

National interests, European solutions?

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The situation on the Greek island of Lesbos after the burning of the Moria camp is considered a European scandal. But who is „Europe“? That migrants expect to be admitted into Germany once they have made it across the Mediterranean stems from 2015, the unilateral border opening by the Merkel government, without consultation of Germany’s European partners. (Arguably it contributed to tipping the British vote over Brexit, a few months later.) Almost all migrants, those already in Greece and those waiting to get there, want to move on to Germany, not to Hungary or France or Denmark where they know they won’t be welcome — and if they were sent, under a European immigration regime, to Latvia or Bulgaria (none of which will ever agree to such a regime), they’d be in Germany within a few weeks.

And why not? Large parts of German society, including German business, but also the unions, are eager to receive them. The German labor market seems to have an endless capacity to absorb immigrants, skilled and unskilled; the churches, politically powerful and financially well-endowed, would like to prove their usefulness; and local communities want to fill the living quarters that they built for asylum seekers in 2015, and collect the per capita daily subsidy the federal government pays for each new arrival — not to mention the language training centers and similar institutions that now lack customers and revenue. German politicians, keeping their eyes on the center-left electorate, knowing its sense of guilt over German prosperity and their desire for their country to be a model of virtue for Europe as a whole, have called for thousands of the Moria migrants, even all of them, to be flown to Germany immediately.

Why does the Federal Government, still led by Merkel, not open the borders again? It is here that „Europe” enters the picture, more precisely, the „European solution“, the same

one that was deemed unnecessary in 2015. While everybody knows that no “European solution” will be forthcoming, now the message is that a national solution is out of the question. Why?

Open borders polarize. German politicians remember how in 2015 Merkel saved the AfD from the decline it was then suffering, and helped it establish itself as the biggest opposition party. There is a limit to the number of immigrants that a country will accept, beyond which xenophilia turns into xenophobia — viz. Denmark, Sweden, Italy, the Greek islands themselves: wasn't Lesbos once celebrated worldwide for the welcome it offered to the first refugees arriving there across the water? Remember that already in November 2015 Merkel began secret talks with Erdogan on a deal under which Turkey would stop Syrian refugees from crossing into Europe, and „Europe“ would pay him billions of euros for expenses incurred by policing Europe's borders – or more precisely, Germany's extraterritorial borders – from the outside.

Still: if refugees are welcome, provided their number is limited, why not let as many of them in as people are willing to accept? German immigration law, made in a different time, makes it for all practical purposes impossible to reject anyone having entered the country, legally or not, if only they ask for asylum. Moreover, if asylum is refused, often after a year-long legal process, almost everybody can find a way to avoid deportation. Since the government is too scared politically to ask voters for an overhaul of the country's immigration law, it enlists „Europe“, and Turkey, to keep migrants away from Germany, essentially locking them up in Moria and the many other places like it.

Here is the bizarre logic behind this. German law and German-style humanity, and the Greens in particular, require that Germany cannot have an upper limit on immigration, neither in Germany nor in Europe. But without an upper limit immigration cannot be regulated: no quotas, no priorities etc. Unregulated immigration, however, causes a political backlash, earlier or later, so we cannot have it either. So “Europe” must prevent it for us, Greece and Italy in

particular, with Austria, Hungary and others closing their borders to bottle the migrants up in Greek and Italian camps while doing Germany the favor of blocking a “European solution” compatible with German law but incompatible with German politics. As long as “Europe” keeps the migrants away from the German border, Germany can keep its laws without having to practice them, while publicly reprimanding and privately commending Hungary, Austria, Poland and others for rejecting fixed national quotas for the distribution of an unlimited number of migrants.

This does not preclude “humanitarian gestures” – or, in Merkel’s language, “showing a friendly face”. Immediately after the Moria fire, the German government announced that it would admit 150 (!) unaccompanied minors from the camp. A few days later, exactly 1,553 migrants, members of exactly 408 families, not more, no less, were additionally allowed in. As it turned out, none of them are from Moria, and all of them have already been granted legal refugee status by the Greek authorities, upon which they were taken to the Greek mainland. It also turned out that the Greek government had insisted that the impression must be avoided that setting fire to a Greek refugee camp can get you into Germany, or that if you make it to Greece you can expect to be taken to Germany, rather than having your application for asylum processed by the Greek authorities, thereafter having to wait in Greece for the elusive “European solution”. With Greece making the selection and keeping the unselected, Germany can preserve the moral purity of its immigration law: no upper limits, no quotas, practically no deportation. The day after the official invitation of the 1,533, the German public had forgotten the 12,000 inmates of the former Moria, not to mention the many more inmates of the many other Morias in Greece and Italy attracted to Europe by Germany’s friendly face and, on paper, open borders.