

Sharing Greece's asylum shame



OVERCROWDED The Pagani detention centre on the Greek island of Lesbos. REUTERS

The EU's border agency should not be sending migrants to camps deemed abusive by Europe's top human-rights court, writes Bill Frelick

Greece's appalling treatment of asylum seekers and migrants was, until recently, a blot on its reputation alone. But in November, the European Union and its member states became complicit in Greece's shameful conduct when Frontex, which manages migration at the EU's external borders, began deploying a multinational team of border guards along Greece's north-eastern border with Turkey.

Just as the "guest officers", in Frontex-speak, were arriving from across the European Union, the European Court of Human Rights barred Belgium from returning an Afghan asylum-seeker to Greece because it would subject him to inhuman and degrading conditions in migrant detention centres there and leave him unprotected in Greece's dysfunctional asylum system.

So, while Europe's top human-rights court, whose rulings bind EU states, banned border guards in Belgium from

sending asylum-seekers to Greek detention because of abusive conditions there, Frontex was asking Belgium (and other states) to send their border guards to Greece to participate in a mission to apprehend irregular migrants and help Greece detain them in those same detention centres.

As justice and home affairs ministers meet in Brussels this week (22-23 September) to consider expanding Frontex's mandate, by giving it more operational power and a more explicit duty to respect human rights (changes agreed by the European Parliament last week), they should reflect on whether they really want to share Greece's shame.

In December 2010, during the Frontex deployment, Human Rights Watch visited detention centres in north-eastern Greece and found the authorities were holding migrants, including vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied children, for weeks or months in filthy and

grossly overcrowded conditions.

The police station at Feres, with a capacity for 30, held 97 detainees in squalid and dangerous conditions. "You cannot imagine how dirty and difficult it is for me here," a 50-year-old Georgian woman detained there said. "It's not appropriate to be with these men. I don't sleep at night. I just sit on a mattress."

In the Fylakio migrant detention centre unaccompanied children were held with unrelated adults in overcrowded cells. Sewage was running on the floors, and the smell was hard to bear. Greek guards wore surgical masks when they entered the passageway between the large barred cells. And conditions have not improved. This month, detainees in Fylakio put their own lives at risk by burning mattresses to protest against their treatment.

Member states and EU agencies such as Frontex are barred under European and international human-rights law from knowingly exposing anyone to inhuman and degrading treatment. Right now, co-operation with the Greek detention system means doing just that.

But this does not mean the EU should wash its hands and turn away. It should instead make Frontex's engagement in

border-enforcement operations in Greece – and anywhere else – contingent on placing apprehended migrants in decent facilities.

This week, as it takes its hardest and most significant look at Frontex in years, the Council of Ministers should demand that the Greek government immediately transfer migrants to areas of Greece where detention standards meet human-rights requirements. Without a positive response from Greece, the ministers should exercise their sovereign discretion by immediately making detention spaces available in their countries where conditions meet international and EU standards, or they should withdraw their border guards and direct Frontex to suspend its activities in Greece.

And as it amends the regulation that created Frontex, the Council should ensure that Frontex never again places European border guards in a position where they expose migrants and asylum-seekers to inhuman and degrading treatment.

Bill Frelick is the director of Human Rights Watch's refugee programme and the editor of a report entitled "The EU's dirty hands: Frontex involvement in ill-treatment of migrant detainees in Greece".

Challenging the rise of populist extremism

Mainstream parties need to find new approaches to reduce the significant electoral potential for extremist parties, writes Matthew Goodwin

The rise of populist extremist parties is one of the most pressing challenges facing European democracies. At least since the 1980s, the rise of parties such as the National Front in France, the Austrian Freedom Party and Vlaams Belang in Belgium has caught established mainstream parties off-guard.

These parties have since been joined by the likes of the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats and – beyond conventional party politics – confrontational groups such as the English Defence League. More recently, the potential for violence from individual 'lone wolves' from the extra-parliamentary sub-culture was

underscored in Norway this summer by the killing of 78 people by Anders Behring Breivik.

When seen as a whole, populist extremist parties have challenged many assumptions that accompanied their rise. They emerged before the recent financial crisis and recession, so are not simply rallying citizens who are deprived and insecure about their economic prospects. They emerged before the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, and so are not simply a response to the rise of al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism. They have mobilised durable bases of support among specific social groups, and so are far from the short-lived 'flash' parties that many thought they would become. Several have also outlived 'charismatic' leaders who were once held up as the reason for their success.

At the same time, however, across Europe mainstream parties and policymakers appear unsure about two core questions: who is supporting these parties, and how mainstream parties and other actors in society should respond.

Three principal points emerge from a recent Chatham House report that

draws on a wealth of empirical data and workshops with experts across Europe.

First, supporters of populist extremists share a distinct profile and are concerned not simply about economic grievances – such as the distribution of jobs or social housing – but are anxious mainly about the cultural impact of immigration and rising diversity. These citizens are economically insecure, but they are driven most strongly by a perception that immigrants and minority groups are threatening their national cultures, traditions and communities. They are also increasingly linking this sense of cultural threat to settled Muslim communities. This means that simply talking about how economic resources are allocated, or reducing the number of immigrants, will not satisfy the modern far-right voter.

Second, there remains significant electoral potential for these parties. Across the continent, large sections of electorates are anxious about immigration, concerned about the perceived threat from Islam and dissatisfied with the response of the mainstream parties on these issues. There are some important variations. In

central and eastern Europe, voters are more concerned about Roma communities and are more likely than their counterparts in western Europe to endorse the most strident forms of racism. Conversely, in the western half of the continent, voters remain anxious about immigration but also distance themselves from the most overt forms of racism. Nonetheless, there remains considerable potential in Europe for parties that are hostile to immigration and that attack the mainstream.

Third, several potential response strategies are available to the mainstream parties, but only some will be effective. The 'traditional' approach of attempting to exclude populist extremists is unlikely to work. Instead, greater attention should be devoted to the strategies of engagement, which would see mainstream parties focus more on connecting with voters at the local level, and of interaction, which would see policymakers focus more on building bridges and forums of interaction between members of different groups.

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