulation to the troika has made the plight of refugees even worse.

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**Last year, the attempt of Greece's newly elected radical-left government to resist austerity policies imposed by the European Union institutions and the International Monetary Fund put the country at the center of world attention. This battle was definitively lost when Alexis Tsipras capitulated in July to the demands of the creditors, signing up to a third memorandum only days after a referendum in which Greeks had rejected a softer EU proposed austerity package. Since that moment, the plight of Greek society has only deepened. But it is now a silent suffering, deprived of the expectation of change and hope that had fueled the mobilizations of recent years. But 2016 again made Greece headline news, this time for a different reason. The laboratory of neoliberal shock therapy is also Europe's entrance gate for the millions of people leaving countries devastated by war and poverty. Syriza's capitulation to the troika has made the plight of refugees even worse.**

The refugee crisis has illuminated how "Fortress Europe" acts as the complementary side of a neoliberal, deeply antidemocratic, and authoritarian "European integration." It has killed the hopes of a left which believed it was possible to break from neoliberalism within the framework of the EU, as "European values" became an alibi for the display of imperialist violence and hypocrisy.

The Mediterranean's role as the graveyard of Fortress Europe and southern Europe's role as its guards is not new. The "externalization" of the EU border started in the early 1990s and acts as the indispensable supplement to the "free movement of capital, goods, and people" inside the EU with the movement of "people" always posing the most problems.

Concretely, externalization means the militarization of the border, with the support of increasingly sophisticated electronic surveillance; and the transformation of the external and the internal periphery of the EU into a vast "buffer zone" which acts as a lethal barrier, a filter, and a prison for all those lives excluded from the full humanity of the white, European, Western citizenry.

According to the [available figures](#), between 15,000 and 17,000 people died in the Mediterranean between the late 1980s and 2012, before the recent exodus from the Greater Middle Eastern area. More than 10,000 have died since, 2015 being the [peak year](#) with 3,800 deaths.

This dark side of the "European project" has been so far the least visible and debated one, except for those networks of courageous activists and researchers who have been working on the situation of migrants. The "refugee crisis" a term which assumes that migrants and refugees pose an inherent threat to order has at least the merit of politicizing the European project and putting it at the center of public debate. This has been the case in Greece, which found itself, once again, at the frontline of a battle of much wider proportions.

Seen from Greece, the "refugee crisis" reveals in the most brutal way the nature of the European Union as an entity for the surveillance, the policing, and the hierarchical categorization of the population. At the same time, it uncovers another dimension of an allegedly "left government" which, following its shameful surrender to the blackmail of the EU and the IMF, has aligned itself at all levels with the dominant logic of "crisis management."

This is one of the main [lessons](#) to be drawn from Syriza's disastrous failure. The idea that it is possible to remain faithful to "left values" on the terrain of human rights while making "painful but unavoidable concessions" on economic policy is an illusion.

The 2015 battle against the troika and the austerity memoranda was lost but the war is far from over. Social resistance exists, emerging on occasions like the [February 4 general strike](#). One of the most positive signs of the recent period has been the capacity of Greek society to react positively, in its majority, when faced with the massive arrival of refugees and migrants. What prevailed were feelings of empathy and humanity, the kind of solidarity that only the oppressed and the humiliated are capable of when they display their own ability to resist.

The refugee crisis has become a terrain for this ongoing political confrontation, one in which social organizations and the militant left have shown their own capacity to intervene and keep in touch with broader sectors of Greek society.

To analyze the multiple dimensions of this phase we have interviewed two of the most well-known figures of the antiracist and pro-migrant movement in Greece.

Mania Barsefski has been a member of the [Network for Social and Political Rights](#), a historical organization of the Left focused on migrant rights, human rights, and antiracism, since its creation in 1994. She is now working for the [Network for Social Support of Migrants and Refugees](#), which was founded in 1995 and is affiliated to the Network for Social and Political Rights. She was a member of Syriza's central committee and a member of its rights commission. She left Syriza in the summer of 2015 and has joined Popular Unity, taking over its rights commission.

Thanassis Kourkoulas is the coordinator of the [Deport Racism!](#) organization and a member of the Workers Internationalist Left (DEA), a former founding component of Syriza and of its Left Platform, now part of Popular Unity. He is also a member of Popular Unity's rights commission.

They are interviewed by Stathis Kouvelakis, who formerly served on Syriza's central committee and teaches political theory at King's College in London, and Angelos Kontogiannis-Mandros who is a graduate student studying Greek social movements at King's College London.

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### **Let's go back to January 2015 when Syriza won the elections. What was the situation in the country for refugees and the immigrants?**

**Mania Barsefski:** In January 2015 the number of immigrant workers in Greece had already started decreasing due to the financial crisis. Many decided to return to their home countries or tried to move elsewhere to escape the high unemployment.

At the same time the flow of refugees was up as a result of the intensification of military conflicts in the broader area. The European Union obviously bears a lot of the responsibility for this situation since it has either ignited or encouraged those wars.

As for the [Samaras government](#), its policy was directed towards the repression of refugees and migrants. Those considered illegal were held in detention centers for more than eighteen months at a time. In the camps of Amygdaleza and Korinthos there were deaths due to lack of appropriate health care.

The same repressive strategy applied to the refugees. Samaras's close collaborator, Thanasis Plevris, called for "blood on the borders" to prevent migrant flows. Nikolaos Papagiannopoulos, the head of the Hellenic Police, demanded we "make their lives unbearable" and Varvitsiotis, then-minister of shipping, was in favor of illegal pushbacks of migrants to Turkey.

This strategy had already taken the lives of hundreds of people in the Aegean with the minister covering up the

activities of the Hellenic Coast Guard. Emblematic here was the tragedy near [Farmakonisi Island](#) in January 2014 that shocked Greek society. Moreover, the fence erected at the area of the Evros river left no other way into Greece but the perilous sea route.

**But the Evros fence was put in place by a Pasok government in 2011, wasn't it?**

**MB:** Yes that's right but New Democracy continued the work. In reality there is no distinction between the two.

After the fall of Pasok's government, a coalition government between Pasok and New Democracy took over and adopted a common agenda with regard to the migration/refugee issue. Police operations were conducted throughout the country to arrest immigrants and racist violence was increasing.

In Manolada, in the Peloponnese, vigilantes at the service of employers repeatedly attacked immigrant workers asking for their pay. The neo-Nazi thugs of Golden Dawn unleashed a series of pogroms against immigrants, taking advantage of the anti-immigration discourse of mainstream media and of the government.

Some of these attacks ended up in murders as with the case of the Pakistani worker [Sahzat Lugman](#) , in December 2013, and of the rapper [Pavlos Fyssas](#) in September 2014. After Fyssas's assassination there was at last a crackdown against Golden Dawn which led to the arrest of most of its leaders and to a significant decrease of its activities.

**Thanassis Kourkoulas:** Since 2010 Greece has been at the forefront of Europe's deterrence policies, beginning with the construction of the Evros fence by Pasok minister Christos Papoutsis. It is the first EU country to refuse safe routes for refugees.

In 2011-12 the Greek government in agreement with the Turkish one upgraded the surveillance of the border in the Evros area using high-tech equipment which can track human presence more than a mile across the Turkish side of the border. This was a clear manifestation of the alignment of Greece, Turkey, and the European Union on migrant deterrence strategies.

This policy became entrenched after the April 2010 speech by Pasok's George Papandreou announcing not only the troika's rule but also the dogma of zero tolerance against the migrants. Papandreou made it clear that the repressive policies against the migrants and refugees go hand-in-hand with the "austerity shock" and the impoverishment of the Greek people.

We are faced here with a unified policy emanating from Fortress Europe that wants to filter the influx of "outsiders" according to the needs of the markets for a low-paid and dispensable work force while leading the "insiders" to [poverty and unemployment](#) under a state of emergency rule.

**What were Syriza's positions on migrants and refugees? How can we assess the links that Syriza had established with antiracist movements and organizations supporting migrants and refugees?**

**TK:** Since its formation in 2004 and due to its active involvement in all the mobilizations on that terrain, Syriza developed organic relations with the movements against racism and Fortress Europe.

It adopted nearly all the demands of these movements: the termination of detention policies and the closure of

detention centers for migrants and refugees, the opening of safe land corridors in Evros from which people would be able to enter freely and register in Greece, the legalization of most undocumented migrants and finally the condemnation of the collaboration between the Samaras government and Golden Dawn.

In my opinion, this policy played a determining role in the subsequent rise of Syriza into power, by expanding the electoral influence of the party and also creating the sense that a Syriza government would in reality be a government of the people, of the social movements, etc.

**MB:** Syriza found itself many times at the forefront of these movements. It organized regular visits to the detention centers, publicized the awful living conditions of the migrants there, and promised to dismantle these camps when in office. During the electoral campaign of January 2015 it put forward the proposal for the automatic granting of citizenship to all the children of immigrant families born in Greece, an initiative called "stop racism from the cradle." It had also committed itself create open facilities for the refugees and to call for a fair policy of relocation of the refugees across the European Union.

**Were there specific demands from Syriza for the cancelation of the [Dublin treaty](#) and the dismantling of the Evros fence?**

**MB:** There was indeed a position against the existence of the Evros fence although it wasn't clear if it should be dismantled altogether or if safe corridors would be opened. The spirit of the argument though was pointing towards the direction of the progressive dismantling of the fence.

As for the Dublin treaties, which obliged refugees to apply for asylum in the country through which they enter the EU, and allowing their deportation to that country if they leave it illegally, Syriza was clearly opposing them.

**Let's move now to the period of the first Syriza government, between January and July 2015. Tassia Christodouloupoulou, a figure with close ties to the antiracist and pro-migrant movement is appointed as minister of migration. Yet Yiannis Panousis, who espoused "law and order" and repressive policies, is appointed as minister of public order. What is your assessment of Syriza's migrant policy during this period, when confrontation with the EU over austerity policies was still on the horizon?**

**MB:** Well, during this period some hesitant but positive steps were accomplished. First of all, deterrence policies in the Aegean Sea immediately came to an end. This resulted in a spectacular decrease in the number of migrant deaths at sea.

Detention centers, more particularly in Korinthos and Amygdaleza, were almost entirely emptied out simply by bringing migrant detention time, almost limitless before, to three months, i.e. by sticking to the existing legislation. The government also passed an antiracist law and stopped police operations targeting migrants. The term "illegal immigrant" stopped being used by state authorities.

Moreover, the law for the attribution of citizenship to the [children of immigrants](#) was voted in parliament. This law has some significant flaws. For instance, the attribution of citizenship is linked to the legal status of the parents, which means that a child born and raised in the country whose parents haven't acquired legal status cannot get Greek nationality.

Those ambiguities reflect the fact that Syriza was in office without holding real power. On this specific case for example it needed to adapt to existing rulings issued by the Council of State with regard to the provision of

citizenship.

Then there was the hostility of the minister of public order, Yannis Panousis, who was relentlessly pushing for a law-and-order agenda. Under his command police forces dispersed with tear gas and use of force the first protest organized outside of the [Amygdaleza detention center](#) after Syriza took office.

In general, we can say that there was a constant pressure to move towards more "realistic" positions. The discussion about the Evros fence was blocked as the government's internal contradictions and its inability to impose its will upon the state apparatus became evident.

**TK:** The first Syriza government tried to test a possible balanced position vis-à-vis the European Union and the domestic establishment, with a policy in favor of socio-political rights during times of austerity. In other words, it was an attempt to reconcile clearly contradictory strategies. In that context all the steps that Mania outlined previously remained incomplete and inconclusive.

In my opinion especially after the agreement of February 20, when Syriza started to adapt progressively to the demands of the troika, the dead end to which this approach was leading became evident.

That pressure to adjust to the framework of the memoranda created a very tight economic environment that significantly limited the room of maneuvering on many issues, including migration. To cite just one example, Tassia Christodouloupoulou had money to recruit some advisers in the ministry for migration but lacked the resources to create hosting centers.

The political contradiction of the period was also reflected in the attitude of Panousis regarding the closure of Amygdaleza and the fact that many cases of maltreatment of migrants by police and coast guard units were reported. In a nutshell, with the exception of the two laws on antiracism and citizenship, the operational and legal framework remained intact with the government just trying to enforce it in a more "humane" way.

**In summer 2015, Tsipras and his government capitulated to the demands of the creditors, Syriza split, and a new Syriza government formed in alliance with the Independent Greeks (ANEL). Tellingly, Tassia Christodouloupoulou isn't part of the new cabinet. At the same time the refugee flows in the Aegean take unprecedented proportions. What is the impact of this political upheaval on refugee policy?**

**TK:** The appointment Yannis Mouzalas to the Ministry of Migration signals a turn in the management of migration and of the refugee crisis. Depicted as a successful and pragmatist politician during his mandate in the interim government, Mouzalas reoriented the government's policy towards NGO-based management.

At that time the first massive wave of refugees was underway and the country lacked any serious preparation for that situation. The determination of the refugees and the strong movement of solidarity forced the government to open the borders on the north of the country and let the refugees continue their journey.

Temporarily, this move allowed the Greek government to appear as having room to maneuver in the management of austerity. To put it differently, it contributed creating the image of a government that can really shape its own policies and take the initiative.

Tsipras also categorically refuses to bring down the Evros fence and thus provide a safe land passage to the refugees. He argues that to do so necessitates the prior approval of the EU and claims that it would be practically

impossible due to the minefields still in place at the Turkish-Greek border. This decision means that the dangerous sea route remains the only available one. It also means that the refusal of any unilateral move vis-à-vis the EU doesn't apply only to economic decisions but extends to the entire policy framework.

**MB:** The border is indeed full of minefields but the government could nevertheless have created [safe corridors](#) for the refugees. Let's not forget that minefields are a clear violation of international treaties.

If the problem was of a technical nature, it could be solved easily had Tsipras the will to do so. In reality the problem was a political one. The government was progressively aligning itself with the strategy of Fortress Europe and only used the work and positions of Syriza's rights committee as a discursive fig leaf.

It was during this phase that "hot-spots" were created throughout the country. Popular Unity rightly condemned these facilities from the very start as the first step towards closed detention facilities where refugees will be grouped separately according to class criteria, i.e. skills, educational level, etc., and between those considered as eligible for asylum and those who aren't. In other words, it was evident that Syriza's policy with regard to the refugee question was changing dramatically.

**This change translated into a dramatic revision of some of the previous concessions that were previously made to the refugees, right?**

**TK:** That's true. During this period, for the first time since Syriza was in office, the Greek authorities started the direct transfer and confinement of refugees and migrants from the islands to detention centers. Algerian migrants were also sent from Idomeni, near the northern border, to Amygdaleza and then deported to Turkey under the rules of the Papandreou-Çem agreement of 2004. The term "illegal migrant" is also reintroduced in public documents.

**MB:** This category of "illegal migrants" also includes people that should be registered as refugees such as the Afghans that have faced war the last thirty years, Somalis, Iraqis, Iranians. In other words, the term "illegal migrants," which should be rejected in any case, is now applied to people that under the Geneva Convention are considered refugees.

Many of the criteria that define the status of the refugee have been lifted as well. For example, who can say that a homosexual that is targeted in his country for her sexual orientation is not a refugee, who can say that a woman facing forced marriage or circumcision is not a refugee, who can say that a child facing forced labor without access to education and healthcare should not be considered a refugee?

The use of the term "illegal migrant" in reality is meant to restrict the refugee status only to Syrians and as we will see later with the [Turkey-EU agreement](#) not even to all of them.

**TK:** This is also the moment when Mouzalas clearly sent a message to North African migrants that deportations will now take place.

**MB:** His formulation was that that North African migrants need to know that "if Osman comes to Greece he will be sent back."

**One of the dominant narratives of the refugee crisis has been the contrast between the "humanist" Merkel, keen to welcome the refugees, and the xenophobic Eastern European, who is alien to the "West European values" embodied by Germany. This despite the fact that the countries of the "Visegrad group" (Czech**



Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia), followed by Slovenia, Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, who unilaterally decided to close their borders, were lead by Austria. This narrative has become less credible since the agreement between the EU and Turkey, however the question remains: how are we to assess Germany's attitude in that period?

**MB:** It is clearly an attempt to whitewash Germany and Merkel after their handling of the Greek crisis gave them a "nasty" image. It is an exercise in spin, using a lot of lofty rhetoric.

In reality they did not distance themselves from the logic of Fortress Europe. Neither Germany nor any other EU member state condemned or reacted effectively to the decision of the Visegrad group and its followers to close the borders, erect walls and fences, and send the military to prevent border-crossing.

Germany tried to change its image abroad and particularly in Greece by presenting itself as an ally and a lenient power with a humane face. Meanwhile Greece is constantly blackmailed and put under maximum pressure to adopt even harsher austerity measures and to sell out its remaining public assets.

We should also not forget that [the deal David Cameron got from the EU](#) , under the threat of Brexit, allows Britain to seal its borders, keep at bay refugees, and even discriminate against EU citizens. Denmark's decision to seize the valuables of the refugees wasn't met with any reaction. The pro-refugee discourse should therefore be considered pure hypocrisy.

**Sure, but Germany accepted nearly a million refugees last year. At the same time, the German government is also adamant about the need to externalize EU's borders and to transform the countries of the southern periphery, and particularly Greece, into Europe's border police and, if need be, into traps for those who succeed getting in. Isn't that the core of the logic of Fortress Europe?**

**TK :** We should stress the fact that the German government has economic reasons to let refugees in. German industry, and more generally, the German economy, needs extra labor that is both skilled and ready to work for low salaries. So it's not humanism but a class policy oriented towards increased exploitation of both German workers and refugees that will inevitably create divisions and fuel competition between them.

It will be no accident if Merkel declares eventually that there should be a cap to what Germany can accept in terms of numbers. This cap is set by Schäuble and the Employers Union and it corresponds to a cost/benefit calculation that is favorable to the interests of German capital.

**The refugee crisis has peaked with the gradual closure of the borders and the sealing of the so-called "Balkan route." The agreement between Germany and Turkey puts NATO patrols in the Aegean Sea, blocking refugee entrance to the Greek islands. What are the responsibilities of the Greek government at this stage?**

**TK:** The Syriza government should have confronted from the outset the policies and the decisions of the EU. It should have moved unilaterally, as it should have done with the memoranda and in matters of economic policy.

The fact that it didn't follow that line is further proof that the EU framework is a coherent package that needs to be confronted as a whole. It's not possible to separate the decisions concerning the refugees or human rights and the economic policy.

Let me be more specific: the Greek government should have unilaterally withdrawn from the Dublin II agreements



and categorically opposed NATO patrolling the Aegean. NATO presence is obviously threatening for the refugees but is also related to the situation in the Middle East and more particularly to the war in Syria.

Greece should also have withdrawn from NATO, a move that a right-wing government such as the one led by [Konstantinos Karamanlis](#) did in 1974 to protest against the US's and NATO's role in Cyprus and Greece during the military dictatorship.

In terms of positive actions, the Greek government should have at the very least opened up the passages in the area of the Evros river, to allow a safe terrestrial crossing of the border and put maximum pressure on the neighboring countries and the Visegrad group to keep their borders open.

Of course it should also have created the conditions for the refugees to stay in the country in decent conditions, in open and properly equipped centers. To do that it should have taken control of public or private buildings that are currently not occupied and use them to accommodate not only refugees but also Greek people who are faced with housing problems.

Such an initiative could have helped create an alliance with the popular classes on a pro-refugee policy.

**MB:** To put it very simply: the Greek government could have vetoed EU decisions and thus created effective pressure for the opening of the borders and the solution of the refugee crisis. But such an attitude is impossible for a government that has already capitulated to the troika and accepted the neoliberal framework.

But the responsibility of Tsipras and his government go even beyond that. We should emphasize that even before the signature of the shameful agreement between the EU and Turkey, Tsipras had [initiated the rapprochement](#) with Turkey on that terrain.

He traveled twice to Turkey, last November and in early March, and agreed with the Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu on the whole set of measures to pull back the refugees and block the route to Europe.

So in this case, Greece pioneered the repressive policies that were eventually put in place by the EU in its dealings with Turkey. Tsipras even declared that he considered this deal of the EU with Turkey as "an important success."

**Tsipras has defended the EU-Turkey agreement, calling it a "European solution" that can prevent a "domino of unilateral actions." Meanwhile human rights agencies have denounced it as contrary to international conventions on refugee rights. What is your assessment of the agreement?**

**MB:** First, this agreement is predicated on Turkey being recognized as a "safe country" despite the war it is waging at home against the Kurds and despite its position towards Syria, where Kurdish positions near the border have repeatedly been bombed, strengthening ISIS. Turkey's [domestic situation](#) is clearly unacceptable from the perspective of the rule of law and of democratic rights: it is not a safe country for its own citizens.

There are also reports from the UN High Commission on the Refugees and Amnesty International denouncing deportations even of Syrian refugees. This agreement lifts the guarantees granted to the refugees by the 1951 Geneva Convention, which explicitly stipulates a case-by-case examination of every application for asylum.

For the refugees and migrants who are already in Greece, the agreement means, as has been said previously, that

the existing hot-spots are turned into detention centers. Deportations of the so-called "irregular migrants" have already started. Applications for asylum now follow fast-track procedures and if rejected lead to deportation of the applicant.

The agreement also completely seals the borders, including the Greek ones, and sets a punishment for all those who cross them. Indeed for every refugee to be "relocated" in the EU, another one has to be deported from Greece to Turkey.

This perverse, inhuman logic means that those who risk their lives to cross the border are sanctioned whereas those who stay quiet waiting for a hypothetical relocation are, so to say, rewarded by benefiting from the punishment imposed to the others.

Everyone understands that only a very limited number of refugees will now be allowed to enter the EU. An increasing number of them will be punished either by being trapped in Greece, which is thus transformed into a vast detention center, or by being deported to Turkey and confined to huge camps which do not conform to international standards.

**Let's remember here that Turkey hasn't signed the conventions on refugee rights. The protection granted to refugees is very limited and we have reports denouncing that people sent back from Greece ended up in prison.**

**To what extent can it be effectively implemented? In the bill submitted to parliament by the Greek government, Turkey isn't recognized as a "safe country." Are mass deportations to Turkey then still feasible?**

**TK :** The EU-Turkey agreement is a monument of racist inhumanity. Turkey has imposed visa restrictions for the Syrians who enter the country by sea or by air. The land border is also nearly closed, only people with serious health issues are allowed to enter. There are Amnesty International reports about refugees sent back to Syria by the hundreds from camps near the border and others being shot while trying to cross the border.

As far as Greece is concerned, this agreement has led to unprecedented changes in the legislation concerning asylum. The applications will be processed in the islands within two weeks, this deadline is also supposed to cover the procedure of appeal. This amounts to a complete negation of legal guarantees and appeal procedures.

The applicants are treated as prisoners, detained in places that have now become closed centers in which living conditions are rapidly deteriorating. International agencies and activists have left these places, only some selected NGOs are still present.

The applicability of the agreement will largely depend on "technical" aspects. For instance, more than 5,500 people have so far applied for asylum in Greece. It is practically impossible to process those applications within 14 days. Meeting that deadline would require hundreds more staff that are not available.

The question remains of course the possibility of the deportation of Syrian refugees. Will we see the transposition of what is happening with Afghanistan, where Kabul is considered a "safe area," presumably because Western embassies are heavily guarded? In which case Damascus and other government-controlled areas will be considered "safe" and people originating from there will be sent back.

Or will a Syrian who has been granted asylum in Greece be sent back to Turkey if for instance he tries to cross the

border illegally to enter another European country? In any case, for those considered "irregular migrants" or those rejected from asylum, deportation becomes as an imminent threat.

**Refugees themselves have taken action, for instance when they tried to bring down the fence at the border between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on April 10 and were savagely [pulled back by police](#)** . Recently we have noticed that in media discourse, but also to an extent by the Greek government, solidarity activists and the most active refugees are stigmatized as elements "fomenting disorder and acts of violence." How is this evolution analyzed by the solidarity movement?

TK: The only way to implement racist policies is by adopting authoritarian and repressive measures and by targeting activists and the refugees themselves. We hadn't seen this type of atmosphere in Greece since 2013, when, with the crackdown on Golden Dawn, things somewhat improved.

The refugees will continue to resist and oppose the policies that have been adopted as they already did in Idomeni, in Chios, or in central Athens where they were joined by thousands of activists and citizens. We issue a warning to all those who target refugees and activists, either from the far right or from government circles, that their attempt to intimidate us will have no effect whatsoever.

The networks that are active in the solidarity movement but also the militant left, Popular Unity, Antarsya, or other currents, including people who have left Syriza without joining another organization, constitute the backbone of a force that is able to reach and mobilize broad sectors of the popular classes and of Greek society in support of the refugees.

Those who will lose their credibility in this affair are those who pretend to be something different from their predecessors in government and turn out to be their faithful continuators.

**MB:** The most positive signal in this entire period was the tremendous reaction of Greek society when confronted with this crisis. It displayed a strong sense of solidarity, refused to discriminate between "irregular migrants" and refugees, and resisted xenophobic impulses and Islamophobia. This is what has so far prevented Golden Dawn from benefiting from the situation.

The Greek government is trying at the same time to hijack the solidarity movement and make it appear as its best ally while trying to erase its political content by bringing it within the framework of the EU and the Greek state policy as exemplified by the recent EU-Turkey agreement.

This is why the Greek authorities play some NGOs, the "good" ones, against others and against the activist networks.

We have to say here that NGOs manage huge amounts of money in a quite opaque way, even if we should not put all of them in the same bag. Actually the state policy is to subcontract the bulk of the work to those NGOs and to marginalize and even stigmatize the other actors, particularly the most politicized ones.

Activists have thus been arrested and/or subjected to police harassment. Carrying even a potato peeler makes you now a potential suspect for violent action. The media make of course a big fuss about this.

We have also seen state officials and the media covering jointly violent actions against refugees perpetrated by allegedly "angry citizens" protesting against their presence in various places of the territory. This is the type of attitude that paves the ground for a surge of Golden Dawn activity. And unfortunately we have already seen that

starting with the first [attack](#) since a long time against refugees in Piraeus on April 8.

**Both of you waged a fierce battle inside Syriza to prevent the capitulation and to remain faithful to Syriza's initial commitments. This battle was lost and entire Greek left and the workers' movement are now facing a very difficult situation. However, from what has been said so far in our discussion, it seems the ongoing struggle on the question of refugees and migrants is crucial as a terrain for the reconstruction of a combative, militant left.**

**TK:** I totally agree. The refugee question is of Greek, European, and worldwide importance. For the Left, it is a question that touches the core of its identity and of its values. The Syriza-led Greek government has already started paying a political cost for its management of the situation.

What is needed now and for the forthcoming period is a decisive attitude from the anti-memorandum, radical, and anticapitalist forces of the Left. The refugee question should not be put in the balance and weighted against other agendas, for instance issues concerning foreign policy.

The outcome of the ongoing battle depends on the impact of the new package of austerity measures that the government will have to pass in parliament the next few weeks. It is not obvious that the government will be able to survive once this package is voted. The essential issue lies therefore in the convergence between the social resistance to the new austerity package and the movement of solidarity with the refugees and the migrants.

**MB:** This government has so far succeeded in passing measures that would have been fiercely opposed by popular resistance under different political circumstances. Their only plan is to continue to do so and remain in office at any cost covering up their deeds with a left rhetoric devoid of any effective meaning.

The struggle against the memoranda and in support of the refugees and migrants is a common struggle. Of course different factors enter into play in each of these issues. However it is the same neoliberal and imperialist policy that created the conditions that lead to the wars and the ensuing mass exodus but also to the impoverishment and degradation that have been imposed on the Greek people.

A government that is unwilling and unable to confront the troika of the lenders cannot offer any alternative perspective. Syriza has proved unable to win over the hegemony for a genuine left project, which is a condition sine qua non not only for a solution to the refugee crisis but also for the emancipation of Greek society. This perspective will not arise spontaneously, it implies ruptures and major confrontations. This is not an easy task but without this compass nothing will be possible, at any level of political action.

*May 2 2016)*

[Jacobin](#)