



Greece's Islands of Despair

As the continent's migration crisis deepens, an already economically-challenged Greece has become a de facto detention center for those trying to enter Europe, says Jacob Funk Kirkegaard.

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Pedro da Costa: Hi, I'm Pedro da Costa, editorial fellow here at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. I'm joined by Jacob Kirkegaard. Thank you so much. And we're going to talk about the never-ending story of the migration crisis in Europe, which seems to be getting worse by the day.

So, Jacob, you were skeptical of this deal with Turkey to begin with. And now that it's been implemented, it doesn't seem to be working out very well. It kind of seems to be playing in the direction that you predicted. Can you tell us exactly what the deal involves and why you called it illusory from the get-go?

Jacob Kirkegaard: Yeah. I mean the problem is this is a deal that, in my opinion, will never be implemented. In fact, it's just a piece of paper. And what has been agreed is several things. But the sort of big issue items is that the Europeans have agreed to establish what you can refer to as sort of rapid asylum processing system in Greece. So that as of March 20th or the last weekend everyone that arrives in Greece is put through in principle a rapid individualized process of having their asylum application looked at. And then under the assumption that they do not qualify for asylum in the European Union, they are then immediately returned back to Turkey.

Pedro da Costa: How quickly is that process going to actually take place?

Jacob Kirkegaard: Well, in principle, the idea is that the return should start after two weeks meaning April 4th. But the problem is that this assumes that Greece has a functioning asylum system. And it also assumes that Turkey is a safe country with which you can return refugees and neither is true. So the reality is that if we assume and the earliest data suggests that people are still coming to Greece in the first 24 hours about 1700 arrived. These people are going to be stuck in Greece, in my opinion, because it will take much longer for them to be processed. And it's not even clear that at least the non-Syrians among them can be sent back to Turkey because in Turkey the non-Syrians don't have refugee status.

So, you're going to end up with a situation we're Greece is already turning processing centers into what the deal calls closed detention centers, which is what a normal [inaudible 0:02:38] called prisons.

Pedro da Costa: Yeah. And this is one of the reasons why the UN Refugee Agency has disavowed itself of these camps, right?

Jacob Kirkegaard: Yeah. I mean these are closed camps. They're prisons. And they're going to be built or converted, or established on a number of Greek islands paid for by the European Union.

But this is what I have earlier called essentially the Australian approach to illegal migration, which is obviously Australia is a country that for many years and very controversially has taken the illegal migrants that come to Australia via boat through Indonesia and then elsewhere and process them in camps on far-off small islands. And this is where Europe is heading.

Pedro da Costa: And now, of course, Europe isn't acknowledging that it's doing this and it would be a very controversial approach. But as ugly as this might sound, you actually seem to think that this is actually one of the best things they can do given the rather ugly alternatives. So what could happen if this is—?

Jacob Kirkegaard: Well, I mean I think the one positive from this is that at least these closed detention centers as they call them, these prisons, it will all be paid for by the European Union. So at least Europe is acknowledging that we got to foot the bill for what is a European problem. So you're not in fact leaving this to be only on the shoulders of the Greek government, which is of course is already in many ways a bankrupt government. And you could expect, generally speaking, that the situation conditions in even these closed facilities will be better than on the camps at Idomeni on the Macedonian Greek border, which is essentially a mud pit.

Because the other reality of this deal is that the border between Greece and Macedonia and the entire border north of Greece will remain closed and that is ultimately what's going to slow very significantly the inflow of refugees to the rest of Europe.

Pedro da Costa: You also mentioned when we last spoke that Greece might use this as an opportunity potentially for some of the debt relief that it had been seeking in previous.

Jacob Kirkegaard: Well, I mean, I think, the Greek government should do this as admittedly rather, you know. It's an opportunity for them, in my opinion, in cynical political terms. It seems to me it's pretty obvious that given that this is going to happen, in my opinion, the Greek government should say to the rest of the European Union, "Okay. We will host these detention facilities in Greece and thereby solve a very large political problem or help solve a very large political problem for the rest of Europe. But you, the rest of Europe, should not only pay for the upkeep of these facilities, which they are according to this deal. But you should also pay us some income. Pay some rent. And the easiest way to do that is to basically give us a better deal on debt relief". I think that is an entirely fair appropriate, if somewhat, cynical measure to take from this.

Pedro da Costa: It sounds like an interesting proposal and we'll see what the troika will say.

Jacob Kirkegaard: We'll see. We'll see what the troika says. But I mean this is actually not even the troika. This is only the Euro area. The IMF has nothing to do with it. This is something that is—in fact, the IMF would welcome more debt relief given by the Euro area to Greece probably without asking too much about how the politics that brought it about came to be.

But there is another element to what was agreed, which is often misunderstood, which is the sort of assumption that there is now a new quota under this deal that says that the deal is off when 72,000 migrants—if 72,000 migrants come from Turkey to Greece. That is the maximum number that the Europeans are willing to accept as part of the system because

there is this concept of 1 to 1. And this is essentially, in principle, it's a good idea because you want to undermine the business model of people smugglers.

So what the Europeans, in principle, have agreed to do is that for every migrant that is returned from Greece to Turkey, the European Union is going to accept one refugee or migrant directly from Turkey into all of the EU. The problem, however, with that is that there is no coercion involved in this. It's all voluntary up to each individual member state to say how many would you like to take. And we have known for some time. In fact, in June-July of 2015, the European Union said we should take 20,000 people directly from the Syrian theater and come to EU. And they've all taken 2000.

So the tragicomic outcome is that the first 18,000 of the 72,000 is actually those that haven't come under earlier commitments. So they're just recycling that number in order to avoid imposing more--and they know politically unacceptable demands by different member states to accept more refugees. And the same is true for the remaining 54,000, which comes from parts of those 160,000 that were agreed last year to be relocated from Greece and Italy to the rest of the EU. Well, only a couple, I mean not even a thousand have done that.

Pedro da Costa: So a lot of window dressing, a lot of member recycling.

Jacob Kirkegaard: It's a complete window dressing and it's based on the assumption, which I believe is wishful thinking at best, that European member states will be more willing to take refugees directly from Turkey than from other member states in Greece and Italy. And I just don't think that's possible. So the only way in which this deal might survive is in fact if Angela Merkel says, "Fine, Germany will take all the 72,000 because I don't think anybody else is going to take more than a couple of hundreds". So Angela Merkel if she wants her deal to succeed, she's going to have to pay for it but she's also going to have to take all the refugees.

Pedro da Costa: That's a tall order given the political pressure she's under.

Jacob Kirkegaard: It's a tall order even for her. So, ultimately, this is a deal that doesn't solve the things that it claims to do. It's not, in my opinion, ever going to be genuinely implemented. And meanwhile, the barbed wire on the Macedonian border remains in place. And that, as I said earlier, is actually what's going to solve a lot of the problems and reduce at least this migratory route into Europe. Now that may create others or reestablish other avenues into Europe, but this one will remain closed but just has nothing to do with this deal.

Pedro da Costa: Jacob, thank you so much for your insights.

Jacob Kirkegaard: My pleasure.

Pedro da Costa: I appreciate it.



