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Migration

# Europe's shame

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**If we had to describe the European Union's response to the current refugee crisis with a single word, that word would be "chaos." If we could use two words, the second word would be "shame," necessary to refer to what European leaders and technocrats should feel upon reading the statement released by France's Doctors Without Borders (MSF) on March 22, announcing that the humanitarian organization would cease all activities connected to Moria, the main camp in the Greek island of Lesbos, where refugees are registered and fingerprinted before being relocated or deported.**

As Marie Elisabeth Ingres, the MSF head of mission in Greece, [said](#),

We made the extremely difficult decision to end our activities in Moria because continuing to work inside would make us complicit in a system we consider to be both unfair and inhuman.

We will not allow our assistance to be instrumentalized for a mass expulsion operation, and we refuse to be part of a system that has no regard for the humanitarian or protection needs of asylum seekers and migrants.

On the very same day, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) [published a statement](#) announcing its intention to scale back its activities in the "hot spots" on the Greek islands, as a response to the new agreement between the EU and Turkey:

UNHCR has till now been supporting the authorities in the so-called "hot spots" on the Greek islands, where refugees and migrants were received, assisted, and registered. Under the new provisions, these sites have now become detention facilities. Accordingly, and in line with our policy on opposing mandatory detention, we have suspended some of our activities at all closed centres on the islands.

## Externalization of European Borders

The [new agreement](#) was passed on March 18 and will cost the EU up to six billion euros to fund facilities for refugees in Turkey. It entails three key provisions:

1. All migrants and refugees illegally crossing from Turkey to Greece will be returned to Turkey.
2. For every Syrian refugee deported back to Turkey, another Syrian refugee will be resettled from Turkey to a European country.
3. Turkey will actively prevent illegal crossings by land and sea.  
Activists and UN officials have [openly denounced](#) the illegality of the agreement, which disregards the individual rights of asylum seekers to be protected in the country to which they are deported.

On the one hand, UNHCR has warned that reception centers on the Greek islands are crowded with approximately 52,000 refugees and migrants "who are now being detained in unsafe and inhuman conditions" and that the

system for registering asylum seekers is overloaded.

On the other hand, Turkey confers refugee status only to people fleeing from Syria, and not, for example, to asylum seekers from Afghanistan or Iraq; mass deportations of all non-Syrian refugees and migrants to Turkey would violate both international and European law regulating asylum.

To make things even worse, according to Amnesty International, Turkey is currently [illegally returning](#) thousands of Syrian refugees to Syria. De facto, through its agreement with Turkey, the EU is about to send thousands of refugees to the slaughterhouse.

Although one may be tempted to interpret this horrifying situation as the outcome of a coherent and univocal EU strategy, in fact such a strategy does not exist. Instead, multiple competing and contradictory strategies are in place, each undergirded by different political and economic interests and by a different vision of what the EU should be.

The agreement with Turkey is part and parcel of the main strategy adopted so far by EU institutions and consisting of an attempt to externalize European borders through bilateral agreements supporting the creation of detention centers outside the political borders of the EU, the [creation of hot spots](#) in Greece and Italy, militarization of external borders into fronts, redefinition of the tasks and powers of Frontex, and an intention to create a European border guard.

This strategy, however, is currently at an impasse: though it has failed to keep the flow of migrants and refugees under control, it has created humanitarian chaos, bringing further political discredit to EU institutions.

The extent of the European impasse can be better appraised by considering that in just the past year eighteen different urgent summits on the refugee crisis have taken place, at different times involving various European institutions; the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the United Nations, and even NATO.

The results of these summits have been abysmal: to date, after endless discussions and inner fights about the quota for relocating refugees in various European countries, only 660 refugees have actually been relocated.

Yet, if it is to succeed, the agreement between the EU and Turkey will likely need to be militarily backed by NATO. This past February, NATO became directly involved in managing the refugee crisis: they sent military vessels to the Aegean Sea to try to stop migrants crossing from Turkey into Greece.

Though the effectiveness of this agreement is uncertain, one of its first consequences may be an increase in arrivals from Libya to the Italian coast.

Libya was supposed to be a main player in the bilateral agreements aiming to detain refugees outside Europe's political borders. However, it is currently unable to do so, owing to the country's decomposition following [US military intervention](#).

[Mass arrivals](#) from Libya to the Sicilian coast are beginning anew, and the hot spots planned in Sicily, some of which were never actually created, are largely insufficient.

Mass arrivals through the Mediterranean also mean an increase in deaths at sea: the International Organization for Migration estimates that 531 refugees and migrants died in the Mediterranean between the beginning of January and the end of March; that is 9 percent [more than last year](#).

# Collapse of Schengen

While the strategy to externalize borders meets an impasse, several EU state members are putting forward alternative and reciprocally competing strategies, which are only deepening the crisis of the EU project. The Italian government is contravening the border externalization strategy in two interrelated ways.

First, [Frontex vessels](#) in the Mediterranean Sea have been transformed into centers where refugees and migrants rescued at sea are pre-identified and thus their arrival to the coast is delayed and rescue operations are slowed down. Italian military vessels, on the contrary, have been prioritizing rescue operations ahead of pre-identification.

Second, Italian authorities have so far de facto facilitated the transit of migrants and refugees through the country in the direction of the French and Austrian border, in open violation of the [Dublin agreements](#).

This explains last summer's crisis when France suspended the [Schengen agreement](#) at the border with Italy, causing hundreds of refugees hoping to cross the border to camp for weeks in desperate conditions at the train station in Milan and in the streets of Ventimiglia.

Although there might be humanitarian considerations behind the Italian authorities' strategy, there certainly are economic and political interests at stake, as the Italian government is using its "mismanagement" of the refugee crisis to pressure the EU – particularly, Germany – to make concessions on the stability pact, especially in relation to Italian debt.

In the meantime, Schengen has also been suspended at the border between France and the United Kingdom, thus creating the conditions for the horrifying situation known as the Calais jungle. In February, in response to this situation, Belgium [unilaterally suspended](#) Schengen at its border with France in fear of refugees migrating en masse from Calais in the hope of using Belgian ports as a staging point to cross the border into the United Kingdom.

Already in the month prior, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark had also decided to temporarily suspend Schengen. Austria [joined them](#) a week later, in response to the arrival of thousands of migrants sent back from Germany over the Austrian border.

Austria has also re-imposed controls and restrictions on rail and road traffic at its border with Hungary. Hungary, in turn, has built fences at its borders with Serbia (which is not in the EU) as well as Croatia and Slovenia (which are EU members, the latter of which is also a participant in Schengen).

## A Somber Future for the EU

As the Schengen agreement is falling apart, several options are currently on the table. First, Schengen could be suspended for two years. In December 2015, EU ministers started considering this option, which would please the [rising xenophobic right](#) and appease an increasingly xenophobic public opinion.

However, this option would also be an economic disaster for European capitalism, or at least for a significant part of it. Here is the quibble: Schengen establishes not only the free circulation of EU citizens across borders, but also – and most importantly, from the viewpoint of European capitalism – the free circulation of goods.

This is a key issue, for value chains increasingly operate across the borders between nation-states. From the viewpoint of value chains, the “borders” internal to a nation may be more relevant than the borders among nation-states.

Value chains, for example, organically connect commodity production in northern Italy with production in Austria, Germany, and France, rather than with production in southern Italy. Simply put, there is no correspondence between national borders and the chains of valorization of capital.

Various alarming estimates of the economic loss entailed by suspending Schengen for two or more years have circulated during the past months, and the European Commission [has warned](#) that a collapse of Schengen would undermine economic growth for multiple years into the future.

Second, a mini-Schengen could be created. This option is supported in particular by the Dutch government and may be more appealing to Germany, as it either [would be restricted](#) to Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg or could also include [Sweden](#) and [France](#) .

In either case, it would certainly exclude Eastern Europe, Greece, and Italy – the latter two, in particular, are being held responsible for not complying with the Dublin agreements and for not successfully protecting their borders.

On April 1, responding to the pressure of the prospect of a mini-Schengen, the Greek parliament hurriedly passed a law to make legal what was previously illegal, namely the [mass deportation](#) of refugees and migrants to Turkey, as demanded by the EU-Turkey agreement: in effect marking the last capitulation by Greece’s Syriza government to EU commands.

The mini-Schengen was agitated in large part to put pressure on non-complying EU members; nonetheless, this proposal remains in play. Furthermore, because mass arrivals will very likely increase in the coming months, the possibility that this prospect may be seen as a lesser evil in face of an ever-deepening EU crisis cannot be excluded.

Indeed, another no-less viable possibility would entail an implosion of the EU project tout court, which may be accelerated by a Brexit. Dissolution of the EU may prompt a return to nation-states with full national sovereignty or, alternatively, the creation of a new system of transnational governance that combines nation-states and European institutions to support increasingly transnational value chains.

Although the future of the EU is uncertain, two facts at least are clear. First, no policy whatsoever will be able to stop the flow of migrants and refugees to Europe.

The disintegration of Syria alone has forced four million refugees into Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey and displaced more than seven million people in Syria.

The instability of situations in Afghanistan and Iraq promises to lead thousands of people to flee from these countries, while [climate change refugees](#) will arrive in the thousands from East and Sub-Saharan Africa and from Southeast Asia.

The imbrications of war, climate change, and poverty, moreover, make the very distinction between refugees and economic migrants nonsensical, a matter of bureaucratic opportunism, rather than of substance.

Second, the current EU has proved repeatedly that it is not equipped to grapple with the global transformations – and tragedies – for which it also bears historical and political responsibility. This EU also lacks any political soul

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beyond the technocratic defense of the interests of European capitalism.

In spite of its alleged universalistic vocation, the EU has so far realized only a single form of universalism: that of the circulation of commodities and money.

As far as the rest are concerned, we are left with increasing economic inequalities and exploitation, the destruction of the welfare state, a rising xenophobic right, and the revolting spectacle of a bunch of European technocrats fighting over the dead and tortured bodies of migrants and refugees.

In the meantime, thousands of migrants and refugees have begun [to riot and rebel](#) across Greece: their rebellion is our hope.

[Public Seminar](#)