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Research Report

Making EU-Turkey cooperation on migration sustainable: A greater focus on the Turkish host society is required

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SWP Comment

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Making EU-Turkey Cooperation on Migration Sustainable

A Greater Focus on the Turkish Host Society Is Required

Sinem Adar and Friedrich Püttmann

Managing irregular migration is a focal point of EU-Turkey relations today. European perspectives on this issue, for the most part, are split into two camps: a “caring” one, which concentrates on the well-being of refugees, and a “concerned” one, which focusses on the external border security of the European Union (EU) and the anxieties of EU citizens. Widely overlooked in the European discussions is the mounting social and political discontent in Turkey, which is hosting the largest refugee population worldwide while facing a serious economic crisis alongside a severe governance deadlock. To bear fruits in the long run, any EU-Turkey migration cooperation should account for this growing discontent. After all, neither the advancement of the rights of refugees in Turkey nor reliable security cooperation is possible without accord by the Turkish political class and society. To this end, the EU should signal to Turkey its intention to resettle more refugees and support local integration efforts more proactively.

Despite the broad criticism it received, there is wide agreement among European and Turkish stakeholders that the EU-Turkey Statement on Migration from 18 March 2016 has been effective: EU external border security in the Aegean has been largely restored by bringing the number of irregular and often deadly crossings down to a minimum while the well-being of Syrian refugees in Turkey has been considerably improved through the implementation of the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT), financed by the highest amount of humanitarian aid the EU has made thus far in its history.

Today, a total of 3.7 million Syrian refugees (and another 320,000 non-Syrian irregular migrants – around a third of whom are from Afghanistan) live in Turkey, constituting 15 per cent of all people displaced across borders globally. Around 90 per cent of Syrian refugees in Turkey feel integrated to some extent. Many Syrian refugees also feel culturally close to the host society and at home in Turkey. Their general willingness either to move on to Europe or to return to Syria is currently low. Economically, a major challenge remains the refugees’ lack of integration into the formal labour market, which

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leaves them in precarious conditions. Moreover, following the Covid-19 pandemic, almost 70 per cent of refugee households in Turkey reported loss of employment.

Perceptions of Turkish Citizens

Meanwhile, the perspective of the host society on the Syrian refugees differs in various regards. More than 82 per cent of Turks want the Syrian refugees to be repatriated, 71 per cent regard them as a security threat, and around two-thirds are generally discontent with their presence. A primary reason for this is that the refugees' predominant employment in the informal sector – particularly in the husbandry, textile, and agricultural sectors – significantly drives down wages in a country where one-third of the host population itself works informally. Moreover, many Turkish citizens have the feeling that Syrian refugees are more privileged than themselves because they receive social and financial assistance in addition to not having to pay taxes on their work.

Furthermore, 80 per cent of Turkish nationals see Syrian refugees as a cultural threat: 70 per cent think that “Syrians will deform the identity of the Turkish society” and two-thirds believe that the Syrian refugees threaten Turkey’s “moral values and traditions”. Complaints about refugees living in “parallel societies” are not uncommon. Between 2017 and 2019, the percentage of Turkish citizens interacting with Syrians in a social or business context declined.

Syrian refugees have surely become a new component of Turkey’s long-lasting identity struggles, leading recently to contentious anti-immigration politics similar to those across Europe but which were unprecedented in Turkey, particularly concerning their scale. For instance, a group of university students who call themselves Angry Young Turks (Öfkeli Genç Türkler) think that Turkish identity and the foundational values of the Turkish Republic are in danger as a result of weakened institutions, widespread corruption, worsening

economic woes, and a misguided foreign policy that paved the way for a high number of refugees under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. For them, “border is honour”.

In the same vein, politics professor Ümit Özdağ recently founded the marginal far-right Victory Party (Zafer Partisi) exclusively upon the opposition to refugees and the promise to defend Turkish identity.

The mounting anti-immigrant sentiments have partly unleashed themselves in the shape of violent attacks on refugees, as was the case in Ankara last August and in Istanbul in January of this year.

Migration: A New Driver of Political Competition

Amidst these negative popular anti-immigration attitudes, which are coupled with an increasing anger at the incumbent government, the ruling AKP has begun to move away from its earlier hospitable policies.

What began with rhetoric about Turkish hospitality, portraying Syrian irregular migrants as “guests”, and finding widespread approval across different segments of society, quickly developed into a heated field of contention.

The government earlier overwhelmingly focussed on the notions of shared Ottoman ancestry and Islamic brotherhood as the foundation of its officially refugee-friendly position – paralleling nativist European narratives, as they both build upon the idea of shared religious identity as a crucial determinant of social harmony.

Mainstream secular opposition parties, on the other hand, depicted Syrians as a tool of the AKP government in further Islamicising society and consolidating its power by yielding the perspective of giving Syrian refugees Turkish citizenship. What is important to note here is that their electorates' anti-immigration sentiments are strongly coupled with anger at the AKP and a general fear of Turkey turning more conservative. Their opposition to the refugees

staying in Turkey is thus also an expression of their opposition to the government.

In fact, the mainstream opposition parties, such as the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİ), have recently reoriented their focus to governmental policy, and they strongly push against Turkey's hosting of a growing number of refugees and irregular migrants. In the face of fierce criticism by the opposition, the government has also more pronouncedly acknowledged the public's burdens by levelling up its criticism of the EU for showing insufficient support, ramping up the discourse on repatriating Syrian refugees to Northern Syria, and objecting to taking in any Afghan refugees.

Today, the divergence between the incumbent AKP and Turkey's opposition parties on migration is smaller against the backdrop of increased political competition as Turkey moves towards parliamentary and presidential elections, which are planned to take place in 2023. In the face of Turkey's ever-faster-growing economic crisis, weakening institutional capacity, and worsening elite incoherence, both the vote shares of the ruling AKP and its primary supporter – the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – and the approval ratings for President Tayyip Erdoğan are in steep decline. It is hard to predict the timing and form of the political change; yet its occurrence is likely.

Towards More Sustainable EU-Turkey Migration Cooperation

This does not mean, however, that a different Turkish government would make EU-Turkey cooperation on migration any easier for the EU. On the contrary, the AKP government's Islamic humanitarian discourse and its aspiration to maintain good relations with the EU around the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement have played into the hands of European politicians aiming to keep refugees away from Europe, either in Turkey or in Syria.

A new Turkish government, in contrast, is likely to challenge the EU's externalisa-

tion policies and might be keen on instigating the repatriation of refugees into Syria by liaising with President Bashar al-Assad in a new manner. Under the heading of a peace plan for the Middle East, both the CHP and the İYİ want to "resolve" the Syrian crisis and enable the return of as many Syrians as possible. The mounting economic, social, and cultural concerns within Turkish society pose a considerable challenge to the longevity of Turkey's refugee reception. All in all, these put at risk both the advancement of the rights of refugees in Turkey and reliable migration cooperation. Neither can be resolved solely with financial aid from the EU.

Incentives for a More Proactive Integration Policy in Turkey

Sixty years ago, Germany and Turkey concluded their historic recruitment agreement that would change German society forever. Today, about 3 million people with Turkish roots live in the Federal Republic. The context in which many Turkish migrants in 1961 and after arrived in Germany is nowhere near to being comparable to the realities of Turkey's reception of Syrian refugees today. However, one crucial lesson may be drawn from Turkey's earlier experience of mass emigration for its present challenge of mass immigration: Once people settle, voluntary return becomes increasingly unlikely, and the longer the addressing of this reality is postponed, the more difficult it becomes to steer it later on.

Integration policy is not an ideological choice but an unavoidable investment in the prevention of future social conflict, lost generations, and new economic burdens. As unpopular as it is to acknowledge this prospect in Turkish national politics and public discourse, it is common in practice at the level of municipalities and neighbourhoods across Turkey. These local integration efforts should be much more heavily supported by the EU – via financial and non-financial means – since they represent the only way forward that caters to EU interests, Turkish anxieties, and Syrian refugees'

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rights each. At the same time, more evidence of the EU's recognition of Turkey's dire situation and its challenges as a result of its mass-scale refugee reception is needed. The future of EU-Turkey cooperation on migration is still ambiguous, as there is little progress in renewing the EU-Turkey Statement beyond the approval of another €3 billion. A pro-active approach would give the EU the opportunity to mend its ties with Turkey, prevent future escalations at its border, and improve the welfare of refugees in Turkey. Such an approach could include the following three elements.

More Resettlement

As Kemal Kirişçi at Brookings Institution has pointed out, "the UNHCR has projected that there will be more than 420,000 places of resettlement needed for Turkey in 2021. As of the end of November 2020, the UNHCR reported that there were only 3,867 refugee departures from Turkey, compared to 10,268 the previous November." Resettlement is not only important to cater to refugees' special needs but also carries a high symbolic importance: It is an expression of the EU's recognition that Turkey's challenges in hosting the highest number of refugees worldwide are not purely financial and not only short-term. Therefore, the EU should step up its resettlement of refugees from Turkey.

EU-Turkey Municipal Cooperation

Municipalities across Europe have accumulated extensive knowledge on immigrant integration over the past decades. This knowledge could be shared with municipalities in Turkey today. At the same time, this would also refine European municipalities' understanding of Turkish immigrants' home country. Putting Turkish municipalities at the heart of future EU financial aid for refugees in Turkey would also solve

European leaders' dilemma of giving Turkey full ownership of the refugee reception while at the same time avoiding the impression that the EU's financial aid is going to the benefit of the unliked Turkish President, and thereby inflicting political costs from voters onto themselves. Finally, such cooperation would also move EU-Turkey relations to the level of civil society more and contribute towards improving bilateral ties by bringing citizens from both countries together. Despite Turkey's centralist government, successful examples of such cooperation on immigrant integration between German and Turkish municipalities already exist.

Micro Loans for Turkish-Syrian Joint Business Ventures

A third innovation for a more pro-active approach could be the introduction of micro loans for Turkish-Syrian joint business ventures. First of all, such an initiative would help give work to both refugees and the Turkish host society. Although many current labour market programmes focus on training refugees, little is done to create jobs in which refugees can actually apply their new skills. Moreover, such entrepreneurial activity would also regularise Syrians' employment and reduce competition and wage dumping in the informal sector. Finally, but no less importantly, such an initiative would contribute towards fostering social contact between the host society and Syrian refugees, which has significantly decreased over the last years. Increasing social contact again, meanwhile, promises to reduce prejudices and discrimination against Syrian refugees in Turkey. Social cohesion-oriented job creation in Turkey would be in the vital interest of refugees, Turkish society, and the EU.

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