

# The EU-Turkey Relations under the Shadow of the Contested Politics of Migration

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## Abstract

Migration has turned into a pressing matter (re-)shaping the dynamics of the EU-Turkey relations for the past couple of decades. The sudden increase in the numbers of migrant and refugee arriving to the EU during the summer of 2015, or as referred to by some scholars, the 2015 Mediterranean migrant and refugee crisis, certainly had important repercussions for the EU-Turkey relations and it eventually led to the conclusion of the so-called EU-Turkey Statement in 2016. While the Statement triggered a number of different responses, some observers suspected that the presence of an increasingly politicised environment in Turkey around migration related questions would act as a potential limitation over the prospects for the sustainability and smooth implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement that would comply with the EU priorities.

This study analyses how and why Turkey as a country in Europe's periphery has been contesting the EU's key migration policy priorities. The paper methodologically adopts a qualitative approach drawing on the examination and analysis of selected primary and secondary written materials. It argues that migration has been instrumentalised in the EU-Turkey relations and Turkish authorities seek to challenge the hierarchical power asymmetry, which has long characterised the EU-Turkey relations, by referring to migration issues while negotiating with the EU.

**Keywords:** Migration, Foreign Policy, Refugees, European Union, Turkey

# Çekişmeli Göç Siyasetinin Gölgesinde AB-Türkiye İlişkileri

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## Özet

Göç, AB-Türkiye ilişkilerini son birkaç on yıldır (yeniden) şekillendiren en önemli meselelerden biri haline gelmiştir. 2015 yazında göçmen ve sığınmacı sayılarındaki beklenmedik artışın, veya bazı uzmanların tabir ettiği şekliyle 2015 Akdeniz göçmen ve sığınmacı krizinin, AB-Türkiye ilişkileri üzerinde önemli yansımaları olmuştur ve nihayetinde 2016 yılındaki AB-Türkiye Mutabakatı'nın kabulüne yol açmıştır. Mutabakat, çok farklı tepkileri tetikleyerek bazı gözlemcilerin, Türkiye'de göç meselelerinin artan şekilde politize edilmesinin AB-Türkiye antlaşmasının AB'nin önceliklerine hizmet edecek şekilde sürdürülebilir ve sorunsuz uygulanmasının önünde potansiyel bir kısıt oluşturacağını vurgulamışlardır.

Bu çalışma, AB'nin dış sınırlarında yer alan bir ülke olarak Türkiye'nin nasıl ve ne şekilde AB'nin göç politikası önceliklerine itiraz ettiğini analiz etmektedir. Makale, yöntemsel olarak kalitatif nitelikte olup seçilmiş birincil ve ikincil yazılı kaynakların incelemesine ve analizine dayanmaktadır. Makalenin temel argümanı, göç olgusunun AB-Türkiye ilişkilerinde araçsallaştırıldığı ve Türk otoritelerinin, AB-Türkiye ilişkilerini geleneksel olarak karakterize eden güç hiyerarşisi asimetrisini değiştirme çabası içinde göç konusuna AB ile yaptıkları görüşmelerde değindikleri şeklindedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göç, Dış Politika, Mülteciler, Avrupa Birliği, Türkiye

## INTRODUCTION

The Syrian civil war that started in 2011 triggered refugee flows both in the direction of those countries located in the imminent neighbourhood of Syria and the EU. Attempts to arrive the EU territory via the Aegean reached to its peak during the summer of 2015, by also putting Turkey under spotlights once again as a key country due to its geographical proximity to the EU and the mixed migratory flows that had been crossing through its territory in the direction of Europe (İçduygu, 2015). Both the EU and Turkey experienced the challenge of unprecedented arrival of displaced people on their borders and migration regimes (Müftüler-Baç 2022: 291). Turkey, adopting a political discourse which emphasised “Turkey’s historical responsibility towards the territories of the wider Ottoman heritage” (Maritato, 2021: 90), followed an open-door policy towards Syrians, at least initially<sup>1</sup>, turning it into a key country hosting Syrians in the world by providing *Temporary Protection to around 3.5 million Syrians* (Migration Management Presidency, 2022).

In the face of unexpected surge of arrivals, both the EU and Turkey were motivated to adopt new legal and political instruments in order to have an improved control and management of irregular migration. While Turkey’s introduction of the Temporary Protection Regulation in 2014 was a significant legal response to increasing pressure of arrivals from Syria, the so-called EU migrant and refugee crisis also had important repercussions for the EU-Turkey relations where on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2016 political leaders of both sides agreed to return irregular migrants to Turkey, who arrived to Greek islands via the Aegean Sea by transiting through Turkish territories (European Council, 2016). The EU-Turkey Statement, which sought to put an end to irregular migration (European Council, 2016), was one of the landmark examples of the EU’s efforts to externalize its border controls to Turkey (Üstübcü, 2019) and it clearly indicated the evolution of the EU-Turkey relations in a transactional direction marked by functional cooperation as opposed to “accession-oriented – relationship resting on mutual interdependence and Turkey’s integration in the relevant policy areas of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*” (Saatçioğlu, 2020: 170).

Even though the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs referred to the 2016 Statement as a “game changer agreement” and “the most stunning example of burden and responsibility sharing that Turkey has been advocating since the eruption of the Syrian crisis in 2011” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, 2016), on 24 November 2016, the European Parliament voted to suspend accession talks with Turkey, to which Turkish President Erdoğan responded on 25 November 2016 by stating that Turkey would open its borders, if the EU took any steps to officially suspend accession negotiations with Turkey (BBC, 2016). President Erdoğan continued making similar threats even after the EU-Turkey Statement, which eventually took a more concrete form in February 2020, when he announced that Turkey opened its borders to Europe (The New York Times, 2020) and argued that millions of migrants and refugees would arrive at European borders (BBC, 2020). These events indicate that Turkey has been seeking to instrumentalise the EU’s asymmetric dependence on itself over migration issues, in particular regarding the control of irregular migration. It should also be noted that the EU also approached migration as an instrument in its foreign policy as well. To give an example, even though Turkey has been a candidate country, it was only offered the prospects for visa facilitation, instead of visa liberalization, until the conclusion of the EU-Turkey Statement of 18<sup>th</sup> March 2016. The Statement “put issues of border management, visa liberalization, EU-Turkey readmission agreement, terrorism, and the accession negotiations as a package that have all become explicitly linked and conditional to each other”, marking the shift from “membership conditionality” to “policy conditionality” (Yıldız, 2016: 122).

Furthermore, the EU has also been approaching migration as an instrument for its economic development. While the European Community signed migrant labour recruitment agreements, in the 2000s, the focus shifted more towards attracting skilled and high skilled workers to the EU job market. For instance, in 2007, the European Commission acknowledged the EU economies’ growing need for highly skilled workers, which cannot be met solely by the EU labour force (European Commission, 2007). In order to recruit high skilled immigrants and the establish common rules, the Blue Card Directive was launched in 2007 (European Commission, 2007). The intervention made in 2015 by the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel when she said “we can do this” and declared Germany would

<sup>1</sup> From mid-2012 onwards, Turkey’s open-door policy underwent a change, where, with the exception of urgent cases of humanitarian need, Syrians are required to present their passports at the border (AI, 2014: 10).

be open to refugees, this led to mixed reactions. While the far-right in Germany blamed Merkel for making a catastrophic mistake by outing both Germany's and the EU's security at risk (Trilling, 2021), this is actually a clear example of how the EU and its Member States seek to instrumentalize migration as an economic force for themselves since Germany, a country with aging population, has been benefitting from the labour of refugees (Dowling, 2019).

This paper investigates how migration has been shaping the EU-Turkey dialogue. In particular, it analyses the implications of the management of the humanitarian crisis on the EU-Turkey diplomatic relations by focusing on the post-2015 period. The paper proceeds as follows. It, first, reviews the literature on the connections between migration and foreign policy. Later, it outlines how migration, and specifically, irregular migration, has risen up in the EU's political agenda. Afterwards, the paper discusses how the EU's predominant framing of migration as a matter of border security has been galvanising its efforts to externalize its border controls that involves increased cooperation with the key source and transit countries, such as Turkey. In the fourth section, the paper examines the changing dynamics of the EU-Turkey relations under the impact of migration. Then, the paper analyses the developments of 2015 and their aftermath. It concludes with some projections on how migration might continue to put its mark on the EU-Turkey relations.

### **The linkages between migration and foreign policy**

Studies that focus on the linkages between migration and foreign policy, highlight that migration receiving countries have been designing their migration management policies with a particular concern over their homeland security (Greenhill, 2010; Teitelbaum, 1984; Mitchell, 1989).

Following the end of the Cold War, refugee regimes and approaches to international protection have started to rank higher in the political agendas of many of the refugee receiving countries, including those members of the European Union. This development is due to the fact that both the scale and scope of migration have increased following the collapse of the bipolar international system (Graham and Poku 2000: 2). In many cases these increased population movements generated political volatility and posed certain challenges to the receiving countries by turning human migration into, as Breunig and Luedtke note (2008: 123), "perhaps the most pressing political *problematique* of the twenty-first century". Europe also became subject to the rising migratory inflows as well. The upsurge of international population movements created pressures, in relation to the protection of the external borders, welfare state, cultural and ethnic identity particularly in the Western part of the continent. The sources of threat got multiplied with the emergence of certain non-state actors, such as organised crime networks and terrorist organisations. During the Cold War era, the source of threat to a country would be posed directly by another country. It was relatively easy to identify the enemy. Nevertheless, in a multipolar system, state actors started to become worried about non-state source of threat and started approaching the matter of migration with increased suspicion, since it became increasingly difficult to identify the exact purpose of migratory arrivals. Even though the security dimension of immigration had already been recognised following the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 terrorist attacks provided further visibility to the security aspect involved in immigration. Increased emphasis on the potential security implications of immigration paved the way for a legislative framework which approaches migration as a phenomenon that poses risks (Karamanidou, 2015: 38).

Furthermore, immigration has gained further salience as a political issue also due to the way domestic political elites, which sections of popular media also join from time to time, portray immigration as a threat to citizens' security, socio-economic and cultural well-being to mobilise voters (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002; Bigo 2002; Karyotis 2011; Perlmutter 2002; Huysmans 1995, 2000; Messina 2007). Karyotis (2011: 20), for instance, argues that political elites in Europe "who often see themselves as defenders of national purity and societal security may feel that their role demands they deal with immigrants and asylum seekers as a threat to communal harmony and cultural homogeneity". Immigration's potential to influence "traditional patterns or language, culture, association, and religious and national identity and custom" (Waever 1993: 23) have moved political elites to approach immigration and also asylum-seekers as threats. Negative migration discourses adopted especially by the extreme-right wing, portrays arrivals of immigrants and asylum-seekers as an invasion threatening European citizens' safety, welfare and way of life (Cento-Bull 2010; Betz 1993, 2001; Zaslove 2004). Against this background, national migration legislation of the receiving countries became control-oriented, and the state security and sovereignty are approached as more vital than the security of those

who need support and protection. Such security-oriented discourses and policy preferences are clearly visible also when we take a look at to the EU's and its Member States' migration priorities. The EU has been engaging with cooperation with the key source and transit countries of migration, such as Turkey, Morocco, Lebanon and Nigeria. These co-operations particular seek to contain and control irregular migration, which is approached as unwanted migration by the EU.

It should be noted that the international refugee regime, which "is based on the norms" of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, also known as the Geneva Convention of 1951 (Kosłowski, 1998), is decisive for states' responses to migration movements. The Geneva Convention defines the term "refugee" by clearly stating the rights of the displaced and puts forward the legal obligations of states to protect refugees. It also includes the principle of nonrefoulement which states that refugees cannot be returned to a country where their lives or freedom would be under serious threat<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, "the international refugee regime only provides a modest framework for facilitating state management of refugees issues" (Kosłowski, 1998: 159) and foreign policy of individual states influences the direction and characteristic of migration. Naturally, the creation of more efficient border regimes, stricter asylum procedures, the reduction of irregular immigrants or repatriation of them and denying granting asylum status are part of foreign policy making. Foreign policy orientations, decisions and actions influence migration policies, and generate multidirectional forms (Teitelbaum, 1984; Castles et al., 2014).

The connections between migration movements and foreign policy mainly emerge on four dimensions (Teitelbaum, 1984: 433). First, foreign policies often served (sometimes unintentionally) to stimulate international migrations (Teitelbaum, 1984: 433). For instance, military or political interventions, or internal and/or external responses to intervention frequently cause mass migration. Apart from stimulating refugee flows, foreign policy may be employed to restrict existing refugee flows.

Second, mass migration can be instrumentalised by sending and receiving countries in order to destabilize or put pressure on foreign-policy adversaries (Teitelbaum, 1984: 438). For instance, there were claims that during the Cold War, the Eastern German authorities were facilitating the illegal entries of different migrant groups into West Berlin, who would claim asylum in West Germany, by knowing that the West German political and judicial systems were not capable to deal with such high numbers of asylum claims (Teitelbaum, 1984: 438). Receiving countries may accept refugees from adversarial neighbouring regime to be able to maintain a reservoir of opposition that often express itself by engaging with cross-border guerrilla activities.

Third, the presence of significant numbers of immigrants, refugees, and diaspora communities can also affect foreign policy since these migrant communities can influence the receiving country's policies towards the sending country, and also the sending country often seeks to instrumentalize its emigrant population in support of its own foreign policy priorities, such as joining regional organizations (Teitelbaum, 1984: 442).

Last but not the least, concerns related to national security and border controls may also define the shape of immigration/asylum policies. Therefore, various dimensions of foreign-policy of both sending and receiving country may lead to differential treatment for similar categories of migrants from different countries (e.g. EU countries treatment of Syrian refugees vs. how they responded to the Ukrainian forced migrants) and same migrant groups across time (e.g. the EC countries relatively liberal approach towards labour migrants during the 1960s and 1970s vs their security based approached to such labour migrants from 1990s onwards).

Against this background, the EU-Turkey relations emerge as a highly rich and relevant case to reflect on the role of migration in shaping and re-shaping dynamics between different political actors. When we examine the role played by migration in the EU-Turkey relations, we can clearly some empirical evidence backing up some of Teitelbaum's assertions. While some of this evidence emanates from the EU, such as the way security concerns have been shaping its immigration and asylum policies, which eventually got translated into how it approached Turkey as a key partner in its efforts to halt irregular migration, some of the empirical support comes also from Turkey's side. For instance, Turkish diaspora living in different EU Member States has grown to the extent that Turkish policy-makers have actively started to seek mobilizing these groups as part of their foreign and domestic policy goals.

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<sup>2</sup> The guardian of the 1951 Convention is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR Turkey, 2021).

The next section examines the EU's predominant approach towards migration and discusses how it has been seeking to control irregularity in the Mediterranean.

### **Migration, irregularity and the EU**

Migration as an issue has gradually come to figure so prominently on the EU policy agenda. In accordance with the growing socio-economic and political significance of migration as an issue, the EU has been introducing policies that either seek to halt migrants from reaching to their territorial borders or deter them from settling in their preferred destinations (Gibney, 2004). The EU member states approached international migration predominantly as a challenge to their "territorial, organizational and conceptual boundaries; to their ways of thinking about themselves and other" (Geddes 2006: 17).

Especially, attempts to arrive the EU irregularly via the Mediterranean have high visibility, triggering further public and political debates and discussions (Steinhilper and Gruijters, 2018). The dramatic images of migrants, including asylum-seekers crammed in overcrowded dingy boats, screaming and calling for help lead to stark divisions of opinion among members of the public and also political circles. While certain sectors of European societies see these events as the EU's border crisis and worry about the security implications of irregular migration, some others argue these scenes are the result of the EU's and its Member States' migration control policies, which prioritize border security at the expense of the protection of migrants' human rights, and also sometimes at the expense of these Member States' and the EU's responsibilities emanating from international legal framework (Den Heijer et al., 2016; Mainwaring, 2016; Steinhilper and Gruijters, 2018).

The EU policies to control irregular migration in the Mediterranean has turned the Sea into a highly militarized space. Military means are deployed "to control, stop or deter migration flows" (Pacciardi, 2020: para.1), and in particular to disrupt the smugglers' business model. Militarization along the Mediterranean is evident both in terms of deployment and expansion of semi-military forces in the southern EU Member States, such as the mobilization of *Guardia di Finanza* in Italy to target irregular migration and human smuggling (Lutterbeck, 2006: 65), and also at the EU level, as was seen in the EUNAVFOR Med operation Sophia (2015-2020) (Pacciardi, 2020) and Frontex<sup>3</sup> mission called Operation TRITON (2012-2017) (Frontex, 2014). Given that military would be normally deployed during emergency conditions to defeat a state against its enemies, militarization of the Mediterranean to curb irregular migration emerges as a political choice of the EU and its Member States where "migrants attempting at crossing the sea become enemies of the state, and any action against them becomes legitimate" (Pacciardi, 2020: para.1; Lutterbeck, 2006). Yet, irregular migration and human smuggling are actually not the causes of the problem but instead symptoms of the malfunctioning EU border control regime. While there are constant efforts to dismantle "criminal networks involved in organised migrant smuggling" and fight against "the business model of" smugglers" (Mogherini, 2017: para. 3), the EU appears to overlook the fact that its strict border control measures that tighten legal entry routes act as an important factor pushing those, who would like to reach Europe, to rely on human smugglers despite the risks involved (Achilli and Sanchez, 2017).

Social construction of migration as a source of risk and threat in Europe has been conditioning both national and supranational responses to migrant arrivals to the continent in general, and irregular arrivals in particular. The EU has been approaching migration issues through an increasing emphasis on border security where the primary goal is to tackle irregular migration. As Virginie Guiraudon (2000) highlights, the EU's priorities on migration and asylum, which were driven by security considerations, were set in the late 1990s and early 2000s by leading to path dependencies, meaning these policy choices proved to be highly resistant to change.

Since the end of the Cold War, worries about large-scale migration flows to the EU has become a normal component of the EU migration governance. The Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) pillar of the Maastricht Treaty took its form under the influence of those concerns related to a potential large-scale migration originating from the former Soviet bloc (Boswell, 2003b; Geddes, 2007). Similarly, the Dublin system, which defines the state responsible for determining an asylum application, was influenced by refugee flows from former Yugoslavia (Geddes, 2007).

It should be recognised that unlike settler societies, such as the United States and Australia, European countries had a certain tendency to approach international migration "rather nervously as challenging

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<sup>3</sup> Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, is the EU's border control agency (Frontex, 2022).

their territorial, organisational and conceptual boundaries” (Geddes, 2006: 4), and also as a challenge against their ways of life and culture. With “the significant increase and widening of both the scale and the national origins of migrants, since the mid-1980s, European states’ sense of insecurity regarding the arrivals’ potential implications for their stability and welfare systems grew” (Çetin, 2018: 74-75), particularly in Western Europe.

In line with the growing significance of international migration in the EU Member States domestic policy contexts, there were increased efforts to exert control over this phenomenon at the EU-level. Given that the Mediterranean had already been a space from which a significant share of third country migration in the direction of the EU had been occurring, controlling migration emanating from the region was targeted by the EU and its Member States as a priority, resulting in the development of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as the two key policy initiatives in the 1990s.

While potential security implications of migration had already been acknowledged by the EU Member States following the end of the so-called Cold War period (Faist, 2004), more explicit discursive links started to be established between security and the need to externalize border controls in the EU documents issued in the post-2011 era, which marks the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions (Heinitz, 2013).

The EU’s and its Member States’ growing interest in establishing co-operations with the key source and transit countries of migration, with a specific reference to the Mediterranean has been one of the key policy responses. As İçduygu and Demiryontar (2019: 5-6) also note, the EU adopted a strategy of border externalization in order to “shift its border control responsibilities to neighbouring countries, by obliging them to readmit migrants with irregular statuses, control borders to block their departure, and provide reception for asylum seekers, all in the peripheries outside of EU borders”.

The 2015 migrant crisis and its aftermath revealed once again that establishing close cooperation with the key source and transit countries had major value for the EU and the Member States, especially for the so-called front-line countries of migration, such as Italy and Greece, in order to better control and reduce the number of irregular arrivals.

### **Externalization of immigration policy as a key EU policy instrument to control unwanted migration**

Externalization of immigration policy, which is also referred to “extra-territorialization of immigration policy” (Aubarell et al., 2009: 5), signifies the EU’s efforts to export its migration and asylum policies to surrounding states and regions (Paoletti, 2011). In other words, the EU has been carrying out political deals with third countries with the aim of off-loading some responsibility for the migratory pressure on Europe’s borders (Boswell, 2003a).

Externalization involves political dealings with third countries with the aim of off-loading some responsibility for the migratory pressure on Europe’s borders (Boswell, 2003a). This has quite often had an external security dimension, making it more than a regulatory issue to be handled by ministries of the interior and the Commission in the context of the Justice and Home Affairs pillar (from 1999 Freedom, Security and Justice), as was largely the case until the Seville European Council (2002). That was the first occasion on which there was talk of managing immigration “with the use of all appropriate instruments in the context of the European Union’s external relations” (European Council, 2002).

Both the Arab Spring and Syrian crisis revealed over and over again the EU lacked the political will to develop a rapid response capacity towards such surges in migrant and asylum-seeker arrivals, as revealed by the increased securitization of migration matters instead of “providing protection and facilitating displaced people’s access to asylum” (Yıldız, 2016: 13). The EU has come to a clear recognition that it needs to collaborate with third states in order to restrict numbers of unwanted migrants arriving irregularly at its borders. In line with that goal, it has been striking deals with the key countries of origin and transit located in various different regions, such as the southern Mediterranean, sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel, and the Middle East. France, Greece, Italy and Spain have been playing a pioneering role in developing the initiatives for the conclusion of readmission agreements by using both carrots and sticks to exert considerable pressure on their non-European partners. Even though, the EU’s neighbourhood partners could not have been able to reject agreements on returns, they did not always cooperate fully with the EU due to the difficulties involved in locating returnees.

In addition to readmission agreements, the externalization of the EU's and the Member States' immigration control policies rely heavily on increased coastguard patrols, surveillance and the use of border control technologies in cooperation with the partnering countries. Databases, such as the European Visa Information System (VIS), are used to collect and share information in order to prevent the entry of "undesirable" migrants (FRA, 2014). New border security measures are transforming static physical frontiers and redefining the meaning to the borders of Europe. Nonetheless, such technologized and militarized means of external border controls used by the EU have debatable implications concerning human rights as the criteria used to categorize and differentiate between risky and trusted travellers are not clear which drive the risk of exacerbating prejudices based on "mere suspicion alone" (Vaughan-Williams, 2010: 1076) towards particular national, ethnic and religious groups.

In addition, there have also been considerable debates on unlawful or non-action of European actors, especially regarding the treatment of migrant-laden boats crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe. Even though the EU has an abundance of policy tools at its disposal. The unlawfulness of certain practices has been confirmed "by a judgement of the European Court of Human Rights (Hirsi Jamaa and others v. Italy) which condemned Italy's push-back operations to Libya" (Trauner, 2014: 38).

Moreover, the prioritisation and expansion of security can hinder both the arrival of forced migrants to the EU territory and their access to protection safely (McNamara, 2013; Paoletti, 2011). Practices of inception at sea in international waters also risks lives of migrants while also violating the non-refoulement principle (Paoletti, 2011). Resorting to national and public security in order to justify return and detention policies insulates the debate from the tensions that might arise from an open discussion of the compatibility of the EU security agenda with its normative commitment to respect the human rights of migrants. In that sense, the EU's control-oriented migration policy agenda appear to be at stark contrast with its rhetoric emphasising protection capacities and addressing root causes.

### **Changing dynamics of the EU-Turkey relations under the impact of migration**

Turkey has been an EU candidate country since 1999 and has been negotiating with the EU since 2005 for full membership. The country has land and sea borders with the EU and occupies a highly strategic position also in terms of migration cross-points. It has geographical proximity to conflict-prone areas in the world such as the Middle East, Caucasus, Balkans and North Africa, which are also areas where several key source and transit countries of migration are located. Due to its critical geographic position, as early as the 1990s, Turkey was recognized "as a crucial strategic partner" for managing migrant flows, including irregular ones (Dimitriadi, 2017).

The EU-Turkey dialogue in the field of migration was marked by both a power asymmetry and non-linearity. Within the frame of membership negotiations, the EU held a considerable amount of political power over Turkey to transform the country's "national policy discourses and the narratives" (Yıldız, 2016: 108). Even though the EU had some positive impact on improving Turkey's legislative and institutional framework for migration management and control, there have also been certain challenging issues emanating from the EU-Turkey cooperation in the field of migration policy, which are discussed in the next section. The bi-lateral dialogue has also been non-linear in the sense that until Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, it was marked by "occasional cooperation" (Dimitriadi et al, 2018: 10) due to the EU's limited interest towards the South-eastern migratory corridor<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, until 2011, migration related operational and political discussions happened within a bilateral framework, between Greek and Turkish authorities (Dimitriadi et al, 2018: 10). The emergence of the South-eastern migratory corridor brought about a series of changes both within the EU and in Turkey. In particular, the period covering 2014-2017 involved increased efforts among the EU and Turkey to cooperate in the face of rising numbers of mixed migratory arrivals (Adam, 2016). During this period, the media constantly circulated images of migrants, including asylum-seekers, seeking to reach the EU territory via Turkey which heightened the interest both in the EU and Turkey to cooperate with each other to alleviate migration pressures.

Even though, Turkey has been receiving different categories of migrants over the past couple of decades, the country did not have an all-encompassing migration and asylum policy for quite a while. With the start of the year 2000, Turkey entered into a new period in the field of migration under the impact of the

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<sup>4</sup> The South-eastern migratory corridor is a migratory route that "facilitates the passage of persons from the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and Sub-Sahara Africa to Southern Europe" (Dimitriadi et al, 2018: 10).

increasing importance of migration and asylum as well as the accession process with the EU, and felt the urge to increase its efforts “to institutionalize its migration management system” (Yıldız, 2016: 109). Even though the EU dimension officially started in Turkey with the Helsinki Summit of the European Council in December 1999, it was far from being a linear process and instead has been changing quite dynamically. The EU has been a key actor pushing Turkey to reform its immigration and asylum policy, which is actually quite comparable to how migration control policies started developing in some other Mediterranean countries, such as Italy. For instance, in order to meet the EU’s pre-accession requirements, Turkey has begun to “significantly harmonise its migration and asylum related legislation in areas identified in the EU accession partnership document” (İçduygu, 2015: 10). Turkey’s National Action Plan for the Adoption of EU *acquis* (NAP) in the Field of Asylum and Migration, which was adopted in March 2005, and its 2008 National Programme of Turkey for the Adoption of the EU *Acquis* are two crucially important policy instruments that were introduced during this period in order to harmonize Turkey’s national legislation with the EU *acquis*. While the NAP outlined the roadmap that Turkey had to follow in order to harmonize its migration and asylum policies with those of the EU, it did not specify when exactly Turkey would start implementing the *acquis* in this particular area (Yıldız, 2016: 110).

Furthermore, in addition to the pressures of experiencing diverse forms of migratory movements, Turkey’s EU membership bid has also significantly motivated Turkey to put some considerable effort in reorganising its immigration and asylum administration structure. The entry of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) (Law No. 6458) into force in 2014 was an important policy development that took place in Turkey under the influence of Turkey’s EU membership bid. Article 91 of LFIP has been of crucial importance regulating the conditions for the granting of Temporary Protection to Syrians who arrived to Turkey due to the outbreak of Syrian civil war. The promulgation of LFIP marked a significant break from the past practices since it enabled Turkey to finally have a legal protection framework that applied to both asylum seekers and refugees, which was accompanied by both physical and administrative infrastructure (Kirişçi, 2012: 63). It should be noted that Turkey’s EU membership negotiations have been turbulent and non-linear which has led to the erosion of enthusiasm in the country regarding its final membership status and the growth of Eurosceptical positions (Jorgensen, 2015: 121). The EU is viewed as pursuing double-standards and being unfair towards Turkey, which has been creating some challenges in the EU-Turkey relations also in the field of migration. For instance, even though the EU offered visa liberalization to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (European Commission, 2022), Turkey, until the conclusion of the EU-Turkey Statement, only provided a bleak prospect of visa facilitation (Yıldız, 2016: 121). Yet, the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement included a clause on “the acceleration of a visa liberalisation process with a view of lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens by the end of June 2016” (Soykan and Övünç-Öztürk, 2019: 2) which clearly marked the replacement of “membership conditionality” by “policy conditionality” and “migration pragmatically” (Yıldız, 2016: 122).

While Turkey’s migration history continues to develop today with mixed migratory flows and the diverse migration categories with a complex migration system composed of several different migrant groups, including asylum-seekers, refugees, irregular migrants, transit migrants, and regular migrants, the main issues in terms of migration and mobility in the EU-Turkey relations remains to be about halting/controlling irregular migration of third-country nationals transiting via Turkey and moving in the direction of Europe. The EU has been worried about Turkey’s ability to manage and control migration by implementing policies that would fall in line with the EU’s migration and asylum priorities, that tend to develop from a security-oriented perspective as discussed above.

For instance, when Turkey, at least initially, decided to follow a relatively liberal approach towards arrivals from Syria, the reactions from Europe were mixed. On the one hand, Turkey’s approach was assumed to pave the way for removing incentives for Syrians to look up to Europe as the final point of destination.

Nonetheless, there was also some criticism that Turkey’s adoption of a flexible border policy was creating an increased risk and threat for the EU as far as irregular migration was concerned. Moreover, Turkey was accused of weaponizing migrants and refugees to contest the power asymmetry that traditionally marked its bilateral relations with the EU, and to secure further financial aid from it. With the start of the migrant and refugee crisis in Europe in 2015, migration turned into a major issue

determining the course of the EU-Turkey relations. The next section discusses the context within which the EU-Turkey Statement on the readmission of refugees was concluded together with its repercussions.

### **The EU-Turkey Statement**

Turkey had already been an important gate keeper of “Fortress Europe” (Benvenuti 2017: 1), yet, its significance for the EU increased following the start of the crisis in Syria, which led to the creation of new tools of bi-lateral cooperation in the field of migration, such as the so-called EU-Turkey Refugee Deal.

Here, it should be noted that the EU and Turkey had signed a Readmission Agreement (RA) in 2013 which came into force on 1 October 2014.<sup>5</sup> Yet, “pursuant to Article 24(3) of the Agreement, provisions related to the obligations and procedures for readmission of third country nationals and stateless persons were to become effective three years after the date of entry into force” (Çetin, 2021: 5177); meaning on 1 October 2017. Therefore, RA was not actually functional for readmissions from the EU to Turkey during 2015 when high rates of irregular crossings were occurring. The conclusion of the EU-Turkey Statement of 18th March 2016 acted as a catalyst by accelerating this process and enabling the readmission of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) starting by the 4th April in 2016.

The Statement put forward the main objectives to be achieved as “to break the business model of the smugglers and to offer migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk” (European Council, 2016: para. 4).

The way the Statement re-energised the EU-Turkey dialogue in the field of migration ironically revealed the weight of *realpolitik* in moulding and guiding the dialogue between the EU and Turkey, at the expense of the possibility of developing a more accession-oriented – relationship that would have been based upon “mutual interdependence and Turkey’s integration in the relevant policy areas of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*” (Saatçioğlu, 2020: 170). In addition, the document also triggered some serious criticism regarding its legality and also feasibility (Collett, 2016).

While the document emphasised the spirit of burden sharing and identified a certain set of actions to be implemented concomitantly by Turkey and the EU, readmission poses certain challenges since the EU’s and Turkey’s priorities and interests do not quite overlap. On the EU side, the priority remains as returning all irregular migrants, who have transited Turkey on their way to the EU, back to Turkey. For Turkey, the risk of not being able to return third-country nationals back to their countries of origin coupled with the lack of clear and credible EU incentives, especially concerning visa liberalisation is a major downside of its deal with the EU. In order to facilitate the re-admission of third country nationals by their countries of origin, Turkey has been signing bilateral agreements itself by several origin countries from its neighbourhood, such as Greece (2002)<sup>6</sup>, Kyrgyzstan (2004), Ukraine (2005), Russia (2011), Bosnia (2012) and Belarus (2013). Yet, these countries tend to hesitate to be part of such bilateral cooperations since they are worried that these will result in increasing their migration “burden”.

As for visa liberalisation for Turkish nationals, it does not appear to be happening in the foreseeable future. Putting aside the tumultuous nature of the EU-Turkey relations marked by political crisis, which has been lowering down the EU credibility and influence in Turkish politics, an important source of the EU resistance over visa liberalisation is directly related to Turkey’s need to further improve its border management and asylum system, and also its police and judicial cooperation with the EU in order to target irregular migration and organised crime more effectively.

Moreover, foreign and domestic policy priorities of Turkish political elites can generate a context in which Turkey may not act in line the EU’s migration policy priorities. For instance, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield (*Fırat Kalkanı Harekati*) in August 2016, and Operation Olive Branch

<sup>5</sup> On 22 July 2019, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, announced that the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement was put on hold and would not be functional until the EU realises its promise of visa free travel for Turkish nationals (Deutsche Welle, 2019). Similarly, in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ web site, under the question of “What steps could be taken unless visa liberalisation cannot be realised?”, it has been clearly stated that Turkey can unilaterally cancel the RA agreement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, 2022: para. 15). During the writing of this paper, this step was not taken by the Turkish authorities yet.

<sup>6</sup> Following a Greek court decision to release eight former Turkish soldiers, who fled to Greece a day after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu commented that the release of these soldiers was unacceptable and he declared that Turkey suspended the bilateral readmission agreement it had with Greece (Çavuşoğlu, quoted in AA, 2018).

(*Zeytin Dalı Harekati*) in January 2018 in Northern Syria. President Erdogan linked both of these operations to the safe repatriation of Syrians back to their homes (TRT, 2016). In a similar vein, the president's wife, Emine Erdoğan, indicated that the operations in Afrin were conducted to establish safety and security in the area (Hürriyet Daily News, 2018). She stated that when "security and stability are established in the region with Operation Olive Branch, new flows will be stopped and those who are already here [Turkey] are expected to be able to go back to their country" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2018). The initiation of a "return policy" emerges as one of the key sources of motivation for the conduct of these military operations in Syria, which highlighted that Turkey had its own foreign policy priorities and concerns in the context of Syrian refugees, and these concerns could play a role in challenging those of the EU's since Turkey had already acquired a gate keeper role in the EU South East borders. Furthermore, migration, and specifically Syrian refugees, has become a salient issue in Turkish domestic politics. In addition to the arm's length distance that the main opposition parties, centre-left CHP (Republican People's Party) and ultra-nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), retained towards Syrian migrants by occasionally emphasising the need to return these refugees back to Syria (Daily Sabah, 2015; Bahçeli, quoted in Cumhuriyet, 2022), AKP has also been developing a political rhetoric with more nationalistic undertones (Şahin-Mencütek, 2019), which is a switch from its previous emphasis on common religious and cultural heritage between Syrians and Turkish people. Therefore, while seeking to win public support, AKP government might continue to instrumentalise migration issues as bargaining chips and provide further examples of a coercive engineered migration policy in its dialogue with the EU.

## CONCLUSION

By focusing on the case of EU-Turkey relations post-2015, this paper has highlighted that migration and foreign policy decisions are closely inter-related. The analysis indicates that since the end of the Cold War era, the EU and its Member States have been approaching the phenomena of migration, especially via the sea routes, from an increasingly security-oriented perspective. Despite constant efforts to introduce new controls over sea arrivals in the Mediterranean, the migration challenge continues, which is not only made up of the intense, persistent flows and tragic deaths, but also created by a complex legal framework [often ignored by the states] and the multiplicity of diverse actors with different interests and goals. These challenges have led to the development of externalization as one of the EU's key policy instruments in order to control and minimise unwanted migration, mostly in the form of asylum-seeker arrivals from the countries of the Global South, who sometimes, also use irregular means of entry. Turkey, as country in the EU's imminent neighbourhood, has become one of the crucial gate-keepers. Once a major source country for labour migration and also for asylum-seekers, Turkey is nowadays a country of immigration and transit. The European migration and refugee crisis during the summer of 2015 revealed Turkey's strategic importance for the EU in the field of migration management and controls quite strikingly. Turkish officials, realising that migration has become such a soft under-belly of the EU and that it lacks the political ability to rise to a challenge of immediate concern to its citizens, has been instrumentalising this issue in order to contest the EU. As a result, Turkey has been seeking to challenge the traditional power asymmetry that has long characterised the EU-Turkey bilateral relations. Given that the EU priority of defending external borders remains at the expense of concerns related to basic human rights of migrants, including asylum-seekers, it appears that the EU attempts to externalize its border controls by signing deals with the key source and transit countries will remain at place. Therefore, it is hoped that the analysis in this paper provides a relevant ground for reflecting further on the defining elements of the EU's dialogue with other crucial source and transit countries. Examining the specific nature of migration-foreign policy nexus by comparing and contrasting additional examples of the EU-key third country relations in the field of migration controls will allow us to understand the specific tools and mechanisms these countries use in order to contest and challenge the EU better, which can have significant repercussions as far as international political dynamics are concerned.

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