

ESI newsletter 4/2020
3 April 2020

A Mitsotakis Plan – who needs to act?



It is 5 past 12

Dear friends,

Every day now, the news is harrowing: Despair in the bleak heart of the crisis in Lombardy. Death and paralysis of life in Madrid. Elderly patients that can no longer be treated in Alsace. Another epicentre of the global pandemic in New York. And then there are Iran, India, Turkey, Russia, the African continent. Everywhere resources are missing, with face masks, ventilators and medical staff in short supply. And so is the attention of policy makers on issues other than the coronavirus crisis.

Is *this* the right moment to be interested in the suffering of any one specific group of non-citizens? Concretely: why should Germans, Dutch, Swedes and their leaders care about a possible tragedy on distant Greek islands where more than 40,000 refugees and migrants live crammed together in dismal sanitary conditions?

The virus is coming

Here is the state of affairs: As of Tuesday, 31 March 2020, there are 40,139 asylum seekers on the Greek islands. The capacity of the refugee centres is 6,000 places. Another 2,700 places are provided by UNHCR and NGOs elsewhere on the islands. Thousands of people sleep in tents or make-shift huts. There is a lack of water, doctors and supplies.

In Moria, the biggest camp on the island of Lesbos, close to 20,000 people share facilities for 3,000; there is one water tap per 1,300 people and no soap. "This means that recommended measures such as frequent hand washing and social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus are just impossible," said a doctor from *Medecins Sans Frontieres* in Greece. According to UNHCR, one third (14,000) of the refugees on the islands are below the age of 18; 8,400 of those younger than 12 years old.

The coronavirus has reached every country in the world. It has infected prime ministers, royalties, sport and movie stars. It has entered submarines. As one article put it: nowhere is out of reach. It has reached the Greek islands, including Lesbos, though not yet the refugee centres. Coronavirus is coming and – impossible to contain in such claustrophobic conditions – it will spread panic and death in equal measure.

Recent days have seen a strong mobilisation around this emergency. Many of the world's most respected human rights organisations, doctors and European parliamentarians have recommended the evacuation of the islands. The European Commission has called for an emergency plan to prevent a disaster.

And yet, as of Thursday 2 April 2020, no Greek or European plan exists to protect the asylum seekers on the islands from an outbreak of coronavirus, apart from appealing to them to exercise social distancing. A senior international official working in Greece has told ESI this week: "If there is no catastrophe in Lesbos it will be down to sheer luck." This is the terrifying state of European policy in the Aegean in April 2020: to rely on luck in the face of an avoidable catastrophe.

To address this crisis, three things need to be done urgently. First, Greece needs to present a plan to its European partners and international organisations for how to evacuate the islands. The migrant population on the islands needs to be brought down to a manageable number of no more than a few thousand. Second, the EU and Turkey must reach a new agreement. Greece can only reduce irregular migration across the Aegean in cooperation with Turkey, and European support for the many millions of refugees in Turkey – a larger population than Berlin – is in the EU's interest. Third, other European countries, including Germany, need to help Greece and should offer to relocate 10,000 recognised refugees from the Greek mainland immediately.



*Ylva Johansson,
the EU Commissioner in charge – worried for a reason*

Aegean choices

The government in Athens must decide whether it wants to evacuate the islands. Unless it does so, outsiders cannot do much to address this crisis. Right now, there are discussions with UNHCR to move small numbers of vulnerable people out of the hotspots. Seven EU countries (Germany, France, Croatia, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg and Portugal) agreed earlier in March, just before the coronavirus crisis hit, to relocate 1,600 unaccompanied minors. It remains unclear when this might happen. Both measures are important but inadequate: everyone in these centres is vulnerable today.

Greece is in a bind: the government fears a pull-effect if it evacuates the islands, with new arrivals filling up the space. The EU's relocation programme ended in 2017. The March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement has broken down at the end of February 2020. Without a credible commitment from Turkey, Greece has no tools to control future arrivals via the sea.

How many people might arrive on the islands from Turkey in the next three months alone? Nobody can be certain. Between January and end of March this year, more than 7,400 people arrived on the islands. Between January and end of March 2016 it was more than 151,000 people. In autumn 2019 it was more than 28,000 in three months.

What will the numbers be this year, once winter ends? **50,000** a month, as in the three months before the EU-Turkey statement? **9,000** a month, as in late 2019? Or **1,800** a month, as between April and June 2017, when the EU-Turkey Statement was working? For Greece and the islands this is the difference between total chaos and a manageable situation.

Before the March 2016 Statement, Greece relied on a bilateral readmission agreement with Turkey from 2002. This never worked. In one decade (!) Greece was able to return fewer than 2,500 people to Turkey. Without a new statement this would not be different in the future.

A decade of failed readmissions from Greece to Turkey

Year	Requested by Greece	Accepted by Turkey	Transferred	Share
2006	2,251	456	127	6%
2007	7,728	1,452	423	5%
2008	26,516	3,020	230	0.9%
2009	16,123	974	283	1.8%
2010	10,198	1,457	501	4.9%
2011	18,758	1,552	730	3.9%
2012	20,464	823	113	0.6%
2013	3,741	370	35	0.9%
2014	9,691	470	6	0.1%
2015	12,149	5,148	8	0.1%
Total	127,619	15,722	2,456	1.9%

No Greek government would accept today that an unlimited number of people gets into boats and arrives via the Aegean, as in autumn 2015. This leaves very few options to control the Aegean border, now and in the future:

The good: Humane border control through cooperation with Turkey. This preserves the right to asylum in Greece, while discouraging large scale arrivals through fast procedures and swift returns of anyone not in need of protection in the EU.

The bad: Deterrence through awful conditions. Reports about awful conditions on the islands, combined with the continued suspension of the right to apply for asylum and reductions of benefits, are required to make anyone think twice before crossing the Aegean. This relies implicitly on conditions in Greece being less attractive than in countries of origin or transit, like Turkey.

And the ugly: aggressive pushbacks. This is what "defending the borders" at any cost means at sea: using the navy or coast guard to try to push back migrant boats, risking serious loss of life. This would, of course, be illegal, and the loss of lives unacceptable. It would also be impossible to implement, as the experience of the past two decades has shown.

This means that in fact Greek governments have to choose between *humane border control* through cooperation with Turkey and *deterrence through awful conditions* on the islands. Note, however, that the appalling conditions in recent years did not prevent an increase in arrivals in autumn 2019. A deterrence strategy is also very bad for islanders, with Lesbos and Chios turned into a "European Manus", the island in Papua-New Guinea that Australia has used in recent years to deter boat arrivals through inhumane conditions. Already tensions on the Aegean islands are high. This strategy ensures that things will get worse there.

For *humane border control* to work in the future, the lessons from the shortcomings in the past four years in its implementation on the islands must be learned. Procedures must be fast. Accommodation on the islands must be humane. The biggest asylum agency in the world today, the German BAMF, increased the number of its case workers from 250 in 2015 to more than 1,700. Ensuring that similar capacity is available on the EU's external borders should be a top priority for the European Commission and the next German EU presidency. *If* this is a priority for Greece and others in Europe, the required resources could obviously be mobilised.

(More on how this could work on the islands:

[The Aegean Tragedy – Key facts and key steps, 24 January 2020](#))

Mitsotakis to the rescue



Mitsotakis – Politics at the time of corona

What will the Greek government do? The two policy options it has correspond to two scenarios.

In the first scenario Greece keeps most of the 40,000 people on the islands, courting disaster in the short term and facing a never-ending humanitarian crisis in the long term. Without a new agreement based on mutual interests Turkey will not take anyone back. Policy continues to be based on the idea that bad conditions deter arrivals. Future asylum seekers may face the prospect of long detention, if the right to apply for asylum is re-established at all. Some may hope that the absence of any prospect for a better life might motivate large numbers to return to their countries of origin through "assisted voluntary returns". The experience of those asylum seekers Australia transferred to the island of Manus suggests that this is unrealistic: despite bad conditions, only very few asylum seekers accepted to go back to their countries of origin. In this scenario Greece is also most vulnerable to pressure from Turkey.

The alternative scenario is that Greece sets out a credible policy of humane control, in order to address the current crisis in line with the values of European Convention on Human Rights, the EU treaties and international conventions. This would rest on three pillars.

1. Greece relocates 35,000 people from the islands now: 15,000 people are accommodated in temporary tent camps constructed with international support within weeks on the mainland, where social distancing is possible. There the EU finances what it has also funded in Turkey: refugee health clinics in all communities where asylum seekers are located, open also to Greek citizens. 10,000 people are temporarily housed in hotels on the Greek mainland, which due to the crisis are largely empty. Another 10,000 already recognised refugees, currently in EU-sponsored accommodation on the mainland, are relocated from the mainland to other European countries, creating space for others transferred from the islands.
2. The EU and Turkey renew cooperation that is in the interest of both sides. A new statement is agreed now ([see Annex](#)). Following the end of the corona emergency, hopefully this summer, the EU and Turkey sit down and talk about a new long-term

policy on migration and how to implement all aspects of the EU-Turkey statement, including possibly extending it to arrivals at the land border.

3. Greece and the EU address the obvious weaknesses of implementation of the March 2016 statement. Greece restores the right to asylum. It also announces, that whoever arrives *from this moment on*, will be held on the islands in closed centres under humane conditions, where asylum status determination will take place within weeks. For this there must be enough human resources for quick and fair asylum decisions on the islands, to return to Turkey all those not in need of protection. At no point in the future should there ever again be more than 10,000 people on all the islands. Making this work should become a big project of the forthcoming German presidency and of the European Commission.

Turkey's interest

In late 2019 the EU made a mistake in failing to reassure Turkey that it will extend its financial commitment beyond the current 6 billion Euros for Syrian refugees, all of which was committed by the end of 2019. It should now offer Turkey a new 6-billion-euro package for the next years. This means investment in education, access to healthcare and social assistance; and support to the regions where they are located.

Would such a statement be in Turkey's interest? Turkey also faces high stakes in two scenarios, with and without a new engagement with the EU.

In the first scenario the EU and Turkey reach a new agreement. It sets out that both sides remain committed to the goals of the March 2016 statement. Turkey insists on a clear commitment in the next long-term EU budget to continued funding for refugees in Turkey. And both agree to sit down in the summer, once the worst of the corona crisis is over, to negotiate under the German EU presidency a new package to improve interest-based cooperation. If there is political will, this could be agreed within days.

For this to work both the EU and Turkey need to be realistic. For the EU it means putting serious money on the table and recognising that for all the tough rhetoric of recent weeks, the EU will need to continue to cooperate with Turkey. For Turkey it means not making demands that Ankara knows the EU cannot agree upon. The EU will not play a role in supporting a safety zone in northern Syria, even if individual European countries should commit more funding to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians displaced in Northern Syria. If political support for the safe zone remains a Turkish condition, there will not be any new statement.

The second scenario is one of confrontation. Ankara remains on its own. The situation at the land border with Greece will be more tense than ever. EU funding for Syrians in the country runs out. There will be no new money and no new projects, despite increasing pressures on the Turkish welfare, health and education systems. The burden of integration would be much more onerous in the absence of serious EU financial support. As Aegean crossings pick up again Turkey would once again become an attractive transit country for migrants from Central Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan) to get to the EU. Note also that even if 150,000 Syrians crossed to Greece via the Aegean, it would not help Turkey: every year some 100,000 Syrian children are born in Turkey.

At the same time, never-ending tensions over migration would undermine all efforts to reset EU-Turkey relations in the post-corona era. There would be no renegotiation of the customs union or prospects for visa liberalisation. At a time of great uncertainty in Syria and within NATO, Turkey would also be exposed to Russian pressure more than ever. In October 2015 ESI wrote that for this reason too an Aegean agreement (what became the EU-Turkey statement) would be in Turkey's vital interest:

"For many years, Turkey has resisted taking back third-country nationals who crossed its borders into Greece, despite a readmission agreement. Why would Turkey act differently now?"

In fact, this agreement could make a significant contribution to Turkey's security. In recent times, a resurgent Russia has been revising borders, annexing territories and supporting separatists in the northern Black Sea. It has moved its military into annexed territories in the Southern Caucasus. Now, it has launched a major military intervention on Turkey's southern border, attacking groups that the US and Turkey have long supported. Turkey today finds itself surrounded by hostile states and armed groups, in a more precarious strategic position than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

At such a time, good relations with Europe are a key anchor for Turkish security. The rise of an anti-Muslim, pro-Putin far right in European politics should therefore be a cause for real concern. It brings the prospect of EU politics moving in the direction of aligned its foreign policy more with the Kremlin."

(ESI, October 2015)

All this remains true today. Any scenario of continued tensions between Turkey and the EU is detrimental and indeed dangerous for both sides.

Who are we, really?

What will Athens, Ankara, Berlin and Brussels choose to do? If the right steps are taken, an impending public health and public order disaster could be avoided. This will require leadership and courage. For Europeans who care about the future of the refugee convention and humane borders this is a moment of truth. And it requires a coalition of European countries ready to come to the support of Greece.

Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz recently explained why his country will not be part of such a coalition:

"As a country neighbouring Italy, we are one of the most affected. We have closed our borders. I do not think that the admission of refugees would be *beneficial* [förderlich] in this situation ... I would only ask that you do not just look at one hotspot. At the moment there are a lot of places that I worry about massively. For example, I believe that the humanitarian situation in many Roma settlements in the Balkans is at least as *extremely dangerous* [brandgefährlich]."

(Mittagsjournal, 27 March 2020)

This is a simple message: as there are many people in many countries exposed to "extreme danger", it makes no sense to focus on any particular group. Put on blinkers. Refocus. And then turn away.

Blinkers can be useful tools for policy makers at times of crisis. But neither the need to focus nor the recognition that there is a lot of suffering in the world justify inaction in the face of an *avoidable* catastrophe on European soil.

Yes, pressures on policy makers have increased. On 5 March 2020 the prime minister and deputy prime minister of the state of North Rhine Westphalia took time to discuss with ESI ways to address the situation at the Greek-Turkish land border and on the Aegean islands. Two weeks later prime minister Armin Laschet's cabinet was worried mainly about procuring masks for hospitals, cajoling 18 million people to reduce social contacts, supporting businesses suddenly deprived of revenues, preserving essential public services and protecting retirement homes from being struck by mass tragedy. All this requires focus.

And yet: even under pressure and in a crisis, there is room for empathy. North Rhine Westphalia and other German states opened intensive care units for infected patients from France and Italy. The government of the state of Berlin recently offered to relocate up to 1,500 people from Greece to Germany. If five of the sixteen states in Germany would each offer to accept 1,000 recognised refugees from the Greek mainland this alone would free 5,000 places for families with children now on the islands. If other countries would join in, 10,000 recognised refugees might easily be relocated even now.



Berlin Tempelhof – where space is available

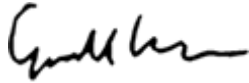
There are currently 4,000 recognised refugees living in camps on the mainland, and a further 6,000 in UNHCR rented accommodation. These places could be freed within a few days and create space for families from the islands. These are people who have already been found to need protection. Their identity is known. Germany alone has moved back more than 170,000 of its citizens in recent days. Like other countries, Germany is currently planning to bring in tens of thousands of agricultural workers, reassuring the public that this will not lead to new infections. Obviously, then, moving 5,000 people from Greece now is possible.

There is an enormous amount at stake in the Aegean today. There is a short-term need to avoid a catastrophe. There is a longer-term need to secure humane border control. Both require action. And justify why politicians in Athens and Vienna, Düsseldorf and Berlin, Dublin and Lisbon, should care about 40,000 asylum seekers in Lesbos, Samos, Chios.

In the two decades before 1951, Europeans repeatedly failed to protect those in need of refuge – those fleeing from the Third Reich (some coming to Turkey) and later from the Soviet Union.

That's why the Refugee Convention was adopted. It must not be allowed to drown in the Aegean in 2020. How Europeans, Greeks and Germans respond today will tell future generations a lot: not about who we want to be, but who we really are.

Many best regards,



Gerald Knaus

PS: What an EU-Turkey statement 2.0 could look like

Last week John Dalhuisen and I set out this case in Der Spiegel:

[Kampf gegen Corona: Evakuiert die griechischen Inseln – jetzt!](#)

[The fight against Corona: Evacuate the Greek Islands – Now! \(26 March 2020\)](#)

ESI also proposed a plan on 20 March – [Aegean Plan 2.0 – preventing a disaster in the times of Corona](#). This referred to earlier [proposals from 2019](#) on how to address shortcomings in managing migration and asylum in the Aegean, summed up again in early 2020: [The Aegean Tragedy – Key facts and key steps](#).

Here is how a possible EU-Turkey statement 2-0 might look like:

Renewed Engagement – joint statement by the EU and Turkey

Today the Members of the European Council met with their Turkish counterpart to address the migration and refugee challenges they face.

Turkey and the European Union confirmed their commitment to the implementation of the commitments in the Statement of 18 March 2016.

Some progress has been achieved already. Turkey and the EU recognise that further, swift and determined efforts are needed.

Turkey will continue to accept the rapid return of all migrants not in need of international protection crossing from Turkey into Greece and to take back all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters. Turkey and the EU agreed to continue stepping up measures against migrant smugglers.

In order to break the business model of the smugglers and to offer migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk, the EU and Turkey agreed on the following action points:

1) All irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as of this moment will be returned to Turkey. This will take place in full accordance with EU and international law, thus excluding any kind of collective expulsion. All migrants will be protected in accordance with the relevant international standards and in respect of the principle of non-refoulement.

Migrants arriving in the Greek islands will be duly registered and any application for asylum will be processed individually by the Greek authorities in accordance with the Asylum Procedures Directive and the UN refugee convention. Migrants not applying for asylum or whose application has been found unfounded or inadmissible in accordance with the said directive will be returned to Turkey. The costs of the return operations of irregular migrants will be covered by the EU.

Turkey and the EU will jointly nominate two eminent personalities entrusted with the task to monitor that standards defined in the European Convention on Human Rights and in ECtHR judgements are respected in implementing these commitments.

2) Turkey will take any necessary measures to prevent new sea or land routes for illegal migration opening from Turkey to the EU and will cooperate with neighbouring states as well as the EU to this effect.

3) From the moment of conclusion of this Statement the Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme is activated, to resettle annually [*a fixed number of people / 50,000*] in need of protection from Turkey to EU member state in the next four years [*the number to be agreed once the coronavirus emergency has ended*].

4) The EU, in close cooperation with Turkey, will mobilise and then disburse another 6 billion euros under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey in the coming five years (2020-2024) to ensure funding of further projects for persons under temporary protection identified with swift input from Turkey. For this it the EU will continue to cooperate closely with the Ministries of education and health. Projects for refugees might also benefit other vulnerable people in the communities, hosting many refugees. Projects in the field of health, education, infrastructure, food and other living costs, that can be swiftly financed from the Facility, will be jointly identified.

5) The EU and its Member States will work with Turkey to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria, in particular in certain areas near the Turkish border and in close cooperation with international organisations.

6) The fulfilment of the visa liberalisation roadmap remains a common objective. Turkey will take the necessary steps to fulfil the remaining requirements to allow the Commission to make, following the required assessment of compliance with the benchmarks, an appropriate proposal on the basis of which the European Parliament and the Council can make a final decision.

Further reading

Deutsche Welle: [Coronavirus: Urgent appeal for evacuation of Greek refugee camps](#), interview with Gerald Knaus, 31 March 2020

The European Stability Initiative is being supported by Stiftung Mercator

STIFTUNG
MERCATOR
FOUNDATION