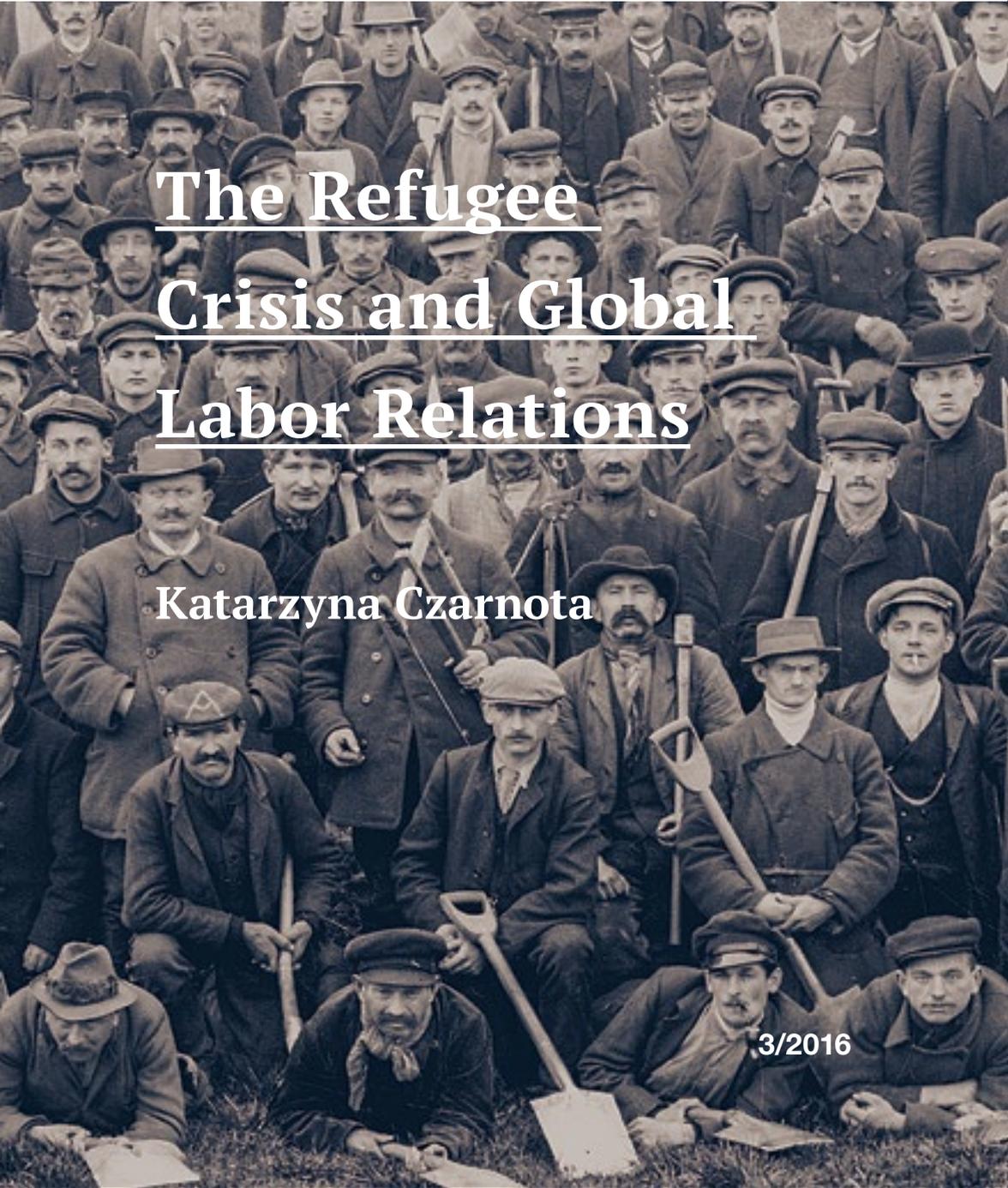


# CzasKultury/English



## The Refugee Crisis and Global Labor Relations

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It has been a while since the refugee crisis broke out in Europe. What we are seeing today is merely a handful of the life stories that make up events similar to many of those that have unfolded in previous years, as thousands of migrants were trying to reach Europe, jeopardizing their health and lives. The legal and social mechanisms along with economic segregation applied towards the refugees have served as a tool for strengthening hierarchy and social injustices in the global labor relationships for quite some time now. Political consequences of the changes that we are observing, the gradual limitation of rights and the strengthening of border regulations will affect consecutive generations of workers. And just who exactly and in what ways they will suffer these consequences most will be largely determined by the social and ethnic backgrounds of those generations.

## **The refugee shock doctrine**

Certain elements of discipline and segregation of migrants have always been present in legislation of the European Union. However, the current dynamics and the context of changes that are being introduced deserve greater attention. According to statistics by IOM (International Organization for Migration) in 2015 Europe admitted around a million refugees<sup>1</sup> which is 500,000 more than in the previous year. This number should not lead to any economic destabilization in the member states as it has to be remembered that each year the European Union registers around 30 million migrants from non-EU countries. The current situation, however, looks somewhat different due to the deepening recession of 2008 that has been stifling the Eurozone. Crashing economies, increasing public sector debts and the danger of collapse of the Eurozone well illustrate the inefficiency of the EU structures, especially in the context of Europe's reactions towards the war in Syria or crises in the Middle East or in African countries.

For over a decade the ruling establishments of the EU member states have systematically avoided accepting co-responsibility for the situation of the refugees in the Middle East. In the aftermath of successive military conflicts – unleashed with the purposes of gaining control

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<sup>1</sup> *Irregular Migrant, Refugee Arrivals in Europe Top One Million in 2015*: IOM, IOM, 22.12.2015, <http://www.iom.int/news/irregular-migrant-refugee-arrivals-europe-top-one-million-2015-iom> (8.06.2016). The actual data might show higher numbers due to the fact that a large part of migrants had to follow unofficial smuggling routes, from Eastern to Western coasts of Europe. However, regardless if people took the official Balkan route or followed smuggler's routes, they still were exposed to violence, theft, and tortures – both on the part of police, border guards, as well as Frontex agents and smugglers.



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fot. Ahmad Deeb  
[www.ahmedeebphoto.com](http://www.ahmedeebphoto.com)



over oil deposits and strengthening the geopolitical position of the United States and its allies – millions of refugees had to escape war, hunger, environmental degradation and persecution only to find shelter in overcrowded camps scattered throughout Jordan, Syria, or Iraq and often to be used as cheap labor unable to exercise the same rights as the citizens of a given state. In 2014, during the weekly Friday demonstrations in the streets of Amman, Jordan, it was already the third generation of Palestinian refugees that demanded their right to work and be promoted in public institutions. Some refugees are not allowed to do any work, such as the Syrians placed in the Zaatari camp – the largest “container” camp counting almost 80,000 people.<sup>2</sup> In 2011 a revolt in Syria broke out, gradually turning into a bloody war that sees various forces as its participants: the Assad regime, the Islamic State, Kurds and Russia. Syrians have been fleeing the country for years now. Only in 2012 was the Zaatari camp established in Jordan which initially gave shelter to 12,000 people. The escalation of the conflict in 2015 caused a larger number of refugees to appear at Europe’s borders. We need to remember, however, that what on the Old Continent is called the refugee crisis, is made up of only a handful of all the consequences brought about by the longstanding policy adopted also by the European Union in an attempt to protect its own interests.

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<sup>2</sup> The data comes from the UNHCR (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) reports, [http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176&country=107&region=77\(8.06.2016\)](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176&country=107&region=77(8.06.2016))

**The Balkan route – one way to establish systematic discipline among the workforce**

The Dublin Convention of 1990 – which was replaced by the Dublin II Regulation in 2003, states that refugees should file for asylum in the first European country in which they arrive. According to this regulation, if people managed to get deeper into the Old Continent, to arrive in successive EU member states, the governments of those countries had the right, and were in fact obliged, to send them back to the country they first reached. The escalation of the military conflict in Syria over recent years brought about a dramatic increase in the number of refugees and has caused a heavier burden to those countries on whose territory the refugees were arriving first. As a response, Germany was the first state which decided to withdraw from the Dublin provisions and refrain from sending back some of the Syrian refugees. Given the situation on Europe's borders, the ruling establishment was forced to react. On the one hand, the suspension of the Dublin procedure and establishing of the so called Balkan humanitarian corridor were enforced by migration and people's determination to flee. On the other hand – the overuse of the term "refugee crisis" has allowed for more and more sophisticated control, discipline and segregation mechanisms to be used towards the people taking that route. Paradoxically, the humanitarian route that was supposed to serve as a temporary corridor enabling thousands of people to move freely, quickly became the place of increased control and militarization. International law was broken overnight

when – pursuant to arbitrary decisions taken by governments of particular Balkan countries, the free transit of people and filing for asylum regardless of one’s nationality were no longer allowed.<sup>3</sup> There were numerous acts of violence directed against refugees. In March the route was officially closed.

At the same time, in successive European countries, military units and entanglements were placed along the borders in order to “protect Europe”. Media coverage concerning the situation on the refugee route would no longer speak of the internal weakness of the European Union or shifting the burden of recession on the poor, of the precarization of work, financial cuts and destabilization of the Eurozone. Instead, they started using a new concept of “the dangerous refugee” who was supposed to pose the biggest threat to “democratic values” and the Schengen Area. Millions of euros were being spent towards numerous safeguards with the aim of “protecting”

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<sup>3</sup> The first restrictions regarding the flow of people over the borders were put in place already in October 2015 and concerned the newly introduced requirement to register and the temporary closure of borders. Next, most probably pressured by the EU, Slovenia closed its borders for those refugees who cannot prove that they come from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan. Then the governments of Serbia, Croatia and Macedonia closed their borders and introduced the selection of refugees based on their nationality, sanctioning by that the segregation policy. From that time on only those who had previously been registered by the Greek authorities as citizens of one of the three countries – Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan (known as SIA) – had the right to cross the first border on the Balkan route at Idomeni. In February 2016 NATO-ordered warships started their actions aimed at turning back refugee boats – the borders were closed by the agreement of March 18th. The European Union and Turkey signed an agreement which allows for deportation of refugees to Turkey that already in February had been declared a safe country. These political decisions are rather ineffectual attempts at limiting the number of people coming to Europe.

European borders – the Frontex Agency<sup>4</sup>, for that matter, established its new unit to provide better migration control.<sup>5</sup> The consequences were felt directly by the refugees. Each decision to temporarily close the border resulted in situations comparable to humanitarian crises, forcing thousands of people to live in makeshift camps located at the vicinity of border crossings. In July 2016, almost a month after the border crossing in Indomeni, situated on the Macedonian-Greek border, was closed 11,000 people were stranded. Tired and after many days of making the long journey, they slept on the ground regardless of the weather with no access to washing facilities. Every time they attempted to storm the border, they were beaten and attacked with tear gas by the police and soldiers. The NGO's working in this region limit their activity to distributing food, providing blankets and clothing, informing the refugees on how the situation is changing and which routes are currently the safest for them to use. In doing so, they de facto indirectly contribute to legitimizing the dangerously growing oppression. Political decisions regulating the way the humanitarian corridor is organized, violence on the part of the police, the border guards and the army are aimed at showing the refugees right from the start how subordinate their position in Europe they so long for is going to be. The refugees who experience humiliating treatment are often left with no

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<sup>4</sup> FRONTEX (from French: *Frontières extérieures*, meaning "external borders"), The European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union. Their headquarters are in Warsaw, Poland.

<sup>5</sup> Frontex to assist Greece with registration of migrants at its land border, 3.12.2015, <http://frontex.europa.eu/news/frontex-to-assist-greece-with-registration-of-migrants-at-its-land-border-9Qg48g> (8.06.2016).

support at all. They are treated as second-rate citizens with their rights suspended.

### **Deepening the class divide and ethnic segregation**

The fault lines dividing Europeans from migrants are ever more visible. Keeping migrants in closed-off reception centers will allow for more effective control of their flow but it also makes it possible to freely order those people who are deprived of any rights and privileges can be let out and then shut in again, depending on the situation. It will allow the most developed countries to use migrants' work almost for free, oftentimes "on the black market", while avoiding any obligations towards them – such as paying the minimum wage, health insurance or pension contribution, for that matter.

It is a growing danger, especially considering the fact that a rising tide of xenophobia in Europe does not allow for pro-immigration moves. Islamophobia and racism are ideal for the control system that the European Union seeks – at the same time they serve as a tool to direct social dissatisfaction of the EU citizens and to put migrants under pressure. After many months of negotiations within the European Union structures the decisions were made that supposedly are going to keep the Schengen Area from falling apart through the tightening of the borders and introducing the system of control over the flow of migrants (an agreement between Europe and Turkey<sup>6</sup>). If we try to see this process in the broader

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-16-1664\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-1664_en.htm) (16.06.2016).







context, taking into consideration the geopolitical reasons for these decisions, we can reach a conclusion that it is not the Schengen Area itself that is the center of attention here but rather the strengthening of the existing class and ethnic hierarchies in a way that enables the exploitation of cheap labor on a global scale. Keeping migrants under continuous pressure that will stifle their economic aspirations<sup>7</sup> might be an efficient way to rid them of their basic economic and social rights. These people were being “prepared” already during their journey on the so-called humanitarian route to assume a subordinate social position. As Przemysław Wielgosz notes, “only once pacified that way, can they become a useful tool for the capital. As a group of workers deprived of any social and civil rights they can be used to lower the employment standards and decrease wages as well as to manage the whole labor force.” In order to illustrate the dependencies in the realm of the geopolitical system of employment relations Gaspar Miklos Tamas introduces the concept of “migrant competition”.<sup>8</sup> In his opinion, the migration of a large part of excessive labor from Eastern Europe to the West that has been going on for years now is a key factor for the current anti-refugee policy.

The fact that over the past few years, hundreds of thousands of young qualified workers left such European

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<sup>7</sup> P. Wielgosz, “The Refugees, or, The Crisis That Does Not Exist” *Le Monde Diplomatique* 3(121)/2016.

<sup>8</sup> G.M.Tamas, “What is going on in Central-Eastern Europe? The Meaning of the Refugee Crisis” *Le Monde Diplomatique* 3(121)/2016.

countries as, among others, Hungary, Poland, or Slovakia, seems to be of crucial importance. Through wire transfers these migrants strengthen their home economies with billions of euros. If the refugees were to gain full rights, it could lead to a seriously competitive situation on the job market. Refugees from the Middle East would be in competition with the European migrants. As Tamas predicts that could bring about an economic crash in the aging Eastern Europe. For, as Tamas claims, the money transferred by “grandchildren from the West” are a substantial contribution to the family budgets, especially under the current conditions when the systems of pensions and social benefits have been systematically dismantled in Eastern European countries. Tamas describes the current policy of the Hungarian government ordered by [Viktor] Orban as aimed at “winning the race to the West by ‘our’ immigrants”.<sup>9</sup> As much can be also said about the Polish government.

### **Cheap labor camps spreading all over Europe**

Recent political decision resulted in increased spending not only on weapons and entanglements but also on the building of dozens of refugee camps. Some of them are closed-off centers, some are open ones. It is not precisely defined how they are going to function in the future. Is the character of the current camps in Europe and Anatolia Turkey going to change from temporary to permanent? The current situation and the creation of new camps in Turkey, Greece and the Balkan states

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

is dangerously reminiscent of the process of building refugee camps in the Middle East where millions of people lived in the aftermath of the wars. The camps that were built then were often considered temporary and were to provide only a temporary shelter. Yet despite such declarations, they turned into ghetto-cities that exist till this day and serve as a place of residence to already the third generation of Palestinian refugees, for instance.<sup>10</sup> As the experience of the Middle East shows, creating refugee camps and introducing double-standards for citizens and non-citizens serve as tools of very strict control over people through either denying or greatly reducing their access to the labor market – a good example of that would be the necessity to work low-paid jobs, without any possibility for taking up managerial or supervisory positions, working for public institutions, or access to social benefits. That is why, among others, it can happen that highly-qualified newcomers will not take up low-paid jobs (e.g. bus drivers in Sweden) which is met with disbelief.

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<sup>10</sup> A good example of such processes is a Jordanian camp for Palestinian refugees in Jarash, situated around 50 km from Amman. It was built as a consequence of the invasion of Israeli army on the territories of the current Gaza Strip in 1967. Around 11, 5 thousand Palestinian refugees were placed in Jarash where UNRWA (The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) provided them with shelter under 1,500 tents. Although that displacement has never been recognized as complying with the international law, with time the tents were replaced with a sub-standard city. According to UNRWA statistics, the camp whose territory is less than 1 km<sup>2</sup> is currently inhabited by 24 thousand people though its inhabitants claim the number might be as high as 50 thousand. The increase in population is also caused by successive conflicts in the Middle East. Segregating the Palestinians as far as their access to basic rights goes was practiced for years in order to keep the refugees under control. They are allowed to work as cheap labor, they don't have full civic rights though, and their access to public education and healthcare is very limited. The refugees from the above mentioned Jarash camp cannot gain Jordanian citizenship though it is already the third generation living there.





The reason for refugees turning down such job offers is by no means pride – as it is often explained – but rather their awareness that once they are downgraded into the worse segment of the labor market it will be incredibly difficult to get out of it.

### **Political will and an alternative for the Balkan route**

Is it possible to find a different, better solution to the refugee crisis? Assuming that there was the political will to grant the migrants full rights, the answer is: “yes, it is”. Nonetheless, that would require some changes to the neo-liberal policy that is based on exploitation and economic and cultural racism. Some NGO workers and independent activists claim that enabling the transportation of migrants from Athens directly to the destination country would be a much more efficient solution than closing the borders (which in fact does not stop the migrants but rather pushes them back into the hands of smugglers)<sup>11</sup>. These could be direct journeys by train in order to avoid control and changing trains each time when crossing the borders of a particular country that a given route runs through.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Each closure of the border was met with appropriate reaction on the part of smugglers. For instance, when the decision to close the corridor for people other than Syrian, Iraqi, or Afghani was made, migrants were forced to buy fake identity documents from smugglers, but also from official functionaries in order to avoid detention in Turkish or Greek pre-deportation centers or wait in so-called open reception centers in Athens. For as much as several hundred euros a whole family can have their identity changed from Iranian to Iraqi, for instance, or from Palestinian to Syrian. A regular sized A4 piece of paper with printed personal data and a stamp is a pass to Europe. What happened or is going to happen to those who arrived in Germany using fake documents? Are they not going to be deported from one of the European countries as a result? Nobody knows the answer.

<sup>12</sup> When the Balkan route was still open, the travelers had to cross each border on foot and then pay to the state or private carriers for the subsequent means of transportation. Border crossings were often temporarily closed which resulted in traffic hold-ups and long and tiresome waits.

It seems that those who cannot stand it any longer are in the worst situation – they are ready to give up their further journey but it is not possible for them to return to their country of origin.<sup>13</sup>

### **Strengthening current hierarchies and divisions**

The European borders were closed in March 2016 and for a time being there is nothing to indicate that the so-called humanitarian corridor will be reopened. At the same time, successive kilometers of border fences between different countries are being financed and built. Media coverage from border crossings and the places where people are still stranded more and more often focus on fights between refugees and the police. Public opinion is becoming gradually accustomed to the fact that migrants die every day – on the Mediterranean Sea or during the dangerous journey of the smugglers' routes. We have reached a moment when people fall into two categories – Europeans and refugees – who in the right-wing narrative hold the status of subhumans posing a threat to “European civilization”. Those who cannot boast the proof of proper nationality and high-enough financial status are left with two possibilities: deportation to Turkey or detention in centers which are being heavily financed by the European Union. Those who make it to their country of destination

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<sup>13</sup> Some migrants cannot turn back as it is life-threatening; others because their home countries simply do not want them back. The latter is well-illustrated by the dramatic stories of Pakistani citizens which are more and more frequent. Usually with the help of smugglers, they reach the coast of Greek islands. The journey is long, dangerous and costly. Their documents are often burnt by the smugglers which gives the migrants greater safety whenever they have to get checked or if anything goes wrong. In case they decide to return to their homeland but have no documents, Pakistanis are to be sent back from their country.

can still be deported if they are not successful in completing the asylum process – and that can happen for a number of reasons. Some of them have no choice but to buy fake registration papers from the smugglers, especially after the borders were closed and the nationality-based segregation began.

The question remains if – just like in the Middle East before – successive generations of migrants, denied full social, economic and political rights will become a tool for disciplining labor; facilitating wage cuts and lowering working standards.

**translated by Agnieszka Rubka-Nimz**