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Sealing our borders, closing our minds

The stand-off on the Greek-Turkish border might display Erdogan's unscrupulous nature — but also the EU's delusion

What is happening on the Greek-Turkish border is, above all, a tragedy for the people who have been exploited and treated in such a reprehensible way.

It is a reminder (not that one was needed) of the calculated and abhorrent way in which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan can act. But it also exposes the discreditable approach taken by the European Union to the war in Syria and the refugee challenge it has created.

We can decry Erdogan's tactics but the fear, division and cynicism with which the EU has addressed this issue over the last few years has handed the initiative to the Turkish president, giving him the ability and impetus to blackmail petrified European leaders. So, closing the border now, after Turkey gave refugees and migrants free passage in the wake of developments in Idlib, may seem like the only option to show Erdogan that he is not calling the shots, but in reality Europe gave him the upper hand a long time ago.

On Greece's part, in purely political terms Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had little choice but to close the land borders with Turkey. Migration is the one area where his government's opinion poll ratings have been very poor since coming to power last summer. He has also faced resistance on the mainland to the idea of creating reception centres for migrants to ease the pressure on Aegean islands. Islanders showed over the past few days that they are also unwilling to accept the construction of detention centres for asylum seekers on their patch either.

Greek hysteria

Moreover, senior figures within the ruling New Democracy party, including former leader Antonis Samaras, have been calling for a tougher

approach to the migration issue even though the government passed a new asylum law aimed at speeding up the repatriation of economic migrants, is planning to create closed reception centres on the islands, is creating an official register for NGOs and even intends to install a fence in the Aegean Sea.

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Some in the conservative party are even pushing the 'great replacement' theory that is popular with far-right parties in the west, arguing that the inflow of asylum seekers is part of a grand plan to undermine the Greek nation.

On social media over the past few days, some Greeks have been claiming that Erdogan is conducting a 'hybrid war' against their country. Some of these keyboard warriors also spent the last few years arguing that the influx of migrants to Greece was solely the result of the previous SYRIZA government's 'open border' policy so their credibility is on a par with the Turkish president's.

Nevertheless, this all contributes to creating hysteria, which limits the policy options available to the Greek PM and his colleagues, especially after they spent years in opposition trying to convince the Greek public the refugee challenge would disappear after the elections and the last few months in power insisting that most of the people crossing from Turkey are economic migrants not eligible for protection, even though official data showed this was not accurate.

The war in Syria didn't end

The bigger picture here is that after the shock of 2015, which led to the closing of borders around Greece, the flawed EU-Turkey deal and a reduction in the number of asylum seekers reaching Greek shores, too many European policymakers were willing to kid themselves about the situation being under control.

The prism through which they viewed it was whether the number of migrants reaching their countries had dropped, thereby giving them a chance to fight off the rise of the far-right which had been buoyed by the refugee crisis.

The root of today's challenges lie in the

The dire conditions and overcrowding on the Greek islands were allowed to continue for years, there was hope that the 3.5 million

situation in Syria, where war has raged since 2011, more than 380,000 have been killed and millions displaced.

registered Syrian refugees in Turkey would have no reason or encouragement to head towards northern Europe and that the war in Syria would sort itself out one way or another, even though the west demurred and Turkey and Russia entered the fray.

'Greece does not bear any responsibility for the tragic events in Syria and will not suffer the consequences of decisions taken by others,' Mitsotakis said on Friday.

The EU's timorous approach

Understandably, Athens feels it is caught between a calculating EU that had no qualms about isolating Greece in 2015, when the Balkan corridor was closed and talk of exclusion from Schengen began, and a Machiavellian adversary across the Aegean, who has no qualms about weaponizing destitute people. But claiming that Greece, or any other European country, will remain impervious to developments in Syria because it is not involved there, or just because it says so, is the diplomatic equivalent of sticking fingers in your ears.

The root of today's challenges lie in the situation in Syria, where war has raged since 2011, more than 380,000 have been killed and millions displaced. If Syria does not find peace and stability, the consequences will be felt in Greece and the rest of the EU, whether its leaders believe it fair or not.

If the EU maintains its timorous approach to the refugee challenge created by the Syrian war, including the failure to come up with a new asylum process that is fit for purpose, Erdogan will continue to exploit this fear. The words of support from EU leaders for Greece's right to protect its borders mean little in this context. Greece can close its land border with Turkey, but access routes will remain in the Aegean. More importantly, sealing ourselves off from reality cannot be a serious response, especially from a group of nations that pride themselves on being the most enlightened, prosperous and democratic in the world.

The stand-off on the Greek-Turkish border might have highlighted Erdogan's unscrupulous nature, but it also stripped away more of the EU's veneer. Closing another border is politically expedient in the short-term, but those who cheer it as a mark of decisiveness have learned nothing from the last few years and are fooling themselves about what lies ahead.

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Nick Malkoutzis
Athens

Nick Malkoutzis is co-founder and editor of MacroPolis, a political and economic analysis website based in Athens. He has contributed to The Guardian, Die Zeit and Politico, among others.