Migration Diplomacy: Domestic drivers of Turkey’s migration diplomacy

The first online brainstorming meeting of “Oxford-Berlin Partnership: Migration Diplomacy and Turkey-EU Relations” project was held on 30 June 2020. 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). Othon Anastasakis and Mehmet Karli (both St. Antony's College) co-chaired the event that was held in accordance with Chatham House rule. The aim of this meeting was to discuss the domestic drivers of Turkey’s migration diplomacy, and in accordance, the speakers and the participants were prompted with the following questions:

- How do migration flows affect the Turkish foreign policy making?
- What is Turkey’s migration diplomacy?
- Who are the main actors in Turkey’s migration diplomacy?
- What are the drivers in Turkish foreign policy making in relation to its migration diplomacy?
- What are the connections between local forces and its migration diplomacy?
- Shall we focus on only Syrian refugees in Turkey? How about Russian or Egyptian diaspora in Turkey?

Below are the main points discussed in line with these questions.
**State – level analyses**

With Turkey being the largest refugee host country in the world with 3.5 million refugees, refugees in Turkey affect domestic policies as well as Turkey’s foreign policies. The meeting first focused on state-level analyses, discussing the ways in which the dynamics within the Turkish state influenced migration and foreign policy. After AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey has been considered a trading state by some scholars until the Arab Spring. According to this view, Turkey’s foreign policy was shaped by a need to find new markets to support its export-oriented economy. Following the Arab Spring and its impact on Syria, Turkey began to receive large migration flows, and started increasingly becoming a “liberal migration state”. Turkey went through significant legal changes in relation to its migration laws; a migration law on asylum seekers were adopted based on human rights but not security-based concerns, Turkey decided to give temporary protection status to refugees, and adopted an open-door policy towards Syrians. Some scholars argue that these changes in Turkish migration laws was the product of Europeanisation, as well as Turkey’s closer relation with the UNHCR.

Turkey’s role as a trading state was not in contradiction with its role as a liberal migration state; in fact, these two roles enhanced one another. However, in the recent years, Turkey’s role as a trading state has weakened and migration has become the central issue in Turkey’s foreign policy making. Certain domestic events such as the power struggle between Turkey’s then Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who had different approaches towards migration, and other factors such as the increasing violence in the Syrian conflict, the rise of ISIS, and eventually the Russian intervention caused the pillars of the liberal migration state and its policies towards Syrian refugees to begin to show its cracks. Turkey turned in favour of establishing safe zones inside of Syria, aiming to prevent migration flows into Turkey, and eventually stopped implementing an open-door policy.

The Turkish state also witnessed de-Europeisation and drifted into authoritarianism. The Turkish government ruled by Erdogan’s party AKP co-opted with the nationalists MHP, which was acknowledged to have a negative stance against refugees in Turkey.
Turkey started implementing a nationalist and an imperialist approach in its foreign policy, rather than the so-called humanitarian approach. In August 2019, the Turkish government forced Syrian refugees to settle in Idlib, and in February 2020, Turkey encouraged Syrian refugees to cross the border to Greece. Although there were few Syrians who did cross the border, these actions were clear demonstrations of a change in attitudes towards Syrian refugees. Therefore, Turkey moved from a liberal migration state to an imperial state in relation to its migration diplomacy as demonstrated by its foreign policy in Syria and Libya.

**External factors**

Another main point in the meeting was Turkey’s instrumentalization of Syrian refugees in its foreign policy making. According to this view, Turkish foreign policy regarding migration has been largely shaped by external factors. At the beginning of the crisis, Turkey sought to use a welcoming attitude towards Syrian refugees in an attempt to help Ankara present a positive image in the international arena. In 2017 and 2018, Turkey spent the highest amount of money in the world on global humanitarian assistance, and described itself as an “Ensar” country (helping country) making reference to the Islamic tradition. Later, external factors, especially the relations with the EU and the developments in the Syrian conflict have become the determining factors around changes in Turkish foreign policy making. The changes in Syria pushed Turkey to increasingly link its domestic and foreign relations, and Turkey wanted to use its role as a host country as leverage in its relations with the EU. For instance, Turkey opened its borders with Greece allowing Syrian refugees to cross the border, and this decision came two days after 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in Idlib by the Syrian government forces.

Turkey expected the EU to cooperate with the Turkish government to install a buffer zone inside of Syria in order to prevent refugee flows into the country and also to oppose the Russian presence in Syria. Turkey’s goal was to establish a Sunni-Arab corridor which would prevent Kurds from occupying a larger territory. In fact, the amount of land established by Turkey resembles Assad’s Kurdish policies in the 1960s. However, there was growing frustration with the EU on the Turkish side as the financial support by the
EU was less than expected and it came with conditionality. Supporting Turkey’s Syria policy is a controversial issue for the European countries, mainly because in the case that they do, they might be accused of ethnic cleansing in Syria, as Turkey has been implementing population exchanges. The second problem is the funding; how will the European public respond to funding Al-Qaeda-affiliated organisations such as AL Nusra, HIS, and the Sultan Murat Brigade that have been an ally of the Turkish government against Russia and Syria? Turkey also tried to test the new Greek government and its support from the EU countries by opening its borders with Greece. It is also important to note that the new Greek government has a tougher stance on Syrian refugees than the previous one; the new government tried to present the refugee problem as an EU problem, rather than a national problem. In summary, some main drivers of Turkish migration policy were the Idlib crisis and relations with the EU, and Syrian refugees became an instrument in these relations.

The EU factor
A further point the meeting was specifically the EU factor in Turkey’s changing migration policy. What started as a cooperation with the EU in addressing the migration issue turned into a conflict starting from 2016. Turkey signed a dialogue agreement with the European Union in 2016 to stop arrivals to the bloc in exchange for funds allocated to the handling of the millions of refugees it hosts, among other benefits. This agreement changed the relations between Turkey and the EU. Prior to the agreement, Turkey was considered an EU candidate state and conducted its relations with the EU based on European norms and values. Since the agreement, the EU and Turkey’s relations have become more and more functionality-based. Domestic changes in Turkey and in the EU member states, the developments in the Syrian Civil War with increasing terrorism and regular border crossings contributed to the change in public opinion in Turkey and the EU countries that pushed the two sides into adopting a more functional approach in their relations.

Has the deal become successful?
From a technical point of view, the deal managed to reduce irregular crossings from 900,000 people to 40,000 annually. It also managed to limit smuggling activities. It has
increased the livelihood of Syrian people in Turkey, as, for instance, they were granted work permit in 2016. However, as part of the deal, Turkey still wants more liberal visa policies with the EU, but the EU has only focused on the number of refugees reaching the Greek borders, and they have turned a blind eye towards the Greek government’s ill treatment of Syrian refugees in Greece.

Turkey has been more successful than other countries bordering Syria such as Jordan and Lebanon. Today in Turkey 63% of Syrian children are in school and 1.5 million Syrian refugees have received financial aid from the EU agreement. Turkey also has stronger state resources than other regional countries in addressing the Syrian migration issue. However, from the Turkish society’s perspective, the issue is still a hot topic as most Turkish citizens are concerned about Syrian refugees living in Turkey. There is no clear long- or medium-term vision at the national level. Turkey argues that the country has spent over USD 40 billion on Syrian refugees, although it is difficult to confirm how much Turkey has actually spent on helping refugees. According to the deal between Turkey and the EU, Turkey was promised a total of 6 billion Euros in financial aid. This amount falls short of what Turkey needs to support refugees, so while Ankara wants to share the responsibility of Syrian refugees with the EU, there is a clear gap between Ankara’s expectations and what the EU promises. Both sides are trying to revise the EU-Turkey migration deal, but their expectations are still very different, and it is also not clear what Turkey expects from a new deal with the EU.

**Domestic factors**

In the meeting, the key actors in Turkey’s domestic politics that influence Turkey’s foreign policy making were discussed. In Turkey, the President determines all the framework of Turkish foreign policy making. There are three ministers involved in foreign policy decisions under the framework defined by President Erdogan: Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and Economy Minister Berat Albayrak. There are also three bureaucrats who are involved in the decision-making process: The head of MIT, Hakan Fidan, the presidential spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, and the communication director of Turkey, Fahrettin Altun. There are also three advisors that have been influential
in foreign policy decisions who are also members of the foreign affairs and security board: Cagri Erhan, SETA Coordinator Burhanettin Duran, and the head of SADAT security Adnan Tanriverdi.

There was also a duality within the ranks of the AKP during Davutoglu’s premiership. It was Davutoglu who signed the agreement with the EU and it was considered to be an opportunity for Turkey to institutionalise its relations with the EU. He established the Humanitarian Aid Department under the Prime Minister’s office which was planning to coordinate the financial aid received by the EU. As part of the EU-Turkey Deal, Turkey was expecting to liberalise its visa restrictions with the EU, once Ankara fulfilled its requirements as part of the agreement, such as updating Turkey’s law on terror. In May 2019, Davutoglu resigned from his post and the humanitarian aid department was abolished. The AFAD became the new institution under which the Turkish Presidency controls the EU financial aid to Syrian refugees in Turkey. The coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, plus various terror attacks, also contributed to the deterioration in Turkey and EU relations.

Political costs
The internal costs of hosting refugees for Turkey were also discussed in the meeting. Providing legal status, health and educational rights as well as citizenship rights can be politically costly. Since the migration flows, local authorities have played an important role in providing assistance to Syrian refugees in Turkey. Following the local elections in Turkey in 2019, the AKP government lost control in most of the metropolitan municipalities, and since then, there has been a change in the role of local authorities. There is increasing conflict between the national government and local authorities in supporting Syrian refugees, as local authorities have been trying to develop their own migration strategies. The most recent example is a new centre which will develop policies for Syrian refugees in Istanbul established by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Turkish officials in the border cities such as Antep and Hatay have also been very liberal in implementing local policies. Opposition local authorities want to develop long term policies, but the national government still focuses on the temporary and short-term
position of Syrian refugees in Turkey. The national government tries to introduce new pro-government NGOs as new players to the Syrian refugee emerge.

The migration issue became more politicised in the 2019 local elections as AKP officials blamed Syrian refugees for their defeat, and the opposition responded by pointing out the government’s foreign policy calculations in Syria and its impacts on Istanbul. The opposition mayors have adopted more refugee-friendly policies across the country with the discourse “they created a mess, but we are dealing with it”. However, according to recent polls, Turkish public support for Syrian refugees is decreasing day by day. The current economy, which was also one of the main determinants of the 2019 elections, has also played a role in changing Turkey’s migration diplomacy. The decline of the liberal migration state was coupled with the worsening of Turkey’s economy within the context of increasing globalisation. This resulted in a shift in public opinion on migration as the unemployment rates in Turkey have increased.

Written by Emre Çalışkan, revised by Aslı Töre.