

CORRESPONDENTS

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# In defence of Europe

KLAUS NEUMANN

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As the European Commission swings behind Greece, signs of an alternative Europe are emerging

Right:

"The suffering is palpable": by the end of 2019 the Moria refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, built for 3100 people, was home to more than 20,000. Armin Durgut/Pixsell/AAP Image



Ursula von der Leyen was a surprise choice for European Commission president. The job was meant to go either to Manfred Weber, the German leader of the conservative European People's Party, the largest party in the European parliament, or to Frans Timmermans, the former Dutch foreign minister nominated by the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats. Von der Leyen had never been an EU commissioner, had never been a member of the European Parliament and had never held a foreign affairs portfolio. Her Brussels experience was limited to having been born in Brussels and having lived there until the age of thirteen when her father held a senior position with the European Community, the EU's predecessor. Once considered Angela Merkel's natural successor, von der Leyen had dropped out of contention in recent years as a candidate for her party's or her country's top job. In fact, as a minister in Merkel's government, her involvement in scandals related to the misuse of public funds had turned her into a liability.

Her nomination by the European Council in July last year seemed less about her personal qualities and expertise than about the hostility of influential council members, including French president Emmanuel Macron, towards Weber and/or Timmermans. Last week, however, von der Leyen demonstrated that her previous assignment, as German defence minister, had prepared her well for the top job in Brussels. Only fatigues, helmet and flak jacket were missing when she fronted the press to declare Europe's support for Greece's treatment of refugees arriving from Turkey. The tone was befitting a general's calm assessment of a grave threat.

“We... have seen how tense and how difficult the situation is,” she told journalists. “The Greek authorities are facing a very difficult task in containing the situation... I am fully committed to mobilising all the necessary operational support to the Greek authorities.” Flanked — and dwarfed — by Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Croatian prime minister Andrej Plenković, European Council president Charles Michel and the president of the European parliament, David Sassoli, she was nevertheless obviously in charge when she decreed: “We will hold the line and our unity will prevail.” She ended her brief statement by thanking “Greece for being our European *ασπίδα* in these times.”

Her statement assumed that Europe needs a Greek *ασπίδα*, or shield, because Greece is defending Europe’s borders. Just a few days earlier, on 28 February, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had announced that Turkey would no longer prevent asylum seekers from crossing into neighbouring Greece or Bulgaria. Thousands of them, many of them Afghans and Iranians who don’t enjoy the limited protection available to Syrian refugees in Turkey, immediately rushed to the Turkish–Greek border, some of them on board free buses provided by the Turkish authorities to ferry migrants from Istanbul.

The Greeks responded by closing their border and deploying additional military units and border police to guard it. Greek security forces then repelled prospective intruders by firing tear gas canisters and stun grenades. According to [a report](#) in the German magazine *Spiegel*, a twenty-two-year-old Syrian man died after being hit by a bullet. Turkish sources claim he wasn’t the only casualty. All those who had managed to cross the land border but had been picked up by the Greek police were immediately returned to Turkey, often after being beaten up by police or border guards. Greece also announced that it would accept no new asylum applications.

Von der Leyen’s use of the term *ασπίδα* may have been meant as a reference to [Operation Aspida](#), which was launched in 2012 by the government of Antonis Samaras, Mitsotakis’s predecessor as leader of Greece’s conservative New Democracy party. Then, too, Greece’s European partners expected it to control a section of the EU’s external border: a 200-kilometre stretch mostly marked by the river Evros, which divides Greek West Thrace from Turkish East Thrace. Operation Aspida involved the construction of a barbed wire fence and the deployment of an additional 1800 border guards to keep out refugees and other irregularised migrants. It was accompanied by [Operation Xenios Zeus](#), which was aimed at detecting — and then detaining — migrants living without a visa in Greek cities. Both operations were terminated when left-wing Alexis Tsipras replaced Samaras as prime minister in 2015.

I suspect Mitsotakis and his cabinet associate the term *ασπίδα* not only with the securitisation of the border eight years ago but also with an earlier effort to keep Asian invaders out of Europe, 2500 years ago. “Who doesn’t understand that this is a normal Turkish invasion?” Adonis Georgiadis, vice-president of New Democracy and minister for development in the current government, [tweeted](#) last week. As far as invasions from an Asian neighbour are concerned, perhaps none is better remembered — in Greece and elsewhere — than that of the Persians in 480 BCE. Then, a small Greek force led by King Leonidas of Sparta held up the

vastly superior Persian army at the pass of Thermopylae. While their famous last stand only delayed the Persian advance, it allowed the Greek forces to regroup; the following year the Persians were decisively beaten and had to withdraw.

The Greek far right has frequently drawn on the history of Leonidas's last stand to argue that all "illegal immigrants" need to be deported. The Golden Dawn, the fascist party that until last year held eighteen seats in Greece's parliament, used to gather regularly at Thermopylae. References to Thermopylae are also used by the far right outside Greece. Last week, for example, a contributor to the white supremacist website VDare wrote: "Like their ancestors at Thermopylae, Greeks are trying to repel an Asiatic invasion... Western Civilisation began with ancient Greece. And it might end with the Third Hellenic Republic if the West doesn't fight back."

The river Evros is one of the sites where a replay of the battle of Thermopylae is now being imagined. The other is the Aegean Sea, or rather those of the Greek islands that lie only a few kilometres from the Turkish mainland. There, the heroics of the defenders of Greece against the imagined invasion include burning down facilities operated by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, and the Swiss charity One Happy Family, assaults on journalists and aid workers, and attempts to prevent rubber dinghies carrying irregularised migrants from reaching Greek shores.

But it would be unfair to lay the blame for Greece's hostile response to asylum seekers squarely at the feet of the far right. At the time of Operation Aspida, Human Rights Watch and other non-government organisations accused Samaras's New Democracy government of violating the human rights of people seeking Europe's protection, and of forcing desperate people to resort to using riskier routes, thus contributing to a higher number of border-related deaths. Similar accusations can now be levelled at the Mitsotakis government. It has been responsible for pushbacks (which are illegal under international law) and for endangering the lives of people trying to reach Greece by boat.

According to a recent *New York Times* report, Greece is also maintaining extrajudicial detention centres. It wants to deport to their countries of origin asylum seekers who arrived after 28 February and are being detained on board a Greek navy ship — without formally assessing whether they are owed protection. Police have done little to curb the activities of Greek vigilantes and far-right activists from France and Germany, who have taken it upon themselves to repel or expel asylum seekers and the people helping them.

Von der Leyen did not visit One Happy Family's torched community centre on Lesbos, and only observed first-hand Greece's *ασπίδα* in operation at the river Evros. Yet even there, it should have been obvious to her that the Greeks have been using tear gas and stun grenades to repel desperate migrants, including families with small children. She would certainly have been briefed about Greece's decision to suspend its refugee determination procedures. But in an attempt to "hold the line," she offered only praise for the Greek government's hardline approach, and ignored its flouting of European human rights and refugee law. She presented as a visiting commander-in-chief, inspecting her troops at the southeastern limits of Europe,

thereby distinguishing herself from her avuncular predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker. (To be fair, von der Leyen had not sought to become Juncker's successor; the job she had eyed was that of NATO secretary-general.)

After 28 February, asylum seekers also tried to reach Greek islands just a few kilometres off the Turkish west coast. According to local media [reports](#), 977 people succeeded within the space of twenty-four hours on the first weekend of March alone. Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos and some smaller islands were often the first European port of call for Syrian refugees during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015–16. It was opposite the island of Kos that Alan Kurdi and his family boarded a small inflatable boat in the early hours of 2 September 2015; for many readers internationally, the photo of three-year-old Alan's dead body on a Turkish beach would have epitomised the crisis.

Although the number of arrivals dropped sharply in early 2016 after the Balkan route was closed, conditions on the islands went from bad to worse. By the end of last year, the Moria camp on Lesbos, for example, which had been built for 3100 people, accommodated more than 20,000. "The suffering is palpable, the hopelessness is insidious, the feeling of abandonment is all-consuming," [wrote](#) Annie Chapman, an English volunteer doctor working in Moria, in the *Guardian* in early February. She was particularly concerned about the situation of the most vulnerable camp residents: "Guardians work hard to keep the most vulnerable safe, but... monitoring and care is stretched, and problems continue to spiral. With finite space and an infinite number of increasingly vulnerable people arriving, many minors and women are living alone outside the [secure] sections, at risk of abuse, violence, and systemic failings."

The conditions have been appalling not least because Moria and other camps have been hopelessly overcrowded. And that's because the Greek authorities have been slow in processing asylum seekers, and because until very recently they refused to transfer people from Lesbos and other islands to the mainland. Conditions have also been poor because Greece didn't take full responsibility for the asylum seekers crossing its borders and instead left their care to private agencies, individual volunteers from elsewhere in Europe, and local people.

At the height of the crisis of 2015–16, Greek islanders often welcomed new arrivals — so much so that Lesbos fisherman [Stratis Valamios](#) and eighty-six-year-old Lesbos islander [Emilia Kamvysi](#) were among the favourites to win the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize. Pundits assumed the extraordinary hospitality of the islanders would have to be acknowledged. But the arrival numbers kept growing and, with the Greek government failing to transfer people to the mainland, many islanders began to resent their presence. The islanders' anger was initially directed at the authorities, but its target has shifted to the unwanted foreigners themselves. The Greek government saw no need to defuse the situation on the islands. It was demanding that other EU member states accommodate some of its asylum seekers and probably calculated that images of suffering children were aiding its cause.

Elsewhere in Europe, the appalling conditions on Lesbos have been a symbol of the failure of Europe's asylum seeker policy for at least the past two years. In Germany, in particular, civil society groups have demanded that asylum seekers be evacuated from the islands and, if necessary, accommodated in Germany. Two years ago in Hamburg, for example, a [coalition of civil society groups](#) calling itself Hamburg hat Platz (Hamburg has space) began demanding that the state government agree to the resettlement of 1000 additional refugees from Greece.

Städte Sicherer Häfen (Safe Harbour Cities), a 140-strong [network of German towns and cities](#) formed last year in response to Italy's refusal to let migrants rescued in the Mediterranean disembark, was also ready to welcome asylum seekers and refugees, including people accommodated in Moria and other overcrowded camps in Greece. Network members have been willing to accommodate asylum seekers over and above those assigned to them by Germany's federal and state governments under a quota system.

These calls became louder towards the end of last year. Just before Christmas, Robert Habeck, the co-leader of the Greens, gave a much-quoted [interview](#) to the Sunday paper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*. Asked what he thought of the Greek prime minister's repeated call that other European countries relieve Greece's burden, Habeck said, "First, get the kids out. Around 4000 children crowd on the islands. Lots of girls, lots of fragile little people. Our humanity demands that we help quickly." His sentiments were widely echoed, although it was not clear whether he meant unaccompanied minors or children more generally.

Among those backing Habeck's call was Heribert Prantl, a senior journalist with the liberal *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He called the German government's inaction "criminal" and likened the children on Lesbos to the infant Jesus, pointing out that the latter too had not been a Christian. Although the government rejected Habeck's call, its timing (which meant that the children in Moria became associated with Mary's child in Bethlehem) generated significant momentum, shifting the German debate. The issue was no longer whether to assist Greece and accommodate some of the asylum seekers stranded there, but when to evacuate vulnerable children.

**T**he images of asylum seekers being tear gassed at the Greek land border focused the attention of critical European publics on several linked issues: Europe's failure to develop a new common asylum system that could replace the existing [Dublin regulations](#); the humanitarian crisis in Idlib that prompted Erdoğan to blackmail the European Union by unleashing a wave of irregularised migrants in its direction; the fact that Turkey is currently hosting more asylum seekers and refugees than any other country; the shortcomings and potential collapse of the refugee deal between the European Union and Turkey; and the intolerable conditions in Greek refugee camps.

In Germany, the spectacle of stun grenades being lobbed in the direction of unarmed men, women and children sparked demonstrations and pledges by mayors and state premiers to accommodate asylum seekers from Greece. The day after the first images of violence at the Turkish-Greek border appeared on German television screens, spontaneous demonstrations



and vigils in support of a more generous German policy were held in nineteen German cities. More such rallies occurred over the following days. On 7 March, for example, some 5000 people took to the streets in Hamburg, and 4000 in Berlin.

Predictably, representatives of the extreme right-wing Alternative for Germany, or AfD, called for sanctions against Turkey, categorically rejected calls to admit children from Greece (calling them, borrowing a term used by Donald Trump and the Australian government, “anchor children”) and suspected a plot that would allow the German government to let in yet more people of the wrong colour and religion. They also showed their solidarity with Greece (the same country, by the way, whose people were accused not so long ago by AfD politicians of being lazy and undeserving of a bailout by fellow eurozone countries).

Perhaps surprisingly, however, many ordinary Germans remain open to the idea of resettling refugees from Turkey or Greece. In a reputable [survey](#) conducted three days after Erdoğan’s announcement, 57 per cent of respondents concurred with the following statement: “The refugees ought to be allowed to cross the border into Greece, and afterwards should be divided among the EU member states.” And 48 per cent thought that “Countries such as Germany and France should take in refugees, even if other EU member states are opposed to that.”

Last week in parliament, the Greens put forward a resolution calling for the admission of 5000 children and other vulnerable asylum seekers from Greece, an issue over which the governing coalition has been divided. Most Social Democrats want Germany to admit a sizeable number of asylum seekers from Greece. They agree that states and local councils prepared to take in extra people should be encouraged and enabled to do so. Speaking in his capacity as interior minister of Lower Saxony, prominent Social Democrat Boris Pistorius pleaded with the federal government to allow the states to go it alone and lead a coalition of the willing within the European Union.

The Christian Democrats and their Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, have been saying that there must be no repeat of 2015: of the mass influx and the ensuing debate that divided the country and damaged the party’s brand. But they too were divided. Of the two main contenders for the party leadership, one, the conservative Friedrich Merz, opposes Germany taking in any asylum seekers whatsoever from Greece, whereas the other, the North Rhine-Westfalian premier Armin Laschet, who is considered to be a loyal Merkel supporter, advocates a more generous approach. The issue has also created unusual alliances: at a recent meeting of the parliamentary party, it was Merkel’s *bête noire*, interior minister Horst Seehofer, who defended her record and objected when it was suggested that Germans did not want any more refugees. Merkel herself has remained largely silent on the issue.

In the end, with the exception of eight members of the governing coalition who either abstained or voted against the government, Social Democrats and Christian Democrats toed the government line: that a German initiative could only happen as part of an EU initiative. Last Sunday, though, the Koalitionsausschuss — a committee comprising the leaders of the three governing parties together with Merkel and her deputy, Social Democratic finance

minister Olaf Scholz — agreed that Germany would, after all, go ahead and accommodate between 1000 and 1500 children from Greece on the basis that a handful of other EU governments signed up to a joint initiative. By then, that condition had already been met, with France, Finland, Portugal, Luxembourg and Croatia indicating they were willing to help out.

Given the size of the problem, though, the capacity of countries such as Germany and the willingness of municipalities to help, the evacuation of perhaps no more than 2500 children and other particularly vulnerable asylum seekers from Greece would be largely symbolic. Besides, it remains to be seen whether the promises will be kept. It wouldn't be the first pledge by EU member states to resettle refugees and asylum seekers, or fund programs to assist them, to be left unfulfilled.

“We will hold the line and our unity will prevail,” Ursula von der Leyen said last week in Greece. “Now is the time for concerted action and cool heads and acting based on our values.” Given the uncompromising attitudes of Hungary and other Eastern European EU member states, a joint European approach that respects the rights of asylum seekers and other irregularised migrants — an approach that is indeed guided by their rights — is unrealistic. “Our unity” therefore means unanimous support for the response summed up by von der Leyen in Greece: a show of solidarity with Greece, a commitment to sealing the European Union's external borders for asylum seekers, and — publicly at least — a shying away from criticising the Greek government's flagrant violations of EU human rights and refugee law.

This is not an approach that would uphold the values considered intrinsic to the European project, enshrined in Article 2 of the [2007 Treaty of Lisbon](#):

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

In 2015, at the height of the last large-scale influx of asylum seekers, von der Leyen was one of the staunchest defenders of Angela Merkel's decision not to close the German border. She strongly supported the sentiments encapsulated in Merkel's famous statement, “*Wir schaffen das*” (we are able to do this). Perhaps she adopted the persona of Europe's commander-in-chief last week because she sensed that this was the only way she could speak for *all* EU member states. If so, then von der Leyen made the mistake of identifying the smallest common denominator and thus mirroring the views of the likes of Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who are obsessed with “illegal immigration.” The current leadership of von der Leyen's party, Germany's Christian Democrats, may also have made the mistake of assuming that a simple majority would not be sufficient when it comes to deciding to take in additional asylum seekers and refugees, and that nothing short of unanimity would be required for such a momentous decision.

Von der Leyen made another mistake by focusing exclusively on the member states' national governments. More so than most, she should know that an alternative approach is available, one in which European cities and regions are empowered to respond to situations such as those unfolding on Lesbos, thereby upholding the values spelled out in Article 2 of the Lisbon treaty. That's to do with her family history. Her father, Ernst Albrecht, was also a prominent Christian Democrat. Six years after his return from Brussels, where he had headed the Directorate-General for Competition, Albrecht became the premier of Lower Saxony. Today he is perhaps best remembered for his unfortunate commitment to building a nuclear waste facility in his state.

But Albrecht should also be remembered for his decision, on 24 November 1978, to invite 1000 Indochinese "boat people" to settle in Lower Saxony. This was well above the number allocated to Lower Saxony by the federal government. In fact, in the previous three-and-a-half years, since the end of the Vietnam war, West Germany as a whole had taken in a total of only 1300 Vietnamese refugees. Albrecht and his state government subsequently decided to accommodate further contingents of "boat people." He also prompted fellow state premiers to follow his example, was a supporter of the charity operating the *Cap Anamur*, which carried out search-and-rescue missions in the South China Sea, and lobbied conservative politicians in Europe in support of a European rescue mission for "boat people."

If the German government is concerned about the backlash against the arrival of a sizeable number of asylum seekers in, say, Saxony, it could take up the offers of the eight German states and 140 cities and towns that so far have pledged to go it alone if a national consensus couldn't be reached. They include, for example, the state government of Berlin, which has said that it has the capacity to take in 2000 people from Greece, including 150 unaccompanied minors, immediately.

German cities are not the only ones offering a safe harbour for asylum seekers and refugees. A network similar to Städte Sicherer Häfen, the [Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants](#) (National Association of Welcoming Cities and Territories), exists in France. At the European level, sixty municipalities are part of the European Network of Solidarity Cities. It includes, among others, Amsterdam and Milan, Barcelona and Gdansk, Strasbourg and Munich. Incidentally, it also includes Athens and Thessaloniki, the two largest cities in Greece.

Ursula von der Leyen's performance in Greece last week and the subsequent arguments over the evacuation of children from the Aegean islands suggest that Europe is in a bad way. "Respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights" don't seem to count for much. But things are not entirely dire: an alternative Europe — as evident in Athens and Amsterdam, Barcelona and Berlin — is slowly emerging. But that's no comfort for those stuck in Moria, wedged between Greek and Turkish border guards at the river Evros, or forgotten in all the other camps at or beyond Europe's borders that never make it onto the evening news. •



**KLAUS NEUMANN**

Klaus Neumann works for the Hamburg Foundation for the Advancement of Research and Culture. He is an honorary professor at Deakin University and a visiting researcher at the Hannah Arendt Institute in Dresden.