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Europe cannot allow itself to be blackmailed forever

Last week, European leaders decided to extend the EU-Turkey refugee deal. But the agreement has been a complete disaster. Europe needs a new strategy

At their European Council meeting at the end of last week, EU leaders announced their intention to continue cooperating with Turkey on refugee policy. Now, the European Commission is supposed to draw up a more detailed proposal by the next meeting in June. The wording of the resolutions, however, suggests that any new agreement could end up being just a remake of the old agreement. But as the last five years have clearly shown, the so-called 'EU-Turkey deal' has been an absolute failure.

In late 2015, the EU started setting up so-called hotspots on the islands in the Aegean Sea, where newly arriving refugees are either held, sent to various European countries or quickly deported again. The plan was for EU states to take in a Syrian refugee from Turkey for every Syrian refugee returned to Turkey. However, this plan quickly collapsed – not just because it was a violation of European fundamental rights, which protect asylum seekers from being deported without examining their asylum applications, but also because of Turkey's refusal to take people back.

The agreement ultimately amounted to horse trading: the Turkish government prevented refugees from travelling to the EU, while the EU pledged €6bn to Turkey for taking care of its refugees. European leaders also promised to resume EU accession negotiations with Turkey and to facilitate visas and trade. However, these promises were never kept. The agreement even included a humanitarian admission programme that would have enabled a larger number of refugees to find protection in European countries in a safe and orderly manner. However, it was never implemented.

Did the deal actually do anything?

After the 'deal' was concluded in March 2016, the number of refugees arriving in Europe plummeted. Many – notably within the European Council and the EU Commission – therefore consider it a great success. Most governments also want it to go on. They accept the desolate state of the camps on the Greek islands, where asylum seekers, including small children, sometimes wait for years to be deported or sent on further. Humanity falls by the wayside.

Ironically, Turkey did not get what it wanted either. That's why, for a continuation of the agreement, the Turkish government is explicitly demanding visa-free travel for its citizens to Europe and a clear path to a customs union with the EU – in addition to more billions in payments for taking care of refugees. Turkey now wants to use these funds to accommodate Syrian refugees in military 'protection zones' it controls in northern Syria – an arrangement that is illegal under international law.

Today more than ever, the situation is completely different than it was five years ago: most of the refugees who are now living in Turkey have neither a specific intention to move to Europe, nor the means to do so.

But as early as 2018, when Turkish troops marched into the Kurdish areas in northern Syria and occupied them, Europe hesitated to protest. The fear that Turkey might back out of the refugee deal outweighed security interests and human rights concerns. Consequently, the EU was also unable to respond adequately to the increasingly authoritarian elimination of the democratic opposition in Turkey.

In short, the EU has manoeuvred itself into a dead end. While European governments have thrown important achievements in refugee protection overboard, they placed themselves at the mercy of the Turkish government, which uses its control over refugee movements to put Europe under pressure. President Erdogan has repeatedly threatened to 'send' refugees to Europe. It's what political scientist Kelly Greenhill has called 'weapons of mass migration'.

Today is not five years ago

If the EU continues the agreement in its current form, it will become permanently dependent on Turkey. And it has no strategy for extricating itself from this dependency. The March 2016 agreement was based on false assumptions. After all, the number of people arriving in Greece had dropped drastically before that – since November 2015. The closure of

the Balkan route had made it virtually impossible to reach north-western Europe. Surveys also showed that the majority of those who wanted to continue their migration further into Europe had already set off by that point.

Today more than ever, the situation is completely different than it was five years ago: most of the refugees who are now living in Turkey have neither a specific intention to move to Europe, nor the means to do so. With the construction of a wall, Turkey has also largely closed itself off to newly arriving refugees.

Therefore a change of course is necessary. The EU should continue to provide financial support to refugees in Turkey. European governments seem to be willing to do so. But it should also finally set up an orderly admission programme to take in those refugees from the region who are seeking protection. A resettlement programme through which refugees from Turkey can be relocated to European countries already exists. However, since 2016 only around 28,000 people have benefited from it.

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In contrast, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), almost 400,000 particularly vulnerable refugees are in need for resettlement. Therefore, at least 100,000 refugees from Turkey should be admitted annually over the next five years. Moreover, the resettlement quotas for other countries in the region and beyond should also be increased. Family reunifications need to be more generous again and access to visas for study and work should be improved.

The end of blackmailing

These measures would send a clear signal to refugees that there is a safe and realistic way to get to Europe. They won't have to put themselves in the hands of smugglers. It would be possible for European countries to plan the arrival and admission of these refugees, including security checks and health tests prior to entry. Many local municipalities in Germany have already indicated that they would be willing to take in refugees.

This approach would significantly curb irregular migration to Europe. Of course, some will still try to get to the EU on their own on risky routes. Europeans need not be overly concerned though: the number of irregular arrivals in Greece is not high and could even be much lower, given the

prospect of safe access to the EU.

Of course, not all EU countries would go along with such a change of course. Many European governments and political parties stir up a fear of refugees for their own political benefit. Nevertheless, some states could lead the way, and pursue the goal of a human rights-based refugee policy. It would also significantly strengthen the EU's clout in foreign policy. Europe can no longer allow itself to be blackmailed.

When the Turkish government brought several thousand refugees to its border with Greece in February 2020, Europe reacted harshly. Since then, the protection of refugees has increasingly been receding into the political background. But to be able to credibly represent democratic and constitutional principles to its own citizens and to the outside world, Europeans must defend their ideal of human and refugee rights. A stable international refugee regime based on human rights is in Europe's self-interest after all.



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