

Gerald Knaus, Chairman of the European Stability Initiative (ESI) conducted a follow-up presentation of the 'Merkel/Samsom plan' at ELIAMEP. He emphasised that there are currently advanced talks taking place between Germany and Turkey for the finalisation of a resettlement deal, which is based on the original 'Merkel/Samsom plan'. In this respect, his presentation focused on the current developments and the next steps that the involved parties need to take.

Initially, the Chairman of ESI argued that since the beginning of the refugee crisis there have been two competing solutions to the problem: 1) erecting fences at the northern border of Greece; and 2) Merkel's, and the current Dutch Presidency of the EU's plan, also known as the 'Samsom Plan', which foresees the resettlement of refugees directly from Turkey and the effective implementation of the readmission agreement between Greece and Turkey. Mr Knaus identified two versions of the former plan: a) the 'hard' one, supported by Victor Orban, which foresees the erection of fences at the northern border of Greece, and the opposition to the establishment of a permanent relocation mechanism; and b) the 'soft' one, still popular in Brussels, which foresees no clear opposition to the erection of fences, and the provision of millions of euros to Greece in order to deal with a humanitarian crisis caused by the closure of borders. The 'soft' version goes hand-in-hand with the establishment of a relocation mechanism, which would slowly take some pressure off Greece.

The presentation then attempted to challenge the idea adopted by various human rights organisation, political elites across Europe, and the Greek government, which suggests that one way of helping Greece at the moment, is by establishing a permanent relocation mechanism in the EU, which would relocate asylum seekers from Greece to EU member-states. Mr Knaus stated that such a mechanism: 1) is not working, and would never work, as it demonstrates an inherent shortcoming in its initial conceptualisation (i.e. it requires asylum seekers to become 'trapped' in Greece in order to be able to be relocated in the future); and 2) still forces people to risk their lives by crossing the Aegean Sea. Thus, a relocation mechanism will not work, and even if it worked, it would have worked in the wrong way.

In this respect, Mr Knaus suggested that Greece should not press the EU to make the relocation process work faster, as it constitutes a 'Trojan Horse' for the country. Instead, Greece must propose jointly with Italy the suspension of the relocation programme. This would give the opportunity to Germany to suggest to the rest of the EU member-states to participate in the resettlement of refugees directly from Turkey. He highlighted the fact that Greece needs the success of the 'Merkel/Samsom plan' more than any other country. In this regard, Greece has to push towards this direction, by acknowledging Turkey as a 'safe third country', which is a precondition for the implementation of the 'Merkel/Samsom plan'. Moreover, he emphasised that Greece has to increase its capacity to process and conduct readmissions. Finally, he argued that Greece, Turkey and Germany must sit on the same table and discuss the technicalities related to the implementation of the 'Merkel/Samsom plan'.

Mr Knaus argued that in return, Turkey must: 1) fully implement the Greece-Turkey readmission agreement by June 2016; and 2) attest to all conditions attached to its acknowledgement as a 'safe third country'. As soon as these two preconditions are met, the EU Commission must start the visa liberalisation procedure for Turkey, which was initially planned for October 2016.