

10.06.2021

What kind of opportunities and risks would a continued EU-Turkey migration cooperation pose for the EU, Turkey and the refugees?

The existing framework regulating EU-Turkey migration cooperation ends this year. The European Council Conclusions announced on March 25 acknowledged the importance of the EU's financial support to the Syrian refugees in Turkey (also in Jordan and Lebanon) and acknowledge that the EU's cooperation with Turkey on migration management "should be strengthened, notably in areas such as border protection, combatting illegal migration, as well as the return of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers to Turkey, in accordance with the EU-Turkey Statement, applied in a non-discriminatory manner." Experts from CATS Network and other institutions responded to our question.

Aslı Selin Okay, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome

Merely renewing EU-Turkey migration cooperation without a substantial rethink would be a major risk in itself. This could mean remaining 'stuck' in a short-termist mindset oriented towards quick fixes and temporary responses, to a challenge that calls for durable solutions. A related risk derives from continuing to base policy responses on flawed assumptions. We have seen one such example in the 'hotspot' model, which was built on a set of assumptions: swift asylum procedures in Greece, a smooth intra-EU relocation process and effectively enforced returns, aided by the resettlement mechanism incentivising Turkey. Rather than underpinning a mechanism that would go like clockwork, the model has contributed to creating substandard reception conditions that have acquired semi-permanence, and restrictive measures to gain further traction at the fringes of the EU. That the Syrian refugees were to stay in Turkey only temporarily was another problematic assumption underlying persisting difficulties in moving towards development-oriented approaches. The risk posed by renewing without rethinking is a potential 'ossification' of these problems. For refugees, this would mean a constant state of limbo and precarity. The opportunity – and the challenge – lies in the possibility of gearing the steer towards a direction that delivers durable refugee solutions and strengthens the basis for more sustainable and equitable migration cooperation not only between the EU and Turkey, but also within the EU.

**Steffen Angenendt, Nadine Biehler, Anne Koch, Amrei Meier,
Nadine Knapp - German Institute for International and Security
Affairs (SWP), Berlin**

A continued EU-Turkey migration cooperation is likely to entail the same problematic trade-offs as during the past five years: while reducing arrival numbers, the EU's outsourcing of migration control has exacerbated the Union's dependency on Turkey. The Turkish government, on the other hand, values the arrangement as a welcome source of funding for the enormous task of hosting 3.7 million Syrian refugees, while simultaneously complaining that parts of the agreement are not being abided by. For the directly affected refugees on Turkish territory, EU-Turkey cooperation has improved their material situation, but without improving their protection status and access to rights, leaving them in a volatile position.

In sum, EU-Turkey migration cooperation over the past five years has been an exercise in realpolitik par excellence, with the short-term benefits outweighing the costs for both the EU and Turkey while at the same time entailing severe costs for refugees and significant long-term risks for the EU. Already, the deplorable conditions of the refugees stuck on the Greek island and reports on illegal push-backs at the Greek border threaten its legitimacy. Any follow-up agreement is likely to continue on this path and should as such be viewed with caution. At the very least, the EU should make this kind of cooperation conditional on strong safeguards against deportations to Syria, enhancement with regard to the type of protection status granted as well as improvements regarding the overall human rights situation in Turkey.

**Angeliki Dimitriadi, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign
Policy (ELIAMEP), Athens**

The EU-Turkey statement was a transactional, EU-focused deal prioritising returns and border management that did not yield the expected results. Turkey has expressed dissatisfaction with the EU for failing to deliver on visa liberalisation, a customs union upgrade and accelerated negotiations over accession to the EU. The EU also has reasons to be dissatisfied. Turkey instrumentalised refugees (e.g., events on the Evros land border with Greece in February of 2020), has not cooperated consistently with Greece on returns since the attempted coup of 2016, and is currently involved in at least two military operations (Idlib and Libya) where refugee populations are originating. Yet, there is little doubt that some form of cooperation is required between the EU and Turkey as regards migration.

Two risks lie ahead. The first is to repeat the framework of 2016 and offer incentives (e.g., visa liberalisation) that take time to deliver and are unlikely to materialise in the immediate future. The second is to once again prioritise returns, instead of creating a more equal responsibility-sharing arrangement that would

benefit migrants and refugees. A renewed deal offers instead a rare opportunity to narrow the scope, move away from the high-level political dialogue and focus on migration-based incentives (e.g., labour integration for Syrians, family reunification open to all nationalities, resettlement programmes) conditional on normative and legal standards, as well as realistic expectations on what either side can in fact deliver.

Omar Kadköy, The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), Ankara

Looking at EU-Turkey relations, at least since the Statement of 2016, one could say that cooperation on migration has been the single forward-moving vehicle. This cooperation, however, is controversial in that it is associated with mutual benefits tagged with a moral bill to pay.

On the practical side, the bloc has a far less chaotic Aegean border since March 2016; Turkey benefits from financial and logistical support to improve its institutional capacity; and asylum seekers and refugees enjoy greater socio-economic resilience due to training (e.g., language, vocational) and monthly financial support.

Ethically, however, operationalising a similar framework means the bloc securitises and externalises a universal human right, the right to seek asylum. In the meanwhile, Turkey relies on unsustainable financial support while instrumentalising the existing framework and the hosted vulnerable groups for regional and domestic political manoeuvres and gains. Finally, asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey are deprived of safe and legal migration passage to Europe, and are living under nondurable, EU-dependent and insufficient financial aid – 150 Turkish Liras per eligible person a month.

Going further, the EU should offer adequate resettlement and commit to safeguarding the right to seek asylum through safe and legal entry to the EU and extend sufficient development funds to Turkey after the latter puts into effect a roadmap focusing on the long-term integration of the hosted asylum seekers and refugees.

Ilke Toygür, Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid

Today, the Turkey-EU Statement on refugees is an integral part of Turkey-EU relations. Back in 2016, this deal opened the way for a more transactional relationship, while mixing and blurring various processes Turkey's accession negotiation, the Visa Liberalisation Roadmap and irregular migration management. This was not necessarily a wise decision. It is only fair to say that Turkey has done a tremendous job as the host of the largest refugee population in the world. This sacrifice, however, gave a useful bargaining chip to the Turkish government while

limiting the already very weak leverage the EU could apply to Turkey. Despite its downsides, this cooperation is assumed by the European Union to be beneficial. It appears from the March 2021 European Council conclusions that the Union is willing to provide further funding, not only to Turkey but also to Jordan and Lebanon. While doing so, a three-fold approach should accompany the money:

I) A far-reaching revision of the EU's relationship with Turkey is needed if tensions are to be avoided in future. The current state of affairs makes any deal on irregular migration very vulnerable. II) A more comprehensive policy on migration, based on a fair burden sharing among the EU27, as well as with the EU's partners, should be put on the table. III) A concrete strategy on the stabilisation of the situation in Syria should also accompany the first two. All in all, both Turkey and the European Union should look for stable, mutually beneficial ways of collaboration that also take into consideration the well-being of refugees.

Nienke van Heukelingen, Clingendael – The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, the Hague

The question is not so much what the risks and opportunities are – which implies that the EU and Turkey have a choice – but how they can best cooperate in the reception of the 3.7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Helping those seeking refuge is a legal and moral responsibility to which both parties have committed themselves by means of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. Plus: the EU wants to avoid a 2015-like situation at all costs.

The implementation of the migration deal has received much criticism. Nevertheless, in general, the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT) can be considered a success. In 2016, the European Union allocated 6 billion euros to support refugees and host communities in the country, keeping half of them out of extreme poverty and allowing refugee children in Turkey to go to school, and build a better future. A future that, at least for the next few years, probably lies in Turkey, and requires more funding.

The first tranche of funding will end mid-2021, providing welcome momentum for both Turkey and the EU to outline a new and fairer financial framework. Since the EU has already promised a continuation of financial assistance, one thing should be kept top of mind while working on new arrangements together: the integration of refugees in Turkey. Only by becoming full members of Turkish society can refugees make a positive contribution to the economy, stand on their own feet, and in the end reduce the likelihood that they would move to the EU.

Senem Aydın Düzgit, Sabanci University & Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), Istanbul

The continuation of EU-Turkey migration cooperation is necessary for both sides due to two reasons. First, the so-called EU-Turkey deal in its initial formulation has managed to reduce the numbers of transit migration through Turkey into the EU, hence the political necessity of continued cooperation for the EU. Secondly, Turkey now hosts over 4 million Syrian refugees, entailing major economic and societal challenges which it cannot possibly govern on its own. Nonetheless, the experience of the initial EU-Turkey agreement suggests that continued cooperation also bears risks for the overall long-term EU-Turkey relationship. One major risk relates to the consolidation of the transactional nature of the existing EU-Turkey relationship. Without being complemented by cooperation in other policy fields anchored in normative principles, continued cooperation in migration bears a high risk of being taken hostage by larger geopolitical issues. The overwhelming focus on the EU-Turkey migration deal intoxicates the overall EU-Turkey relationship, with the deal itself being subject to political bargaining and joint accusations breeding substantive mistrust on both sides. Another major risk relates to the actual content of sustained cooperation in migration. In the case that cooperation tilts towards migration/border management at the expense of rights-based integration and social cohesion for those refugees who reside in Turkey, this would further erode the credibility of the EU as a trustworthy partner as well as intensify the pressure on the refugees in Turkey to migrate to Europe.

Sinem Adar, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

Since being put into practice in March 2016, the EU-Turkey Statement has been subject to harsh criticism. The EU's externalisation of migration governance, and consequently Ankara's politicisation of refugees as a bargaining chip, have been rightfully at the core of this critique. Despite this to-the-point criticism, it is however realistic to assume that the EU-Turkey cooperation over migration governance will continue because the member states remain divided over a common asylum policy. In addition, the EU's organisational and financial support to Turkey has been beneficial for the coordination and implementation of policies towards Syrian refugees over the last couple of years.

Still, any future cooperation over migration needs to pay attention to a couple of issues to avoid instrumentalisation of refugees, further deterioration of trust between the EU and Turkey, and violation of international norms. First and foremost, any future cooperation should be narrowly framed and should not be mixed with other aspects of the EU-Turkey relations. Secondly, the future cooperation should ensure that the right to asylum and commitment to non-refoulement be protected. Thirdly, member states should take the necessary

actions to help Greece to empty the refugee camps on the islands and to speed up the processing of asylum applications. Fourthly, the EU should continue its financial support to Turkey towards improving the social and economic participation of refugees – Syrian and non-Syrian alike. Finally, the humanitarian situation in Idlib should not be overlooked.

The contributions to CATS Network Perspectives (CNP) reflect the views of the authors.