

No humanity on the EU's external border?

Europe can and must prevent a humanitarian disaster!

by Annabelle Houdret and Mark Furness,

German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



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13,000 refugees are waiting at the Greek-Turkish border. This is, not however, 'no man's land', but rather the frontier between the geostrategic and domestic policy calculations of the EU and Turkey. What we are dealing with here is a humanitarian crisis, not a security issue, and our understanding of Europe as a community of values is at stake. At a time when right-wing extremism is on the rise in Europe and wars are raging on its borders, it is especially important for us to reflect on our values as EU citizens. We need to focus our efforts on dealing more effectively with actual dangers, instead of conjuring up scare stories about a new wave of immigration.

Fortress Europe at the expense of the European community of values

7,500 migrants are currently living in dire conditions in a camp set up for 648 people on the Aegean Island of Samos. 150 kilometres to the north on the island of Lesbos, 15,000 people are stuck in a camp built for 2,500. The picture is similar on other Greek islands, and the situation on the mainland is deteriorating dramatically. The Turkish Government has not only opened the border to Greece, but is also actively bussing migrants there, not least in an attempt to compel Europe to support its military intervention in Syria. Over 13,000 people at the mainland border between Turkey and Greece find themselves lacking sufficient supplies and are exposed to the cold and abuse by security forces and criminals.

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As European citizens, do we plan to isolate ourselves, stock up on pasta and hand sanitiser, and stand by while the Greek police, supported by other EU countries, use tear gas and water cannon to drive desperate people back into the sea? Do we want to allow Greece to suspend the international right to asylum? For many Germans in the 1930s, which is not that long ago, the only way to survive was to flee to other countries. Many refugees forcibly displaced from what is now Poland and the Czech Republic found new homes after 1945 in occupied Germany. And while we pay lip service to our press freedom, journalists on Samos and elsewhere are being beaten and driven out by right-wing extremists. Children's rights are one of the cornerstones of the EU Charter and yet children on Samos and elsewhere have been trapped for years in such desperation that they are becoming completely apathetic. Over 5,000 unaccompanied minors are exposed day and night to the risk of assault and many are falling into child prostitution, and this right in the heart of Europe.

How can we see this humanitarian catastrophe and look the other way, blaming with resignation the coronavirus crisis and right-wing extremist views in potential EU host countries, and returning to business as usual? Anyone forced to expose themselves to the deadly risks of the refugee route through the Mediterranean (which claimed 1,300 lives in 2019 alone) deserves solidarity, not child prostitution, police violence, assault and vilification. It is not only Erdogan's policies that are, to quote German Chancellor Merkel, "taken out on the backs of the refugees". Our own blinkered individual interests as Germans and Europeans are equally to blame for this situation.

Learning the lessons from 2015: Moving from crisis mode to win-win solutions

Rather than panicking about worst-case scenarios, we should learn the lessons from the handling of the influx of refugees in 2015, get out of the current crisis mode and focus on long-term, win-win solutions. Learning from 2015 means taking timely and coordinated action to develop capacity for providing accommodation, medical care, language lessons, education and cultural integration. The 2015 crisis was seriously worsened because the responsible institutions in Germany were not provided with sufficient resources and lacked suitably qualified staff. The inevitable scandals were exploited by populists, although their dire warnings of Islamist terror and criminality proved unfounded.

There are now several robust studies examining the conditions for the successful integration of refugees and migrants. Despite challenges such as a lack of training, difficulties in learning the language and the challenges of dealing with German authorities, the 2015 arrivals are being integrated far more quickly into the labour market than was the case in the 1990s.

In addition to the moral imperative of showing solidarity and offering protection to refugees, which is even more necessary due to the dangerous rise of right wing extremism in Germany, there are also completely rational reasons to accept people. Integrated migrants ultimately bring considerable economic advantages to Germany's rapidly ageing society. Some of them could help German companies with urgently needed internationalisation and thereby benefit our export-oriented economy. They could also contribute to addressing acute shortages of skilled workers (there are currently 30,000 unfilled vacancies in the care sector alone). Controlled admission and registration procedures, and the expansion of and adequate investment in integration measures, at least within a core group of EU member states including Germany, would signal clearly that we Europeans are not trampling all over our basic values, and that we have not forgotten our own recent past.