



» Architect of the EU-Turkey deal for refugees
 "In four months, we'll have the next big crisis" «

February 2, 2020

Gerald Knaus is considered the mastermind behind the EU agreement with Turkey. In this interview he assesses the situation and warns of Europe's even greater problems.

DER TAGESSPIEGEL: Mr Knaus, the pictures of the Greek islands are heart-breaking, but apart from appeals, little is happening

Gerald Knaus: I was on Lesbos in December 2018, and the situation was already unacceptable then. Not enough shelters, doctors, security, and the procedures were humiliating, for example when it comes to food and organisation. No one could explain to anyone how long they had to stay. At that time, it was five to twelve. Today it is five past twelve, the situation is much worse. The way in which the EU and the Greek authorities have been operating there for years will collapse in the near future.

TAGESSPIEGEL: The assumption of many critics of EU migration policy is that the situation on the islands is deliberate to discourage other people from planning to flee.

Knaus: Even those who think so cynically must admit today it does not work. Between September and November 2019, 30,000 people arrived in three months. Last year 74,000 people came to Greece from Turkey. Extrapolate that to the population: that would correspond to 600,000 in Germany! For years we have been hearing: "2015 must not be repeated" but Greece has just experienced its 2015 and it will be even worse in 2020 if nothing happens. Although German cities laudably offer to host several thousand people: that alone will not solve the crisis. A strategy is needed.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Does this mean that the EU-Turkey Agreement, of which you and your institute were the masterminds, has failed?

Knaus: In Greece it failed from the start. In Turkey it was a success from the start and has improved the lives of millions. If 680,000 Syrian children in Turkey were not in school today, if the health system were not open to Syrians, then last year, more than just 16,000 of the more than three million Syrians in Turkey would have come to Greece.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Are you satisfied today with the implementation of the agreement?

Knaus: Of course, I am not. But in the winter of 2016 the alternative to the agreement was not a human rights-friendly orientated policy, it was chaos and that is still the case. What we see on Lesbos is the result. The alternative to the chaos today is to actually implement the agreement. Slogans are not enough, nor are the campaigns of some NGOs to "Open up the islands." Yes, the government in

Athens will have to move the 40,000 people from the islands to the mainland but that won't improve the situation if more follow immediately.

TAGESSPIEGEL: What's going wrong?

Knaus: In the first three months of winter 2016, before the agreement, 150,000 people came to the islands and 380 drowned. In the first three months of 2017, only 4,000 came and 13 drowned. That was a success and the numbers of arrivals hardly increased at all until summer 2019, but the time has not been used. The agreement provided for the return to Turkey those who do not need protection in the EU. These are the vast majority of Syrians who are immediately given a protection status in Turkey, where millions, for years now, have received this status. And they are the ones whose asylum applications are rejected. But there must always be a fair procedure and asylum applications must be processed, even if there are only 10,000 in half a year, as in 2017. That did not happen. Instead, after a long wait, almost all arrivals were taken to the mainland. In three years, from 2017 to 2019, 122,000 people came to the islands. In that time, one percent of them were brought back to Turkey, and every year there were fewer and fewer of them.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Could the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees help to significantly speed up local procedures on the islands?

Knaus: The BAMF is the largest asylum authority in the world, it has multiplied its staff in recent years, and has also invested a great deal in quality control. Of course, it could help if Berlin and Athens could agree on how. Other asylum authorities from the EU could also join. The aim must be to take decisions in a few weeks, and then to relocate recognised refugees from Greece. The only thing missing is the mandate.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Which would have to be given politically.

Knaus: Yes, that must come from the heads of government. Today Mitsotakis and Merkel, Rutte and Macron should sit down together and say: we can do it. We show what a humane border with control looks like. We will not abandon Athens, Ankara or the Western Balkans. It would be in Germany's interest, because Germany remains the main destination for those who reach the Greek mainland.

TAGESSPIEGEL: And the crucial question: What happens to the people in the end whose trials are quickly completed - where do they go?

Knaus: The EU has already solved that. After the conclusion of the EU-Turkey Statement, 22,000 people from Greece were relocated to the EU by plane. In addition to this, so far 25,000 people from Turkey have been resettled. One could immediately set an example and speed up family reunifications but without also increasing repatriations to Turkey, this will not defuse the crisis. No government in Europe is currently moving in this direction.

TAGESSPIEGEL: You speak to many decision-makers in Europe. Don't they see that?

Knaus: Yes, many see it. But seeing is not enough. Although I am convinced that what I am proposing would work, there has never been anything like this before. It would be something new in European cooperation, and that is always tedious. In addition, many in the EU underestimate the urgency of the matter. A lot is happening: the war in Libya, Trump's Tweets, the conflict in the Ukraine, Brexit, climate change. Every government manages dozens of issues every day. When the number of asylum applications in Germany is falling, as well as the number of people crossing the Mediterranean, then, there is a strong temptation to ignore the problem. Therefore, one fire after another is fought instead of worrying about fire safety regulations, and in Brussels, proposals for major asylum reforms, which never have a chance of being implemented, are being discussed in parallel.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Is that all?

Knaus: Let us add to that a palpable distrust after so many unfulfilled promises. People in Lesbos trust neither Athens nor the EU. In Athens, people wonder whether the rest of the EU cares about Greece. People in the north of the EU are wondering if Athens is serious. Turkey sees the EU failing in the Aegean. In the EU, people blame Turkey. Many NGOs also explain convincingly what is not working, but then they don't make any feasible proposals. We will never get anywhere like that. We must show concretely how solutions with majority support could help everyone.

TAGESSPIEGEL: What do you expect?

Knaus: The Greek asylum system cannot cope with the situation today. The current aid to Athens remains piecemeal. The fact that the richest continent in the world is incapable of dealing humanely with even a small number of arrivals is scandalous. In 2018 and 2019, not more than 120,000 people a year came across the entire Mediterranean. Is this supposed to be too much for the EU to handle? In four months, we will have the next major crisis. The danger is that the hour of the demagogues will strike again, those who are calling on us to question the right to asylum and human rights altogether and Orbán's Hungary has been doing this for years.

TAGESSPIEGEL: What do you mean?

Knaus: We see constant violations of the law, for example the expulsion of people at Europe's land borders without any proceedings. The Hungarian asylum law is a human rights scandal, but it has been in force for years. In Zagreb, two Nigerian tourists were pushed across the border into

Bosnia because push-backs became politics. The longer all this goes on, the more we lose the ability to feel ashamed. We have become accustomed to the conditions that still shocked us in Budapest in September 2015.

TAGESSPIEGEL: For example on the Greek islands?

Knaus: There and elsewhere. Since 2017, the EU's policy of stopping migration from Libya is based on cooperation with groups who detain people in camps where they are mistreated, and which were even bombed last year. But here, too, a policy combining control with respect for human dignity is lacking. Anyone who demands that the EU should go back to the sea rescue policy of 2016, when 181,000 people came to Italy by sea and 4,600 drowned, will lose out. Last year only 12,000 came to Italy and less than 800 drowned. If voters in Europe have the choice between the situation in 2016 and 2019, majorities would vote for 2019. Fewer came and fewer drowned.

TAGESSPIEGEL: They are now dying on land.

Knaus: There are also fewer West Africans coming to Libya today than before. The serious question would have to be: how can we achieve this without relying on militias or hindering sea rescue? As long as the only understandable suggestions for reducing irregular migration come from Orbán or Salvini, in the end, they will always win the debate.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Do you have a counterstrategy?

Knaus: Yes. A three-pillar policy for the whole Mediterranean, from Gibraltar to Lesbos: fast and fair procedures, through genuine cooperation between national asylum authorities. Human rights-compliant agreements with countries of transit and origin, in order to send back quickly those who do not need protection in the EU and offer countries something serious in return: Tunisia, for example, visa-free travel for tourists, as with Ukraine today. Thirdly, to mobilise coalitions to help refugees in need anywhere in third countries, as the EU is doing in Turkey today and not in the same way as we see it today in the neighbouring states of Venezuela, where many are waiting for the situation to become unbearable there, too. A focus on success is also needed, not abstract debates. We must prove how what we are proposing can actually work on Lesbos or with a West African country. I am currently talking non-stop with authorities in The Gambia and in Germany about a possible pilot project with The Gambia. Those who are already here are being offered an opportunity for training and work. In return, The Gambia will immediately take back all offenders and anyone who comes to Germany after a decided deadline. Germany will offer more scholarships and legal mobility. And thus, we will stop irregular migration and deaths in Libya and at sea.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Didn't Viktor Orbán win with his strategy long ago?

Knaus: Orbán is incredibly good at pointing out others' contradictions. He knows that scaling up Frontex will not reduce irregular migration and that there will be no agreement on the distribution of asylum seekers in the EU. Sea rescue alone will not reduce the number of deaths. What does he propose? That's where it gets gloomy. He wants to declare war on migrants and refugees. He talks about an invasion, about struggle, about the need to end the age of

human rights. He describes Muslims, even if they live legally in London, Paris or Berlin, as enemies of Europe. His long speeches cannot be surpassed in radicalism, there is no difference to the world view of Bernd Höcke or an Identitarian. Orbán is the first identitarian head of government in the EU and is waiting for the next crisis as an opportunity.

TAGESSPIEGEL: One of his favourite opponents is the financial investor and sponsor of non-governmental organisations, George Soros.

Knaus: I suspect that even many who are critical of Orbán have not read his speeches in the recent years. He says openly: It is about the exchange of populations, where elites in Brussels are pushing this forward in order to destroy states, and a speculator from the US, driven by greed for profit and hatred for Christians, is pulling the strings. Of course, Orbán knows that this is dangerous nonsense. Orbán also knows that EPP politicians like Juncker, Donald Tusk and Manfred Weber are not working to destroy Europe. He is unscrupulous and dangerous.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Soros also supports your ESI.

Knaus: We are a German association with an annual budget of just 700,000 euros. Since our foundation in 1999, we have been independent, and we do not accept commissions from governments. The most important donors are the Mercator Foundation and Sweden, ten percent comes from the Soros Foundation for research into the Council of Europe. In recent years, we have uncovered the biggest corruption scandal in its history, the caviar diplomacy, where this week German politicians are also being investigated. Soros has never supported our work on migration.

TAGESSPIEGEL: You have been dealing with Europe for decades, what is your greatest concern?

Knaus: That a coalition of illiberal, strategic politicians will network, tell stories, scare people and at the same time dismantle structures of democratic control and the rule of law in their own countries behind this rhetoric. We see this in Hungary and even more dramatically today in Poland.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Reading your new analyses, you fear far more dramatic developments for the EU in Poland than Brexit.

Knaus: In Poland we are heading for the most serious constitutional crisis in the history of the EU. This week the

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has put Poland under monitoring. For the first time in the history of the Council of Europe, an EU country is now on the same list as Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan. It is indeed dramatic and the government in Warsaw is preparing for a power struggle, where it is challenging the European Court of Justice, the guardian of the rule of law in Europe, and will no longer accept its judgements. This will happen soon and shake the whole of Europe.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Why?

Knaus: The EU is based on our recognition of other member states' court rulings, that there are independent courts everywhere in the EU. When everything is in the hands of a minister of justice who controls the entire judiciary, then there is no longer an independent judiciary. In this situation we must vigorously defend the rule of law as a fundamental principle.

TAGESSPIEGEL: What can Germany do?

Knaus: Germany needs a clear vision of how to protect Europe, both externally and internally in terms of the rule of law. In return, Poland and other countries must accept the rule of law. It is also curious that in recent years the non-EU member Norway has been the largest donor to support civil society in Poland.

TAGESSPIEGEL: Given the crises, will this be the most important German EU Presidency?

Knaus: The tasks are enormous: migration, undermining the rule of law, illiberal enemies who are more self-confident than ever before. Today, smart German leadership is urgently needed. You can't do it alone; you need allies and solutions capable of winning majorities.

Gerald Knaus was born in Austria in 1971, studied in Rome, Bologna and Oxford and worked for many years for various NGOs, the UN and at prestigious universities, including Harvard. In a café in Sarajevo, Knaus and his friends founded the "European Stability Initiative" (ESI) in 1999. The main donors today are the Mercator Foundation and the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency. ESI is known for its migration concepts but the think tank also works on corruption and threats to democracy. It focuses on Southeastern Europe and Turkey.

Interview by GEORG ISMAR ANDREA DERNBACH