Migration Diplomacy: EU migration policies vis-à-vis Turkey

“Oxford-Berlin Partnership: Migration Diplomacy and Turkey-EU Relations” project held its third online brainstorming meeting on 11 February 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 meeting was conducted according to the Chatham House Rule. Dr. Frank Düvell (Universität Osnabrück) chaired the event. The aim of this meeting was to discuss EU migration policies vis-à-vis Turkey, and it brought together three speakers: Aslı Selin Okyay (Istituto Affari Internazionali), Martin Lemberg-Pedersen (University of Copenhagen), and Laura Batalla (European Parliament Turkey Forum). There were three broad categories that the speakers were asked to focus on:

- The current state of affairs with regard to the EU-Turkey deal
- The complexity and diversity of interests
- The multiplicity of actors that determine the policies in various levels

Accordingly, the speakers and participants were given the following points and questions:

- What is the current state of the EU-Turkey Deal?
- Sustainability of the status quo
- EU’s externalization of its migration management policies and concerns of securitization
Which actors within the EU play a determinative role in the formulation of EU policy vis-à-vis Turkey on migration?

To what extent EU migration priorities are informed by other considerations i.e. economic, geopolitical?

Mezzo and micro-level of engagement and implementation of projects

What do we know of the relevant EU Commission departments and staff and their perception of Turkey and the matters at stake?

The Current State of Affairs

The first remarks were on the current state of affairs and the sustainability of the status quo. It was noted that the current migration cooperation between Turkey and the EU is a patchwork of political agreements that only works partially. The question then was, ‘If the agreement has only been partially working, why has it been sustained in this imperfect condition?’, and several reasons were given to how the deal meets certain core interests of both sides. From Turkey’s side, two points of interest were mentioned: (i) the financial support received by the EU, and (ii) maintaining relations with the EU despite the antagonisms in other areas. From the EU’s side, other than the obvious motive of keeping the arrivals at bay, it was commented that the deal is also important for giving the impression to the public that the EU’s external borders are in control, and for avoiding existential and challenging questions about solidarity and responsibility by sustaining externalized migration cooperation.

The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) was noted as an aspect that has been working for both sides, and therefore is expected to continue. However, the hotspot approach and the mechanisms that it relied upon - such as the swift returns to Turkey, swift asylum processing in Greece, and the swift relocation from Greece to the other member states - were listed as aspects that did not work well as part of the deal. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum demonstrates that the EU is still determined to continue with external cooperation despite all these procedures that are not working. The agreement also has many reputational and credibility costs for the EU due to the
overcrowding of and the poor living conditions in the camps, the inability of the EU to enforce the relocation mechanism, and therefore, the non-compliance of the member states with their own asylum systems.

One last point made in this section was on the transactional framing of the current relations. It was claimed that this give-and-take form of relations between Turkey and the EU stands against sustainability, because transactionality does not foster, and even erodes mutual trust between the two sides. In addition, in order to sustain this transactional approach, the cooperation around migration has been linked with other issue areas (modernization of the Customs Union, visa liberalization, accession talks, etc.). However, these issue linkages also have not been working very well because the EU’s willingness to deliver those commitments does not depend on the migration governance performance of the partner, which in turn, also hampers the EU’s credibility.

**The Complexity of Interests**

The initial point made by the second speaker on the complexity of interests was about the legality of the deal. It was underlined that this ‘deal’ is not official EU policy, but it is only a press statement. This speaks directly into questions about the renewal of the deal. Also, such method of issuing the deal escapes certain legal consequences. This might have massive further implications for EU policy in the area of externalization if the legality of this deal is replicated for cooperation with other countries.

It has also been noted that this deal is one variant of what is known as externalization policies. Externalization occurs when states or other political communities complement the border control across national territories with manifestations of control or support outside the national territories. This not only includes border control, but also humanitarian support and aid, and the nodes between care and control are a continuum that can collapse quiet quickly. Therefore, it is possible to control populations while dispersing aid to them, which is manifested in the EU-Turkey deal. This kind of externalization also creates ripple effects in terms of border control and displacement,
which we have seen on the Greek islands and in northern Syria. We also witness the rise of certain markets responsible for containment and control. For instance, biometrics for identification purposes, registration technologies, other forms of surveillance technologies, data protection, and the financialization of those displaced and contained in these areas are inserted in a certain humanitarian supply line, which then results in a range of contracts with the security sector, and also the humanitarian and migration management sectors. This has a range of implications, and one of them concerns the role of Frontex, as it is situated in a political context with different claims from both Turkey and Greece as to where their naval territory begins and ends.

The speaker also commented that the internal political context plays a role in how the deal is being discussed and what issue linkages are being formed. Externalization policies can be thought of as portals, where policies, agendas and priorities run both ways. The successive change and sometimes erosions of former pillars of EU policies and the discourses around the safe zones in Syria are examples of this. In terms of the debates and frictions surrounding the deal, the speaker stated that the European discourse of Turkey’s blackmailing is not an accurate description of what is happening, since powerful EU actors consented and even pushed for the deal. The Turkish cooperation with the Libyan government of National Accord in the areas of maritime boundaries, energy and construction shows Turkey’s externalization running off of the EU’s externalization to Turkey. Following, alarmist discourses have emerged about how the EU’s migration politics are now in the hands of Turkey, both in the Aegean and along the southern Mediterranean route. In short, there is a fraction within the EU as a result of more expansionist Turkish politics.

The Multiplicity of Actors

The third speaker pointed out that there was never a plenary discussion at the beginning of the deal. The European Parliament, for instance, did not play a role because it did not have to ratify the agreement. Therefore, at the initial stage, the deal was mostly closed to scrutiny from different actors. The European Commission was more ambitious than the
Member States, especially on the issue of resettlement. The EU side finds Turkey’s demands too ambitious, and even does not consider them as promises the EU has made as the deal was only a press statement. The future of these promises, the speaker stated, depends on what will happen in the Eastern Mediterranean field. Progress does not seem possible under the current climate of Turkey-EU relations. The European Council has tasked the High Representative and the Commission to come up with the revision of the EU-Turkey relations, focusing on different aspects such as trade, migration, and the political accession process. What will happen about the deal also depends on this revision.

The only aspect where there is an agreement is the financial allocation under the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey as there is a consensus within the EU that the efforts of Turkey to host the refugees need to be sustained. There are some questions concerning how the FRIT funds will be renewed, i.e. will the member states contribute or is it going to come from the EU budget? However, it seems most likely that they will continue. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum clearly indicates that the external dimension of the EU’s migration policy is the strongest one, and there will not be much solidarity or responsibility sharing with the third countries. There is also very little emphasis on how to integrate or include the migrants and refugees who are already in the EU’s territory. No matter how difficult the relations are, the EU will need to cooperate with Turkey, and the survival of the statement will be key in managing the flows.

After the speakers' remarks, all participants engaged in the discussion by raising questions and comments. The sustainability of the transactional framing of the relations was one component of the discussion. Another focus was on the legality of the statement and how this is being used by the EU to avoid legal scrutiny. The participants also emphasized the importance of including the voices of migrants and refugees in the decision making process of migration governance. The question of how we can frame and address the divergence of voices and perceptions on the European side and the key interests behind this divergence was also discussed. The construction of safe zones in northern Syria and the colonial legacy of safe zones as a device of power to deal with
displacement in the 19th and 20th centuries were also addressed. Finally, arguing that Turkish citizens still support Turkey’s EU membership because they aspire for the values it represents, it was commented that any viable and sustainable solution to Turkey-EU relations should include a value-based, long-term and ambitious approach.