EU has no choice but to work with Turkey on migration

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The EU-Turkey migration deal seems to be at breaking point, but it will suit both sides to patch it up

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s end-February decision to encourage migrants to try to enter Europe via the Greek-Turkish land border was the immediate result of developments in Syria. Thousands came to the Turkish side of the border; Greece’s instant reaction was to step up security in eastern Thrace and bring the EU onto Greece’s side. This has prompted the question whether the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement is dead.

What next

The EU will now reconsider how to engage with Turkey more effectively on managing irregular migration. It is expected, under pressure from Germany, to continue its financial assistance to Turkey. At the same time, the EU is unlikely to be able to revise its common asylum policy, given internal disagreements between member states.

Subsidiary Impacts

- The increasing militarisation of the Greek-Turkish border and worsening conditions on Aegean islands will raise humanitarian concerns.
- Washington will see an opportunity to put pressure on Turkey to incline more to the West in return for security and financial support.
- The decision the EU takes on financial support for Turkey will be difficult, given member states' differing views.

Analysis

On February 29, Erdogan declared the frontier to Europe "open", prompting thousands of migrants in Turkey to move to the border with Greece. The announcement reflected his fears of a dangerous entanglement in Syria and a falling out with Russia over its support for Damascus. Dozens of Turkish troops died in Idlib on February 27 in Syrian government airstrikes (see SYRIA/TURKEY/ RUSSIA: Partnership outweighs frictions - March 3, 2020).

On the domestic front, Erdogan wants to defuse opposition to his foreign policy mistakes. He is already under pressure from expectations of a new influx of Syrian refugees, who already impose large social and economic costs. Turkey hosts an estimated 3-4 million refugees, economic migrants and asylum seekers.

At the same time, he wants to show Europeans that he can control the flow of refugees. As a rule, external crises have tended to strengthen his domestic position.

Erdogan uses foreign policy to bolster domestic support

Immediate Greek reaction

Turkey's abrupt decision to encourage migrants to arrive at the Greek border led to a series of tough responses from Athens: it strengthened its fortified military border along the Evros river; the police used tear gas and rubber bullets against the migrants to hold them back; and military exercises were staged to deter crossings.
The Greek government announced that it would stop processing asylum applications for a month, bringing widespread international reaction from the UN and humanitarian organisations. Any new arrivals would be detained for 25 days in military camps before being deported to their country of origin. Greece also threatened to stop welfare benefits for some asylum-seekers.

For some time now, the New Democracy government has been burdened by poor internal dispersal of migrants. Lesbos, in particular, and the other border islands Chios and Samos, are at breaking point. Far-right groups are agitating daily against the arrival of more refugees, against NGOs supporting them and against the government’s decision to build additional migrant-processing facilities on Lesbos. Meanwhile, refugees are living in appalling conditions in the reception facilities (see GREECE: Migration threatens government’s popularity - November 28, 2019).

The flare-up on the land border with Turkey was an opportunity for Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to react toughly against what he saw as a Turkish plan to destabilise Greece. The creation of a migrant camp along the Thrace border is an additional concern for Greece, on top of bilateral disputes in the Aegean and Turkey’s prospecting for energy in the Eastern Mediterranean outside its recognised maritime borders (see TURKEY/LIBYA: Erdogan prepares to intervene in Tripoli - December 17, 2019).

**EU’s initial reaction**

Erdogan’s February 29 announcement sent shock waves through the EU and brought back memories of the 2015-16 migrant crisis. The initial reaction was to stand by Greece in defending the EU external border and accuse Turkey of playing political games with refugees.

Action was taken immediately, including a visit by the EU top leadership to the Evros line, a decision to disburse 700 million euros (796 million dollars) to help Greece manage the crisis and the deployment of the EU border agency Frontex to enhance border protection. Turkey was criticised for attempting to ‘blackmail’ the EU.

For its part, Germany has been pushing for some time now for more financial support to Turkey. Germany is the country that does not want to see the EU-Turkey Statement collapsing. It is set against any repetition of the massive influx of refugees from Turkey in 2015.

**Germany has most at stake**

**State of EU-Turkey deal**

The agreement between the EU and Turkey to stop the flow of refugees in return for cash has reduced the numbers coming to the EU substantially, but has invited much criticism because it outsourced the management of more than 3 million refugees to Turkey and allowed Erdogan to use the migrants as part of his foreign policy of putting pressure on the West.

Yet Turkey has had to deal with an unprecedented number of migrants, as both the prime destination for refugees from the Syrian civil war and one of the main gateways into Europe for economic migrants from further afield.

When it comes to thinking how to address the refugee issue in the future, the EU could take into consideration the lessons of the past three years. On the positive side:

- the agreement has significantly reduced the numbers of migrants to Europe after the 2015 surge; and
- EU financial support for Syrians in Turkey has made a substantial difference and improved the refugees’ living conditions.

However, on the negative side:

- Europe has seen a rise in anti-immigration populist parties and a hardening rhetoric from
mainstream parties on the migration problem;
• the EU has failed to agree a common asylum policy, as Central European member states refuse to share the burden of hosting migrants on their territory;
• Brexit has reduced the EU budget's spending capacity with the departure of one of its major contributors; and
• despite poor conditions for refugees on the Greek islands raising severe humanitarian concerns, asylum procedures have been very slow.

Outlook

The EU has few options but to work with Turkey and make concessions, despite its concerns over the state of Turkish democracy. For its part, Turkey has complained that the EU is not honouring other commitments emanating from the 2016 Statement, including visa liberalisation, extending the customs union and financial pledges.

In the short run, Brussels will have to release about 3 billion euros already earmarked for projects by end-2020 from the 6 billion that was agreed, but it does not want to be seen to be doing this in response to Erdogan’s threats. The next step will be to decide on another financial package in the context of the 2021-27 budget framework.

Future financial assistance is central to the matter, with Turkey demanding more money from the EU for the refugees, and the EU warning that the amount will be lower than in previous years and that most of it must go to aid organisations and local bodies, rather than through the Turkish central government.

The reality is that both sides, the EU and Turkey, need each other for their own domestic purposes, but are also playing ‘hard ball’.

A solution will come down to money in the end