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German stance on a new stage of the migration crisis

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Chancellor Angela Merkel met the Greek Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis in Berlin on 9 March. During the meeting she promised that Germany would accept some of the minor refugees from the camps in Greece, who number between 1000 and 1500. Other EU member states (such as France, Portugal and Finland) also undertook to do the same as part of a 'coalition of the willing'. Merkel emphasised that the present migration crisis could not be compared to the situation in 2015, and added that German citizens might expect that politicians would be able to "keep migration in order and contain it". She said Ankara was responsible for the tension on the Greek-Turkish border and labelled its policy as "unacceptable". At the same time, during her earlier telephone conversations with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the chancellor expressed her will to help Turkey handle the migration crisis (for example, by offering €32 million to reinforce the Turkish coast guard) and her readiness to renew the 2016migration agreement. Germany will also strengthen the Frontex operation; at present, around 60 German police officers delegated to the agency are stationed in Greece. Germany will send around 20 police officers and a helicopter there as part of the reinforcement of Frontex promised by the European Commission. In early February, Germany offered the UN additional aid worth €25 million to improve the living standards of the refugees from Idlib.

Commentary

- Germany has taken a dual stance at the present stage of the migration crisis. On the one hand, it emphasises the need to protect the EU's external borders, and is sending a clear message discouraging migrants from coming to Germany. For this reason it is strengthening Frontex and supporting Greece in its actions, and the German Ministry of Internal Affairs is posting information on social media in Arabic that the EU's borders are closed. Berlin will also be ready to reduce the permeability of its state border by increasing the number of checks. During a meeting of the CDU/CSU grouping in the Bundestag on 3 March, the Minister of Internal Affairs Horst Seehofer reportedly also said it would be necessary to send back illegal migrants from the German border in case the EU's external border was insufficiently protected. On the other hand, Germany will emphasise that humanitarian aid for refugees from Syria has to be increased (it has declared its wish to donate an additional €100 million to the UNHCR for this purpose).
- Although German political parties are divided over accepting refugees, the government will be willing to accept limited contingents of refugees. However, this decision will be

made on condition that other EU member states agree to make similar moves. In this way Germany wants not only to avoid being accused of making unilateral moves (as in 2015 and 2016), but also wants to share the costs with other EU member states. An escalation of the migration crisis would seriously affect the German presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2020. In such a case, this would adversely affect the functioning of the community as a whole, which already needs to face difficult budget negotiations as well as the challenges posed by managing the coronavirus epidemic.

- Germany's efforts will be concentrated on maintaining a migration agreement with Turkey at the price of increasing financial aid – but without giving in to Ankara's blackmail. Germany does not take Turkey's declaration that it will terminate the agreement seriously, and views it as an element of pressure during the talks concerning the continued financing of the agreement after 2020. The German government is arguing that €3.2 billion euros has so far been paid on the basis of the agreement. The parties which form the grand coalition have taken different approaches to Russia's moves. The Christian Democrats insist on pressing harder on Moscow to end the military operation in Idlib, and have not ruled out imposing sanctions. This policy is advocated above all by Norbert Röttgen (the chairman of the Bundestag's Committee on Foreign Affairs and a candidate for leader of the CDU), although his position is not strong enough to enable him to push through his stance. The imposition of sanctions is also unrealistic because it would be opposed by the co-governing SPD and a large number of Bundestag members who want dialogue with Russia to be strengthened.
- Most German politicians are convinced that it is necessary to maintain control of the EU's and Germany's external borders, and to increase the aid for refugees in Turkey. However, the German political parties disagree over the acceptance of refugees. Regardless of the government's declaration, this solution is opposed by a significant part of the Christian Democrats. The escalation of the migration crisis may also have influence the election of the CDU's leader. Friedrich Merz's strong stance against accepting new refugees and migrants, and his suggestion that Germany's borders might be closed, will strengthen his position. The crisis on the Turkish-Greek border is unhelpful for his main counter-candidate, Armin Laschet, the Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia. Laschet has supported Chancellor Merkel's migration policy from the start, and now hopes to convince those delegates for whom helping refugees is a matter of great importance. The third candidate for CDU leader, Röttgen, has above all emphasised the need to offer humanitarian assistance to refugees on the Turkish-Syrian border and support to refugees in Turkey. Nor has he ruled out accepting some of them as part of the proposed European contingents. Within the SPD, opinions regarding the acceptance of new refugees vary. Although the party leaders (Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans) have approved of this option, most members of the party did not support the Green Party's motion (it was backed only by the Left Party) to accept 5000 juvenile refugees from the camps in Greece during the vote in the Bundestag on 4 March. This was partly due to the party's unwillingness to send any signals that could encourage an uncontrolled influx of refugees and migrants to Germany.
- The German public is strongly divided over the issue of accepting refugees. In a poll conducted for ARD public television on 5 March, 49% of respondents were opposed to

receiving refugees if only Germany and France took part in the contingents, while 48% supported such moves. At the same time, 42% of respondents wanted refugees to be prevented from entering the EU, while 52% were opposed to restrictive border protection. Those who wanted new refugees to be accepted held demonstrations on 3 March, including in front of the Chancellor's Office in Berlin (around 3000 people). Around 120 cities, including Potsdam and Düsseldorf, have declared that they are willing to accept new refugees (under the slogan 'Safe Haven Cities' – 'Städte sichere Häfen') for some time. However, the decision to accept new refugees is not up to individual local governments, but is dependent on the federal government's stance.

Appendix. Statistics of asylum applications in Germany in 2019

According to data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs published in January, the number of applications in 2019 was 14.3% lower compared to 2018; a total of 111,094 of so-called 'first-asylum applications' were received. Additionally, 31,415 applications for children born in Germany and 23,429 second-asylum applications were submitted, a total of 165,938. The largest numbers of asylum seekers came from Syria (26,453), Iraq (10,894), Turkey (10,275), Iran (7778), Afghanistan (7124), Nigeria (6201) and Georgia (3138). The German administration (both federal and local) is better prepared for another stage of the migration crisis than it was in 2015. Proof of this, along with its processing of around 10,000 asylum applications monthly, includes a near-threefold increase (to around 7000) in the number of staff at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), and an increase in its budget from €250 million in 2015 to around €850 million in 2018. The average processing time was considerably shortened (from around a year to three months). In turn, sending back people who have no right to remain is becoming an increasingly serious structural problem. According to official data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were 246,737 such people in 2019 (5% more than in 2018). 12,266 people were sent back in the first half of 2019 (6% less than in the first half of 2018). Individual federal states are responsible for the deportations. They are guided by differing regulations and practices, and do not want the regulations to be standardised as they fear losing their prerogatives as a result.