

Policy Position

The EU must deprive Erdoğan of his basis for blackmail

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The misery at the Greek-Turkish border can be put to an end: The EU's emergency mechanism allows for the rapid redistribution of refugees. Here is what should happen next.

The events currently playing out at the Greek-Turkish border are revealing how fragile the foundations of EU migration policy really are. So far, responses were predominantly shaped by a political reflex, which since 2015 has become the mantra of German and European migration policy: a renewed „loss of control“ must be prevented by all means. In practice, this has meant sealing off the Greek border with a disproportionate harshness and hoping for a new agreement with Turkey.

Such an agreement makes sense if it aims to provide the necessary assistance to the 3.6 million refugees living in Turkey. But in the medium and long term, it is more important that the EU finally does its own homework. Going forward, it must stop political games from being played on the backs of vulnerable people. To this end, Erdogan must be deprived of the basis for his blackmail by ensuring that the house of cards formed by the EU's common asylum and migration policy will not cave in at the first puff by the Turkish President.

Time for a change of course

So what could a European response look like? The core of the solution has long been on the table: a fair system of burden sharing among the EU member states. This requires a mechanism to relocate a certain share of asylum seekers to each member state. Since 2016, drafts for such a model have been presented by the European Commission, the European Parliament and several EU Council presidencies. However, some EU countries, most notably the Visegrad states, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, persistently refuse to support any of the proposals.

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But the situation in Greece once again shows that without a relocation mechanism, there can be no real relief for the member states on the EU's external borders. It is therefore time for a change of course. Individual EU countries must no longer be allowed to stand in the way of introducing such a mechanism. Solutions must be found with those member states that want to fulfil their European responsibility. Otherwise, there remains the significant danger that the images of the past week will be repeated again all too soon.

Relief only through a distribution key

Two steps follow from this. First, a coalition of member states is needed to provide short-term quotas to relocate asylum seekers from Greece. The basis for this urgently-needed sign of solidarity is provided by Article 78(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. According to this article the Council may take measures in support of a member state that is confronted with "an emergency situation characterised by a sudden inflow of nationals of third countries". The Greek government has already brought this into play. Similarly, the EU emergency mechanism that was set up in 2015 was also based on this article. At that time, almost 35,000 people were relocated from the „hotspots“ in Italy and Greece to other member states. Currently, there are about 43,000 migrants on the Greek islands, although the camps only offer space for just under 6,100 people. Among them are more than 2,000 unaccompanied minors.

In the short term, the emergency mechanism will have to be relaunched in order to distribute at least some of these people among member states willing to receive them. If this succeeds, even the 10,000 or so refugees currently stranded in the Greek-Turkish no man's land will no longer pose too great a challenge. For the EU, these are manageable numbers - and an orderly admission would be just the opposite of a "loss of control". It would be a sign of political responsibility. The participation of member states in such a programme is also often greater than initially thought. In 2015, for example, a number of member states, including Ireland, Malta, Luxembourg, Finland and Sweden, made decisive contributions to implementing the emergency relocation mechanism.

In a second step, this ad hoc measure must be turned into a sustainable system of burden sharing. Here, too, the drafts for a reform of the Common European Asylum System, presented by various EU institutions, offer valid starting points. Almost uniformly, they call for each member state to be allocated a share of migrants based on the country's economic performance and population. It is furthermore conceivable that the unemployment rate as well as efforts for the initial reception and registration of asylum seekers could also be taken into account.

To ensure that enough member states participate in the relocation scheme, there must be a mix of positive and negative incentives. On average, new arrivals take up to five years to integrate into the labour market. For this period, member states that agree to take in asylum seekers should be financially supported by payments from a burden-sharing fund set up specifically for this purpose. States that refuse to participate in the redistribution would have to pay into this fund - or otherwise receive correspondingly less from the other EU funds. Conversely, cities and municipalities which provide additional relocation capacities should receive special support.

German Council Presidency with a decisive role

It is time to recognise that strengthening the EU's external borders, a goal which has been pursued since 2015, cannot prevent another „loss of control“ on its own. If we do not want to throw all the EU's fundamental values overboard, we need real solidarity that goes beyond support for border management. For control is not gained by burying one's head in the sand, but by making the challenge manageable. This is precisely where a common relocation mechanism can help.

Germany has a central role to play here. Within the framework of Germany's Presidency of the EU Council, Federal Minister of the Interior Horst Seehofer will become Chairman of the Council of Interior Ministers as of July this year. Paradoxically, this means that precisely the same minister who almost split Germany's governing coalition in a party-political debate on migration in 2018 could now make the big leap to present a pragmatic and sustainable solution. As far as outcomes of a Council Presidency go, it would not be the worst.

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