

Alliance against austerity and for Democracy in Europe

15:00-17:00. **Refugees, War and Peace:** New Challenges for Europe

Ladies and gentleman, friends and comrades,

I confess that I wanted to speak in detail about such crucial subjects such as the terrible policies of drastic cuts, the migration crisis that highlights an apparent contradiction between the principles of solidarity and security, the war which fuels this crisis and the half-hearted attempts to stop this war as well as the EU short-sighted attempt to solve the crisis by a shoddy deal with Turkey and the V4 Plan B, which is – understandably – perceived by many Greeks as anti-Greek and anti-Schengen. For lack of time, I have to restrict myself to certain short statements.

1. In Germany in the 1990s, after a decade of wage restraint, lowering unit labour costs but also lowering living standards, there was not enough demand in the country for Germany's own goods. Hence demand had to be found externally. Excess cash in German banks was lent abroad, to foreign banks—mainly to those in Greece. Greek banks took the German loans and lent to Greek business to buy German goods, thus increasing German exports and raising the level of Greek private debt massively. Indeed, as is well known, German banks own a large share of Greek debt (€1bn). Current Greek debt is not repayable. Policies of drastic cuts imposed on Greece primarily by German banks and, especially, by Finance Minister Schauble, represent a problem, not a solution.
2. The civil war in Syria, including the proxy war taking place there between the superpowers, but also the consequences of the war in Afghanistan, the destruction of Libya, the climate change and poverty in Africa and so on, all led to the greatest refugee crisis since WW2. Over a million immigrants in Germany, hundreds of thousands in small Sweden as well as in Brexit-facing England, many thousands in patience-losing Austria, almost no immigrants in recalcitrant V4 and day-by-day increasing numbers of immigrants trapped in Greece facing the closed border of Macedonia (Skopje as Greeks call it) which is followed by closed borders of Serbia, Slovenia and Hungary. Greece, understandably, appealed to the

EU for help. Most EU governments argued that Greece has not been able to protect its Schengen border and that its promised hotspots on the islands are not yet working efficiently. Sympathy for the Greek position is expressed primarily by Italy, which fears that if Greece will be isolated or even expelled from Schengen, then Italy may soon follow, and, also ironically, by Chancellor Merkel, whose pro-immigrant policies would collapse without the help of Greece.

3. Merkel pushed for the deal with Turkey based on a simple principle of giving Turkey billions of Euro in exchange of a promise to stem the flow of refugees from Turkey to Greece. Furthermore, and more importantly, Turkey demands visa free travel to Europe and easing of the EU accession procedures so that over 80 million citizens of the increasingly authoritarian and repressive Turkey could join the EU. As the former President of the UN General Assembly I admit to be proud that the UN has declared the proposed deal as illegal because compulsory mass deportations are forbidden by the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. European Left should consider not only the rejection of this quite unbalanced deal but also the need to condemn Turkey for its continuous help provided to the IS (Daesh), its repression of leftist activists, trade unionists and Kurdish activists and its bombardment of Syrian Kurds.
4. Many politicians from the four Visegrad countries (V4) oppose this deal but for different reasons. They are convinced that the best way of blocking the access of the immigrants to Europe is to hermetically close the Balkan route. This so-called Plan B stems from their conviction that Greece will not be able to prevent the immigrants from risking their lives to cross the sea and then proceed to the heart of Europe via Greece, Macedonia and other Balkan countries. In effect the Plan B would isolate Greece and move the real Schengen border northwards. It would support the walls and barbed wire on their national borders and keep immigrants out of Europe, or at least out of Central Europe. It would also significantly curtail the decision-making powers of the EU and, especially Chancellor Merkel. This approach is supported not only by the new populist, nationalistic and xenophobic parties but also by over 70% of the population, which is afraid of the unknown. You have to understand that we have no historic experience of any immigrants from outside Europe, from different cultures, different religions and different traditions and thus

we are vulnerable to media hysteria that supports fear, isolationism, extreme nationalism and xenophobia. Same as in the 1920s and 30s, anti-Semites prevailed in regions without any Jews, today anti-Muslims prevail in countries where there are no (or almost no) Muslim communities. Let me underline that the fear of the unknown can be a very terrifying fear indeed.

5. I have to skip any further description of the current realities and attempt to outline some proposals for a possible solutions:
 - a. It is necessary to keep Schengen within its current borders but they need to be more effectively defended. This defence has to be well financed and secured and has to include effective coastal guards. Hotspots have to be fully supported both by the Greek government and by the EU so that they could process all applications and be able to differentiate among immigrants. European experts on the Middle East and Africa should be present. No need to rely on Turkey.
 - b. Greece has to be offered both financial and material help to enable it to cope with the multitude of refugees on its territory. This help should include a major cut of its existing debt. Merkel, though not Schauble, may understand this.
 - c. A potential deal with Turkey should include financial help to Turkey to be used to improve conditions in the refugee camps, to enable refugees to find employment and Turkish authorities to fight the organised network of smugglers that could stem the flow of immigrants risking their lives on the seas. However, EU accession criteria cannot be eased for Turkey, including need to respect human rights, minority rights or freedom of press and speech. No visa free travel, let alone early accession to the EU.
 - d. European rich countries should also channel their finances to refugee camps in Libanon, Jordan and elsewhere in the region. In much better cooperation with the UN much more effective help has to be offered to Africa to fight extreme poverty and consequences of climate change.
 - e. EU, USA and Russia should continue to seek political solution to the war in Syria. Geneva talks have to be attended by the Syrian

government together with representatives of rebel groups not associated with IS, An-Nusra and similar terrorist groups. Turkish refusal to allow the participation of Syrian Kurds (YPG) should be overcome. Following a political compromise that would result in a transitional government, state wide elections supervised by the UN, must be held within 18 to 24 months. The results would have to be fully respected, (even if Asad is re-elected), unlike earlier experience in Algeria or Gaza.

- f. Finally, war against IS has to be intensified. Efforts should be made to end the war in Yemen and chaos in Libya. Lastly, I would like the EU to consider financing an enlightenment campaign aimed at challenging extreme nationalism, xenophobia and racism and explaining the principles of solidarity, democracy, tolerance and multiculturalism, especially in former Communist countries and regions. This campaign, which has to include an explicit support for Greece, has to be adopted by all parties, movements and groups that identify themselves with the European Left.