

Violence and abuse against asylum seekers and refugees in Europe

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Abstract: In the past two years, Europe has witnessed a surge of violence against refugees and asylum seekers. The continent's mismanagement of the Syrian refugee crisis has led to security forces, right-wing vigilante groups and organized criminals to abuse and assault those seeking refuge in Europe with impunity. With governments and the EU ignoring these issues and failing to uphold basic principles of human rights, this violent trend will persist.

LAST YEAR'S WARM WELCOME OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN western Europe has proven to be short-lived. By and large, refugees in Europe face not only a cold reception, but also an increasing amount of open and violent hostility. In fact, the number of violent incidents has spiked across the continent. At this point, Europe appears not only to be unable to manage the political fallout from the large number of refugees and asylum seekers inside its borders, but also to be regularly failing to guarantee their safety and security.

Asylum seekers face violence from the moment they attempt to cross one of Europe's borders, throughout their journey to their desired asylum host and during the wait to obtain formal protection and permanent residence. The perpetrators of this violence are usually organized criminals or those with links to the far right, but asylum seekers also face institutional violence, most often carried out by security forces. Various institutional failures, political games and low media standards have all contributed to this phenomenon.

These violent incidents add to the psychological and physical trauma that many asylum seekers in Europe already suffer from, having fled aggression and conflict in their home countries and having encountered abuse on their dangerous journeys in search of refuge.

Violence At The Border

The failure of European governments to guarantee entry for asylum seekers at official border crossings and effectively implement resettlement programs from abroad have pushed asylum seekers to undertake dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea and land borders. Pressure from the EU to stem the flow of refugees has created incentives for countries en route to turn a blind eye to rights abuses by their own security forces. Thus

migration routes through both external and internal borders have exposed many asylum seekers to violence and abuse.

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At the EU's southeastern border between Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece, incidents of violence and push-backs, which are illegal¹ according to international law, have been documented by human rights organizations for a few years now. In a 2015 report, Amnesty International described² push-backs at the two borders as "routine" and "constant".

Between 2013 and 2014, the UNHCR confirmed³ at least 152 incidents of push-backs by Greek authorities. The Greek coastguard have been accused of pushing back and/or damaging boats carrying refugees in the Aegean Sea, putting their lives in danger. Amnesty International has documented⁴ a number of cases in which refugees were beaten and their possessions confiscated before being sent back. Violent push-backs by the Greek border police have also been registered at the land border with Turkey, though the Greek authorities have denied involvement in such incidents.

Similarly, in Bulgaria, the interior ministry has rejected accusations of violence at the Bulgarian-Turkish border, despite ample evidence. A 2015 report⁵ by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights revealed that of the 110 refugees interviewed crossing into Serbia from Bulgaria, every single one that came into contact with Bulgarian police reported some kind of violence or abuse, including being shot at and threatened with guard dogs.

A 2013 news report by Bulgarian National Television revealed⁶ that police officers mobilized from the country's interior to work at

the border were given instructions to "beat and push back" any groups of asylum seekers trying to cross. The report also revealed that the officers were not properly equipped and trained to handle border policing, and that they felt disgruntled because of the lack of proper organization and support from their superiors and the ministry. At a March 2016 border training for the police, the gendarmerie and the army included⁷ a rehearsal for pushing back a crowd of would-be asylum seekers across the border using water cannons.

Violence at the Bulgarian border has resulted in at least three deaths so far. In March 2015 Bulgarian media reported⁸ that Mohamed Jawad and Elias Murad, two Yazidi refugees, froze to death after Bulgarian border police caught them, beat them and pushed them back to Turkish territory, leaving them too weak to reach the nearest Turkish village. The UNHCR expressed concern over the case but the Bulgarian authorities denied involvement. In October 2015, a Bulgarian border guard shot dead⁹ 19-year-old Ziaullah Vafa, an Afghan refugee, 30 kilometers into Bulgarian territory. After initial claims by the Bulgarian authorities that the officer was acting in self-defense, it surfaced that the group of Afghan refugees were not acting in an aggressive manner, and that they were in fact scared and trying to flee when the police opened fire on them.

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Exposed to a traumatic welcome at external European borders, asylum seekers face further violence should they choose to continue their journey and seek refuge in Western Europe. Violent push-backs and beatings¹⁰ along the so-called "Balkan route" have been



reported since 2014, but over the past year, the failure of various EU and EU-candidate countries to handle the flow of refugees has led to arbitrary border closings, which has exacerbated violent and abusive practices. In the summer of 2015, Macedonia began closing its border to asylum seekers trying to cross from Greece, leading to bottlenecks and overcrowding. Macedonian police often resorted to rubber bullets, stun grenades and tear gas to prevent people from crossing, leading to many injuries. In April this year, for example, after a similar escalation at the Greek-Macedonian border, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reported¹¹ that their staff had treated some 40 people with injuries from rubber bullets (including 3 children) and some 200 with respiratory problems (including 30 children) after being exposed to tear gas.

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Similarly, Hungary has closed its border and its police forces have used violent tactics to prevent people from crossing. In mid-September 2015, shocking images of violence emerged from the Serbian-Hungarian border, where riot police used tear gas, water cannons, pepper spray and batons to disperse refugees. Many people, including children, were injured; some 300 people¹² sought medical help in a nearby clinic on the Serbian side of the border. Seven international journalists covering these events also reported¹³ being beaten by the Hungarian police.

More recently, in early June this year, a group of refugees were pushed back from the Hungarian border, which resulted in the death of a 22-year-old Syrian man. In a statement expressing alarm at the refugee's death, UNHCR pointed out¹⁴ that since May the agency has

recorded some 100 cases of violence against people trying to cross into Hungary.

In the Czech Republic, abuse against asylum seekers has been officially institutionalized. Although the country did not see the same number of people attempting to cross its borders as its neighbors, the government has imposed abusive practices, including strip searches, the confiscation of valuables and detention for up to 90 days. These abuses have led the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein to issue a special statement denouncing¹⁵ these practices and the Czech government's hostile anti-refugee stance.

Further West, in Calais, France, asylum seekers trying to enter the UK have faced repeated police abuse as French authorities have sought multiple times to disband their makeshift camp. According to an April 2016 report¹⁶ by the Refugee Rights Data Project, some 75% of people in the Calais camp have suffered from police violence. MSF staff operating in the area have reported¹⁷ treating injuries, "including fractures, stabbings, broken bones, severe bruising and head trauma, some of which have been life-threatening".

Human rights organizations have repeatedly denounced Spain's policies in its African enclave Ceuta against migrants and asylum seekers. In 2014, Spanish border guard used rubber bullets and tear gas¹⁸ on people trying to swim into Spanish territory, resulting in 15 of them being killed. In October 2015, a Spanish court dismissed¹⁹ the case against border guards who were involved in the incident. At the same time, incidents of the excessive use of force by border guards have persisted despite calls by human rights groups to stop such practices.

Despite being presented²⁰ in 2015 with evidence of the major scale of the police violence, French authorities have said they were unaware of such abuses and various police officials have denied that such violent acts happen.



Hate Crimes And Violence

Over the past few years, Europe has witnessed a rising wave of ultra-right political activity, both in parliaments and in the streets. It is not surprising, therefore, that in many European countries incidents of violence by far-right organizations and individuals are on the rise, while the authorities are systematically failing to properly investigate them and prosecute perpetrators.

Germany has seen a steep rise in right-wing offenses, with 13,846 such incidents being registered²¹ in 2015 (over 3,000 more than in 2014). Of those, 612 have been classified as violent xenophobic crimes – twice as many as in 2014.

Attacks on asylum seekers' hostels, in particular, have seen a dramatic rise, with the government reporting some 1000 incidents²² in 2015 – five times as many as in 2014. A high concentration of such crimes has been registered in Saxony, where former local MP Caren Lay says²³ a “pogrom-like atmosphere” prevails. Across Germany, there have also been direct physical assaults²⁴ on asylum seekers, where right-wing groups would gang up on them and beat them.

The German authorities have been widely criticized for failing to investigate and curb the growing number of violent crimes against refugees. According to Zeit Online, the conviction rates for such crimes are dismally low;²⁵ out of 200 serious attacks on refugee hostels the newspaper examined, there were convictions for just four.

Elsewhere in Western Europe, growing xenophobic sentiment has also fueled violent attacks. In January, around 100 masked men walked around²⁶ Sweden's capital, beating up people who they perceived as “migrants”. In France, Calais has witnessed regular attacks on people residing in the makeshift camp by right-wing groups. Rights groups have accused the French police of failing to prevent such assaults; they have also recorded²⁷ many

instances of serious injuries, including some that have been life-threatening.

In Greece, civilians have also been involved in the dangerous push-backs of boats carrying refugees. Human Rights Watch has documented²⁸ a number of attacks in which masked men damaged and disabled boats carrying refugees from Turkey, endangering the lives of those on board. Violent acts by far-right groups and individuals across Greece have also persisted. In September 2015, an Amnesty international team witnessed²⁹ a violent attack on the island of Kos, in which a group of 20 people armed with bats physically assaulted refugees.

Central Europe, where governments have demonstrated open hostility towards refugees and opposed resettlement plans, has also seen far-right groups organizing attacks on asylum seekers. In Hungary, there were a number of attacks on refugees waiting for trains at Budapest's Keleti Train Station³⁰ by right-wing groups in 2015. In Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, a firebomb was thrown³¹ at a refugee centre after a wave of “anti-migrant” protests across the country in February this year.

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Vigilante and paramilitary groups have begun “anti-migrant patrols” targeting asylum seekers in areas where they are labeled as “dangerous”. In Finland, the Gods of Odin have vowed³² to “protect” Finnish women from sexual harassment and assaults by asylum seekers after the attacks in Cologne. In Slovakia, two organizations—the paramilitary Slovenski Branci³³, which includes mem-



bers of the Slovak army and police forces, and the People's Party-Our Slovakia³⁴ —have also proclaimed refugees to be threats and announced patrols. In Hungary, the Hunyadi Border-Guard Unit was formed for “defense against migrants”.

Although there haven't been any reports of violence against asylum seekers committed by any of these groups yet, elsewhere in Europe they already have a violent track-record. In Bulgaria over the past 6 months, a number of vigilante groups claiming to protect it against “illegal migrants” have emerged along the border with Turkey. Encouraged by positive media attention and initial encouragement by government officials (including PM Boyko Borisov³⁵), these right-wing groups have bragged about “catching migrants” and restraining them with zip ties.

In one incident, legal proceedings were begun against the leader of one of these groups after it became clear that he and others had assaulted³⁶ three Afghan asylum seekers and attempted to take their valuables.

Exploitation, Trafficking And Sexual Violence

Border closures, arbitrary security policies, inadequate and unsafe conditions in camps, and the lack of a safe and straightforward way to apply for legal protection in many European countries all mean that asylum seekers in Europe are less secure. Moreover, the distrust and fear that refugees feel towards various institutions that are responsible for their security, as well as the reluctance of these same institutions to react to threats and violent incidents.

As a result, asylum seekers are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, trafficking and sexual violence. At the same time, they are very unlikely to report such crimes or appeal to authorities for help in escaping criminal networks because of a widespread distrust of security forces. A vast network across criminal Europe has benefitted from the smuggling

business since the beginning of the crisis. Many refugees, especially children and women, are at a high risk of being exploited by such networks. According to Europol, refugee smugglers have earned between \$3bn- \$6bn in 2015 alone³⁷ and evidence suggests that there is growing crossover between networks involved in smuggling and those involved in human trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation. Sexual and labor exploitation and abuse by these networks begins in “stop-over countries” such as Libya³⁸ and Turkey³⁹, but it does not end there.

In January this year, the EU's law enforcement body announced⁴⁰ that an estimated 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees are missing after registering in EU countries and that some of them might be being criminally and sexually exploited or used as forced labor. In Italy, underage refugee and migrant girls have been forced⁴¹ into prostitution, while underage boys are exploited in the drug trafficking business. There have been also reports of younger refugees being forced to resort to prostitution⁴² in Greece out of financial need, yet the true scale of these practices and criminal involvement have not been properly studied.

Amnesty International has also reported⁴³ many cases of women refugees being sexually harassed by smugglers, members of the security forces and other asylum seekers. The UNHCR has also warned⁴⁴ that women making their way through Europe are at a high risk of gender-based violence. Camps and hostels in Greece have been found to provide inadequate security for women and children. Many refugee women in these places are reported to feel unsafe going to the toilet or sleeping in shared tents. In Germany, harassment and assault against women have been committed⁴⁵ by other asylum seekers, as well as security personnel and care-givers. Such incidents, as well as criminal acts within refugee hostels and camps, are seen as “internal matters” among the asylum seekers, and security forces rarely intervene to prevent them and/or investigate them.



A Bleak Future

Violence against refugees and asylum seekers and the conditions that enable this violence are unlikely to change because the underlying political set-up that blocks effective prevention of violence is here to stay. The rise in violent acts has a number of complex causes and contributing factors. The deep roots of the violence lie in the political failure of the EU to uphold the human rights standards of its own.

The extent of this failure became clear this year when the EU concluded a controversial deal with Turkey to deport asylum seekers who arrive on Greek islands, a move that human rights organizations have denounced as being a “disturbing disregard for international law”⁴⁶ and a “historic abdication of [...] moral and legal responsibilities”⁴⁷.

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EU's lack of regard for human rights principles has led to a weak political will across governments of various political leanings in clamping down on anti-refugee crimes, pushing security forces to properly investigate them, establishing prevention measures, and in publicly denouncing them.

European Union mismanagement of this refugee crisis has been further exacerbated by its exploitation by politicians and parties across the political spectrum, who have used fears of mass migration as an instrument for political gain.

This has not only further impeded efforts to properly address the crisis and violence against refugees but has also provoked increasing discontent with the mishandling of

the situation and growing hostility towards arriving asylum seekers among ordinary people in European countries.

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In this atmosphere of popular frustration, messages of hate by far-right groups have resonated with the general public and have found a growing acceptance and following. In fact, the mismanagement of the refugee crisis by European leaders has proven increasingly useful to far-right groups, which in some countries have struggled to stay relevant and/or maintain legislative representation in previous years. Violence against refugees and asylum seekers and the tacit support for these actions from part of the general public have helped many nationalist groups (re)gain popularity. Thus, the perceived political utility of anti-refugee acts has further encouraged them.

What impedes resolute action against such crimes, however, is not only the absence of political will but also the pervasiveness of institutional racism. Various institutions with relevant roles in violence prevention, especially police forces, are failing to act because of internalized bias against the victims of these crimes. At the same time these institutions consistently deny that such a problem exists.

Finally, the media has also had an important role to play in encouraging negative sentiments against refugees and asylum seekers and making violence against them seem acceptable. The failure of some media outlets to uphold journalistic ethical standards, to properly investigate and report facts, and to resist being used as platforms for the promotion of hate speech have had grave consequences.



Violence against refugees has been occasionally cast as irrelevant, unimportant, or even sometimes deserved, and the perpetrators of such crimes have been often portrayed neutrally or have even been praised.

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The use of misleading terms, such as “illegal migrant”, and affective descriptions of refugees as dangerous and disorderly masses, has obscured the general public’s understanding of the rights of asylum seekers and the duties of host countries.

The idea that these people are “illegal” and that the act of crossing a border to seek asylum is a “crime” further encourages perceptions that violence against these individuals is justified.

A huge number of volunteers, regular citizens, NGOs, rights groups and a certain number of politicians have resisted this multi-layered system of silence and abuse within Europe. However, these efforts, unless complemented by significant policy changes at levels from local government to the European Parliament, will not be enough to stop the rise of violence against asylum seekers and guarantee “refuge” to all of them in the full meaning of the word.

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