

Policy Position

In Greece, the Corona crisis threatens to become a disaster

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If the coronavirus spreads to the Greek refugee camps, a humanitarian catastrophe is imminent. Instead of relying on national border controls, other EU states should relocate the migrants who are currently stuck in Greece.

In order to stem the spread of the coronavirus, the EU states have resorted to increasingly drastic measures in recent days. In addition to the national border controls introduced in several countries, EU leaders last Tuesday agreed to ban non-EU citizens from entering the EU. One day later, the Federal Ministry of the Interior also declared that Germany would no longer conduct humanitarian admission procedures for refugees in emergency situations „until further notice“. It was assured that efforts to evacuate underage refugees from the Greek islands would continue. However, it is doubtful that the relocation places promised by Germany, Finland, France, Ireland and Portugal to accept up to 1,600 children will be sufficient if the virus should infect the Greek refugee camps.

According to the Schengen Borders [Code](#), a “serious threat” to the public order or internal security of individual EU states is a fundamental justification for the reintroduction of national border controls. However, the Code also stipulates that member states shall “assess the proportionality of the measure in relation to that threat”. The closure of national borders must therefore be proportionate to the possible restrictions on other rights. For example, the right to apply for asylum at the border is explicitly not affected by any measures of the Borders Code. The same applies for the right to health protection. Admittedly, it may - and should - be examined as to whether the health of a person entering the country represents a danger. However, the EU [Charter](#) of Fundamental Rights also stipulates that every person must have „access to preventive health care and the right to benefit from medical treatment“.

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#COVID19
#Migration
#Greece
#Lesbos

At this point, the measures adopted so far by the EU and the member states have reached their limits. The return to national interests that can be seen in these measures has long been an obstacle to burden-sharing with countries of first arrival, such as Greece. But if exceptional measures are now being taken throughout the EU to ensure the safety of particularly vulnerable persons, the situation of the 42,000 or so migrants who are stranded in overcrowded refugee camps on the Greek islands with inadequate living standards should also be reconsidered.

Medical care is not possible in the refugee camp Moria

On Lesbos, for example, the refugee camp Moria officially offers space for 3,000 migrants. Currently, however, there are over 20,000 people living there. There are reports that 1,300 people share a single water tap. The island has only one hospital. Greek authorities also announced on Tuesday that access to the camp for aid workers will be prohibited for the next 14 days. The migrants have also been banned from leaving the camp. All of this makes adequate medical care impossible.

So far, only one person has tested positive for the coronavirus on Lesbos. That person is said to be on the side of the island furthest from the refugee camp. However, if the virus should spread to Moria, it will be difficult to provide the necessary assistance. This state of affairs was made all the more clear when several people died in a fire that broke out last week.

The situation in Greece was not mentioned in the EU Council President's conclusions on the coordination of joint crisis measures by the member states last Tuesday. However, at this moment, it would be a welcome signal from the EU if solidarity with those who need assistance – which currently receives lip service all over Europe - were also to benefit the people in the Greek refugee camps. In order to ensure this, the camps should be evacuated as quickly as possible with some of the people transferred to mainland Greece.

A coordinated European response is needed

However, it would be imprudent to leave Greece alone with this challenge. Just as it is necessary to cushion the economic consequences of the Corona crisis at the EU level, the evacuation of Greek refugee camps also requires a European coordinated response. Two measures can help here. Firstly, financial and logistical support is needed for Greece to ensure the necessary medical care for refugees who are brought to the mainland. The extension of the Civil Protection Programme initiated by the EU and the relaxed budget rules already provide a suitable basis for this.

In addition, asylum seekers from Moria and other camps need to be relocated to Member States willing to receive them. Sufficient financial incentives are needed to increase the quotas already provided by some EU states. Currently, the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) pays 6,000 euros to member states for each relocated refugee. In light of the fact that it takes 5 years on average for most refugees to be integrated into the local labour market, this contribution should be increased accordingly and paid out over a longer period. Doubling the amount, for example, would cost around 500,000 euros for the 42,000 asylum seekers on the Greek islands. In view of the 10.4 billion euros earmarked for the AMIF's successor fund in the next EU financial framework, this would seem to be a reasonable amount.

Let communities willing to host refugees participate in a relocation scheme

The present situation offers a good opportunity to test the involvement of willing cities and municipalities in a European relocation mechanism. In Germany alone, 120 communities have already declared themselves willing to accept asylum seekers. Ideally, these communities would then also benefit from direct payments from existing EU funds. This would also create an incentive for communities from structurally weaker regions to participate in the relocation mechanism.

The spread of the coronavirus is currently forcing us to consider steps that seemed unthinkable just a few weeks ago. All in order to provide the vulnerable people in our society with the necessary degree of security and solidarity. Neither the right to asylum nor the right to adequate health care are restricted by the reintroduction of national border controls. The threat of an escalating humanitarian catastrophe on the Greek islands is therefore an opportunity for the idea of a relocation mechanism, which has repeatedly been dismissed as utopian, to receive a new impetus.

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