

This is not a fortress

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October 5, 2015

There are many proposals on how to solve the refugee crisis. But there are none that would allow for reducing the number of refugees

ATHENS, 5 October. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), almost 250 people drowned this year trying to get from Turkey to Lesbos or other Greek islands in the eastern Aegean. One of the victims, a three-year-old from Syria, became world famous in his death. The photo of the child's body washed up on a Turkish beach shocked millions in early September. But despite such pictures and almost weekly reports of capsized refugee boats, the statistics also show that 99.9 percent of all people who dare the crossing in small rubber boats, safely reach the Turkish coast and thus EU territory. For those still in Turkey this is the telling figure. "Based on current trends, more than 1.8 million refugees will arrive in Germany next year – and that does not even include the potential impact the Russian military intervention in Syria will have", warns Gerald Knaus, chairman of the think tank European Stability Initiative (ESI).

As soon as mid-September, ESI had already proposed a solution to the refugee crisis, which in large part has now been adopted by the European Commission. At the core of ESI's proposal is the idea that the German government should take the lead and commit to resettling 500,000 Syrian refugees directly from Turkey to Germany. This offer should only apply to refugees that are currently in Turkey, as to avoid giving incentives to Syrians in Lebanon or Jordan to make the journey. In return, Ankara should immediately readmit all migrants reaching Greece via the Aegean or the Turkish-Greek land border in Thracia. Substantial elements of this idea apparently are part of a plan that the EU Commission says it has negotiated with Turkey, but there is no official confirmation from Ankara about the existence of such an agreement. Before Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan arrived in Brussels this Monday, ESI continued to advocate for a "package deal": readmission of a number of refugees to be determined in return for the immediate application of the readmission agreement between the EU and Turkey. In the ESI paper "The Merkel Plan – Restoring control; retaining compassion – A proposal for the Syrian refugee crisis," published on Sunday, its authors use the exclusion principle and advocate for their own proposal by demonstrating why the proposals put forth in the past few weeks purportedly will not work.

Particularly convincing is the part of ESI's analysis of what will not work in the foreseeable future. For example, plans to build and maintain additional refugee camps funded by the EU. Allegedly the EU Commission wants to partially fund six new camps for up to two million refugees in Turkey. But will this attract more Syrian refugees to

Turkey and will they sign up for a life in one of these refugee camps for years to come? Talking to Syrian refugees in Turkey raises serious doubts about this. It is even more unlikely to be the case if Turkey continues to deny Syrian refugees official residence permits. But if Berlin were to open its labour market for refugees as often called for in the German debate, Germany would become even more attractive to refugees.

In addition, the other proposals put forth recently do not contain any short term solutions. Creating a "European asylum agency" may well be progress in a bureaucratic sense, but it would not change the number of refugees coming to Europe. An EU-wide list proclaiming Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey as "safe countries of origin", would be helpful, but less than a fifth (17 percent) of all refugees originate from those countries. The number of people coming by boat in the Aegean would be essentially unchanged. The same holds true for registration centres (so-called "hotspots") that are planned for refugees in Greece and Italy. All of these proposals can help channel the flow of refugees. But as instruments for reducing the number of refugees they are as ineffective as the Hungarian fence. Tens of thousands continue to reach the Austrian, then German border through Hungary. The much heralded "Fortress Europe" is no fortress, and it never has been.

The argument that it is imperative to combat people smuggling elicits a taunting comparison from Knaus: "The refugee crisis won't be solved by arresting people smugglers as drug addiction won't be solved by arresting drug dealers. The demand for a path to Europe is so strong that inevitably there will be unscrupulous characters supplying it." At last, ESI's analysis does not mention the often called for "fighting the causes of the flight" which has a good chance to be voted cliché of the year. "Nothing of what is being debated in Brussels right now, can change something in the short run", Knaus concludes.

For example, why should Turkey stop people from making the trip to Germany if even EU members (including Hungary, despite oppositional rhetoric) put refugees on buses and trains to dump them as fast as possible on the Germans? And the potential offer of visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens travelling to the EU has its pitfalls also, says Knaus: "Only the member states can decide on this, the Commission has no say in this. To make such a proposal credible, it would need to come from Paris or Berlin instead from Brussels." But given the experience with visa liberalisation for Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia, and Albania

(in total around 15.5 million inhabitants), visa liberalisation for Turkey (75 million inhabitants) is seen critical in the capitals.

Negotiations with Turkey can only lead anywhere if Germany were to take the lead, says Knaus “When it comes to this issue, the EU has little to offer ... While European institutions can only offer a patchwork that will not result in a coherent plan, it can be clearly seen that only German

Chancellor Angela Merkel is in a position to really act.” But even if the Chancellor and the Turkish president would be convinced of the plan – is it feasible politically? Turkey will hold parliamentary elections on 1 November in which Erdogan’s “Justice and Development Party” is likely to miss the absolute majority as they did in June. Erdogan’s popularity is falling. At least that he has in common with Angela Merkel.