Migration Diplomacy: Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Regional and Geopolitical Context

The fourth online brainstorming meeting of the “Oxford-Berlin Partnership: Migration Diplomacy and Turkey-EU Relations” project was held on 08 April 2021. The research project is carried out by SEESOX at the University of Oxford, Humboldt University, and the Berlin-based German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM). The aim of this meeting was to focus on Turkey’s migration foreign policy in the regional and geopolitical context. The meeting was chaired by Mehmet Karlı and Othon Anastasakis (both St. Antony’s College), and was conducted according to the Chatham House Rule. It brought together three speakers: Kelly Greenhill (SOAS), Gerasimos Tsouraparas (University of Birmingham), and Roy Allison (University of Oxford). The speakers and participants were asked the following questions prior to the meeting to trigger the discussion:

- What are the implications of the regional geopolitical conflicts for forced migration?
- What are the implications of forced migration for geopolitical conflicts?
- To what extent other external important actors use migration diplomacy for geopolitical aims?

In order to provide a historical and conceptual perspective on the inter-state use of migration, the first speaker introduced the concept of ‘Strategic Engineered Migration’, which is defined as ‘the threatened or actuated in- or out-migrations that are deliberately induced or manipulated by state or non-state actors, in ways designed to augment,'
reduce, or change the composition of the population residing within a particular territory, for political, economic or military ends.’ The strategic engineered migration can take four forms depending on the fundamental goal of the state that aims to use migration as a strategic tool: 1) Dispossessive (social restructuring/redistribution), 2) Exportive (internal political stabilization; external destabilization), 3) Militarized (tactical advantage), and 4) Coercive (coercion – change in the target’s behaviour). There can be three different types of coerencers: Generators directly create or threaten to create cross-border movements unless targets concede to their demands; Agent Provocateurs do not generate flows directly, but design to incite the creation of in- or -out flows by others deliberately and in active ways; Opportunists do not play a direct role in the creation of population movements but can exploit or manipulate further gain from movements created by others. The aims of strategic engineered migration vary greatly. They have included foreign aid, military assistance, normalized immigration, deterrence, political recognition, and regime change. In terms of its frequency, this strategy has been employed at least once a year on average since the 1951 Geneva Convention. In 75% of the cases, the coerencers obtained some of what they sought, and in 57% of the cases, they have achieved most or all of their objectives. Even though the success rate is high, it is rarely a tool of first resort as human movements are difficult to control and predict precisely. Historically, it has been employed by weaker actors against stronger ones, but this seems to be changing over time due to a shift in norms, distressingly, in using people as weapons, and we started seeing increase in its use by stronger actors. Liberal democracies appear to be disproportionately targeted, and although geographic propinquity is not a requirement, spatial proximity may make a target particularly attractive.

The second speaker presented a comparative case study of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, under the theoretical framework of ‘refugee-rentier states’. The initial question of this research was, why did President Erdoğan pursue a coercive policy vis-à-vis the EU in 2015 and 2016, while the decision makers in Jordan and Lebanon, also inundated with Syrian refugees and having the same target, chose a more conciliatory approach? What can explain the variation in how states use migration diplomacy to have certain gains? Employing the economic concept of rent, and going beyond the discussions on oil-rentier
or gas-rentier states, the speaker proposed that we refer to Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey as 'refugee-rentier states'. These are states that host forcefully displaced populations and rely financially on ‘refugee rent’, namely external payoffs by Western actors that are linked to the treatment of these groups. Refugee-rent-seeking strategies take two forms: 1) Blackmailing, which is threatening to flood a target state with refugee populations within its borders unless compensated, and 2) Backscratching, which means promising to maintain refugee populations within its borders if compensated. The choice of strategy ultimately depends on two variables: the strategic location of states vis-à-vis the targets, and the size of the refugee population that they are hosting. If a state believes that it has both a significant number of refugees and that it is strategically important vis-à-vis the target, then it is much more likely to blackmail the target state rather than cooperate. If both conditions are not met, then the state is more likely to adopt the backscratching approach. In the context of the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey, in 2015 and 2016, featured both a large number of refugees as well as a particular position that was strategically important vis-à-vis the EU, based on proximity and also on the ability to send refugees across the border fairly easily. That allowed Turkey to apply a blackmailing strategy based on threats. Believing that they had a large number of refugees but they lacked the geopolitical importance vis-à-vis the EU, the policy makers in Jordan and Lebanon employed a backscratching strategy that resulted in the Jordan Compact of 2016 and the Lebanon Compact of the same year. In terms of what this means more broadly about migration diplomacy and statecraft, firstly, the asymmetric North-South power distribution contributes to the diffusion of refugee rent-seeking behaviour, and the processes of backscratching and blackmailing are slowly making their way across the Global North as well. Secondly, we see an emerging norm of refugee commodification, and an increasing number of states are trying to monetize cross-border mobility. As a final point, the speaker commented that we are in a slippery slope in terms of the future of the refugee regime as these strategies threaten moving towards a durable mode of global burden sharing.

The third speaker brought up several points about the role of Russia in the Syrian conflict and the dynamics between Russia, Turkey, and the EU with regard to the Middle East.
The first point was about one way Russia was benefitting from the crisis, which was by creating various narratives to delegitimize the EU. The discourse of the Russian state-sponsored media was aligned to present the EU as a highly disunited intergovernmental structure in comparison to Russia's effective unitary state. The crisis, they emphasized, revealed the inaptitude in the EU's governance and its ability to cope with the crisis in a structured manner. This approach was also calculated to appeal to Turkish concerns in their bilateral relationship. The second point was about the use of population displacement and humanitarian assistance mechanisms to force states to deal directly with the Syrian Damascus regime. Russia was involved in the generation of the migrant flows through its military strategy, and there were also efforts to channel all post-conflict relief thinking via Damascus. It opposed the delivery of aid across the borders of states neighbouring Syria without the approval of Syria's legitimate authorities, claiming that this would counter the international law. The prospect of the return of refugees were also linked to accepting a legitimised and structured process as Russia and Damascus oriented preferential outcomes. In other words, Russia tied humanitarian alleviation to a form of conflict resolution, which was essentially skewed towards the preferences of Damascus. The third point was about Russian international lobbying via conferences. The EU and the US boycotted the conference held last November in Damascus saying that a Russian-Syrian conference on refugee returns was premature as there is not yet a political settlement of conflicts in the region. Russia also called the EU out on the conference the EU organized last month by arguing that it was a gross violation of international humanitarian law to presuppose solutions without direct contact with Damascus. It also encouraged the EU to undertake policies to assist the countries where the refugees are coming from, and make the conditions more attractive for them to return, putting the responsibility on the EU. The final point was about the contested area of Idlib. A recent development in the area is a shift in the Russian and Syrian air forces, now targeting the energy infrastructure in northwest Syria, including the areas that fall under the de facto Turkish control in Idlib. It has been suggested that Russia is pursuing such strategy to prevent the sustainability of alternative political-economic places of autonomy in Idlib. However, the result of the destruction of these economic assets might lead to the spark of additional refugee waves from Idlib to Turkey, which would undoubtedly raise
tensions between the two countries. The speaker highlighted that there is a strange balance between what is happening on the ground and the diplomatic dance that is happening on the high level between Russia and Turkey. There are many points of contestation between the two countries, but there are also great stakes in their relationship, which neither of the leaders of the countries want to disrupt.

The speakers’ remarks were followed by two rounds of questions and comments from the participants and responses from the speakers. A variety of points were raised in a dynamic discussion, including Turkey’s policy goals vis-à-vis Syria, the fronts on which Turkey is challenging Russia, the re-emerging role of the US in the conflict, the role of Greece, and a collaboration between Germany, the UNHCR and Turkey in northern Syria, to name a few. The participants critically engaged with the theories presented by the speakers. Some related questions were concerned with the significance of the refugee population size as a variable vs. the geopolitical importance vis-à-vis the target, the role of the target states in the negotiation, the domestic politics being another variable in strategy selection, how a non-coercive and non-material interest based policy would fit in the presented models, and when a coercive strategy works and in which conditions it does not work. Building a dialogue between different disciplines that would foster communication among what is happening on the inter-state level and on the ground was also discussed.