The Critical Role of Turkey in the Management of the Syrian Refugee Crisis

https://www.e-ir.info/2023/05/06/the-critical-role-of-turkey-in-the-management-of-the-syrian-refugee-crisis/

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This is an excerpt from *Policy and Politics of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Eastern Mediterranean States*, edited by Max O. Stephenson Jr. & Yannis A. Stivachtis. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

The role of Turkey in the management of the Syrian refugee crisis is long- running and multifaceted. It also has important political implications, both in terms of Turkey's domestic political scene and regarding its external relations with Syria as well and countries in the wider region and beyond. Moreover, the crisis has had a direct effect on European Union (EU)-Turkey relations in the light of the agreements reached between the two sides in 2015–2016 and their implementation since. When the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, few predicted that it would morph into a regional conflict and affect both domestic politics and the foreign policies of multiple states in the region and beyond. Turkey is undoubtedly one of the countries mostly influenced by it, partly by default (it shares a 900 km long land border with Syria) and partly by design, that is, due to conscious decisions made by its leadership. Turkey has been active in the Syrian refugee crisis and its decision to open its borders to refugees from that nation became well known worldwide. A decade later, 3.64 million Syrian refugees are officially registered in the country (UNHCR 2021) and questions arising from the current situation are multiple. Will Turkey opt for the integration of those refugees, or does its government view them as temporary residents? How is the presence of such a large and visible minority affecting Turkish politics? Finally, to what extent does Turkey's stance on the issue, and the Syrian crisis more generally, influence its relations with the European Union (EU)?

This chapter offers tentative answers to these questions. To do so, I begin with a few theoretical considerations premised on the Europeanization thesis and its application to Turkey. The section thereafter discusses Turkey's legal and institutional context on the matter prior to the crisis, before focusing on a watershed moment in the refugee crisis, namely the EU-Turkey agreement of 2015 and its implications. The third section outlines the domestic political challenges that policy makers and parties confront at present, before concluding with an overall assessment of the country's role in managing the Syrian refugee issue.

My main argument is that Turkey has sought to cope with the crisis in two distinct ways and over two identifiable phases. During the first phase, which lasted roughly until 2015, Turkey sought to reap political benefits from the Syrian crisis. It did so by welcoming an influx of millions of Syrians and seeking to manage the situation by upgrading its domestic infrastructure to do so, both legally and institutionally, with the support of external actors and especially the EU. All the while, Turkish government leaders believed that Assad's regime would soon collapse, placing Ankara in a prime position to influence the future of Syria. The fact that this expectation did not materialize weighed heavily in subsequent developments. In the second period, post- 2015, and as the crisis became endemic, Turkey's government confronted a threat and an opportunity. On the one hand, the nation's ability to manage the crisis fell, as the number of Syrians residing in the country remained very high and opposition parties began offering an effective political narrative that cornered the government and articulated the frustration of large swathes of the population set against Syrian migrants. During this second period, Turkey's government began losing control of the discourse regarding Syrian migrants and refugees, a process that became a potent electoral threat.

On the other hand, Turkey sought during this period to reap the benefits of its earlier activism on the issue and benefit from the lack of coordination among EU member states concerning it. The EU-Turkey agreements of 2015 and 2016 are a potent example of the EU's reliance on Turkey to help to manage the crisis on Europe's behalf. That fact gave the Turkish government leverage over EU affairs and allowed it to extract concessions (political and financial) from the Union. In theoretical terms, this case analysis of Turkey's behavior during the crisis confirms the validity of the 'instrumental Europeanization' thesis (Aybars et al. 2019; Fougner and Kurtoğlu 2015), which suggests that Turkey will seek to adjust to EU norms and policies only to the extent that such action aligns with its national priorities. In this view, EU-Turkey relations manifest a transactional character (Dimitriadi et al. 2018) and remain robust only in those policy areas where the two parties derive direct, immediate material benefits from cooperation.

Turkey and Europeanization: Two Stories

Turkey's relations with the EU go back to the 1960s. After submitting its membership application in 1987, Turkey signed a Customs Union (CU) agreement with the Union and trade relations between the two sides flourished as a result (World Bank and European Union 2014). Turkey's goal of EU membership appeared more likely following the 1999 EU Summit in Helsinki that offered the country EU candidate country status. By the mid- 2000s, Turkey's economy was growing, its politics had become more stable and Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) dominated the nation's governance.

The Europeanization process, which guided the accession into the EU of Central and East European states in the recent past (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Grabbe 2006) and had been heavily influential in Southern Europe's incorporation into the Community, was now creating expectations for Turkey (Tocci 2005). Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) have argued that the mechanisms of Europeanisation in candidate countries are evident in two dimensions: the hard mechanism refers to *acquis* implementation while the second, soft mechanism relates to pressures to internalize the EU's normative codes of conduct and 'appropriate' policy behavior. During the early 2000s, in both domestic and foreign policy, Turkey implemented a series of far-reaching political, judicial, and economic reforms. These appeared to confirm the 'stick and carrot' approach, also known as conditionality policy, through which the EU entices members to adopt rules and policies in line with its own. While important challenges remained in several policy areas, not least civil-military relations (Duman and Tsarouhas 2006) and social policy (Manning 2007), Turkey's strategic direction appeared to confirm that a combination of material incentives and normative alignment would eventually result in the country joining the EU.

The impact of Europeanization on Turkey was limited from the start. Indeed, although accession negotiations began in 2005, they never gathered steam. The immediate cause was the Cyprus problem. Turkey refused to extend its Customs Union provisions with the EU to the Republic of Cyprus (Eralp 2009) and its failure to resolve the problem through UN mediation in 2004 meant that its accession process was marred by a major diplomatic spat with an EU member (Cyprus had joined the EU in 2004). As with Cyprus, timing did not prove helpful to Turkey either. The nation's EU accession talks began at a time when 'enlargement fatigue' was becoming evident among Union member governments. EU public opinion was on average negative concerning the prospect of Turkey's accession and several member states, including France, Germany, and Austria, publicly voiced a desire to develop alternatives to full Turkish membership. At the same time, the Turkish government adopted a 'double standards' argument, accusing the Union of opposition to Turkey's accession due to its predominantly Muslim population. In due course, Turkey froze and then reversed EU-aligned legislation, distancing itself from the EU *acquis*. Indeed, the limits of Europeanization (Nutcheva and Aydin-Düzgit 2011; Tsarouhas 2016) were revealed in 2016, during which the Turkish government gradually dropped its EU-related aspirations and openly contradicted EU policies by reversing earlier reforms. The EU lost its ability to act as an anchor to Turkey's reform drive and the lack of a credible accession prospect reinforced Turkey's shift away from the EU. The Eurozone economic crisis tainted the EU's image in the country further, while the Arab Spring facilitated Turkey's attempts to establish itself as a regional power in the Middle East (Öniş 2014).

The validity of the Europeanization framework has come under intense scrutiny because of rising Euro-skepticism in EU member states, the rise of illiberal tendencies inside and outside the EU as well as the multiple crises the Union has confronted, not least Brexit and the migration and refugee crisis. Turkey's relationship has followed this trajectory

and a large literature on 'De-Europeanization' has emerged. This scholarship has demonstrated that in various policy areas, ranging from the rule of law (Saatçioğlu 2016) to media freedoms (Yilmaz 2016), Turkey's policies and practices have moved away from the EU *acquis*.

I argue that, although Turkey's estrangement from the EU is evident in recent years in the case of the Syrian refugee and migration crisis, a longitudinal perspective reveals a sort of 'instrumental Europeanization' stance aimed at using the crisis for political benefit on a transactional, interests-first basis. Methodologically, I use primary and secondary sources as well as semi- structured interviews conducted with policy officials representing Turkish and international organizations, the details of which can be found at the end of the chapter.

Turkey's Policies on Migration and Asylum

Turkey's first legislative initiative in refugee law dates to 1934 when the nation passed its Settlement Law. The Law was quite restrictive: it mandated that only those of 'Turkish culture and descent' would be eligible to receive refugee status. The EU membership process led to realignment in Turkey's legislative framework regrading refugees, but later statutes maintained the ethnic descent criterion, especially for the purposes of settlement in the country (*Iskan Kanunu* 2006).

In 1951, the landmark Geneva Convention offered a definition of who may be regarded as a refugee and established the principle of non-refoulment, prohibiting states from returning refugees to states where they could face torture and other forms of prosecution due to their race, ethnicity, nationality or views (UNHCR 2010). A 1967 protocol broadened the definition of refugee and obliged states to comply with the Convention's provisions without time limitations (UNHCR 2010). Turkey has signed these key documents; however, its government stipulated that a right to asylum in Turkey could be granted only to those arriving from Europe. The direct consequence of this provision has been that the Turkish government views refugees arriving from elsewhere in the world, as occurred in the aftermath of the Iraq war in the 1990s and more recently because of the Syrian conflict, as 'guests,' with no asylum claim right. Such individuals are therefore expected to depart from the country at some point in the future. After the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the first Gulf War, as well as the earlier Iraq-Iran war of 1980–1988, people fleeing conflict in the Middle East (and further East) started arriving in Turkey. The country became a transit spot for those whose final destinations were further west, while others sought to settle in the nation (Tsarouhas 2019). The legal and regulatory framework of the country was inadequate to deal with this new reality. In the circumstances it confronted following these conflicts, Turkey ceased to be a country of emigration to safer and more prosperous western nations. It was therefore imperative that the country's government craft new initiatives to deal with that changing reality.

In 1994, Regulation 69/1994 offered temporary protection status to refugees. Those whose status was approved became entitled to resettlement in third countries. This was the first instance in which Turkey defined refugees (stemming from Europe) and asylum-seekers (stemming from elsewhere in the world) by use of national legislation (Kaya 2009). However, the big legislative changes to consolidate various instruments on refugee status occurred in the 2000s due to two factors: first, Turkey's EU accession talks, and second, the Syrian crisis and agreements with the European Union. Legislative alignment with the EU *acquis* is a major precondition for accession, and the Turkey's National Action Plan (NAP) for Asylum and Migration adopted in 2005 pointed to Turkey's willingness to proceed with alignment.

In 2006, an Implementation Directive issued by Turkey clarified the legal status of refugees and asylum-seekers. However, the geographical limitation was maintained resulting in a two-tier asylum and migration system: the first, referring to Europeans, arose from Turkey's approximation to the West during the Cold War. The second, addressing non-Europeans, was the product of an influx of Iraqi Kurds after 1988 and the first Gulf war (Kirişçi 2012). Nevertheless, this did not automatically mean dropping the geographic limitation that only offered asylum to people stemming from Europe. The NAP identified two conditions for lifting that limitation. First, that EU members commit to burden-sharing and second, legislative changes to prevent a rapid rise in refugees entering the country (National Action Plan 2005).

EU-Turkey Relations and the Syrian Crisis: The First Phase

Turkey began receiving Syrian refugees following the onset of the civil war in Syria in the spring of 2011. The government established an open-door policy for (what it labeled as) its 'guests' from Syria fleeing prosecution (Erdoğan 2014, 66). In the early days of the conflict, Turkey's refugee policy was premised on two assumptions. The first was a belief that the Syrian Civil War would not last long and Syrian President Assad would flee from power, opening opportunities for Turkey to play a decisive role in a post-Assad Syria. Second, Turkey's leaders believed that Syrians coming to Turkey would soon be able to return to their homes and that, therefore, there would be minimal need to integrate and accommodate them into Turkish society. Both assumptions were underpinned by Turkey's changing approach towards the Middle East during the 'Arab Spring' revolt. In an earlier era, the nation's government had sought to normalize and desecuritize relations with countries in the region, notably Syria, to fulfill the 'zero problems with neighbors' doctrine espoused by Ahmet Davutoğlu, advisor to Erdoğan and later Prime Minister. By the time the Arab Spring occurred, however, and in line with Davutoğlu's ambitious 'Strategic Depth' approach to Turkish foreign policy, the government sought to maximize diplomatic gains by positioning itself as a protagonist in the Middle East (D'Alema 2017, 10). Turkey's policymakers saw themselves as leaders of the indispensable country that other peoples and elites, including those of the EU, would need to look to for guidance, inspiration, and support. Turkey's approach to the Syrian Civil War was at least partly shaped by its expectations about what a post-conflict Syria would look like.

It is in 2011 that relations with the EU became important. Both Ankara and Brussels were committed to Assad's overthrow. Their cooperation concerning the Syrian crisis was instrumental in character from the start. Nonetheless, Turkey's agenda appeared not to clash with Europe's yet. Moreover, the mass exodus of Syrians via Turkey to Europe had yet to materialize. Further, although strains in EU-Turkey relations had already appeared, Ankara's senior policy makers maintained rhetorical commitment to EU membership, and the Union was happy to encourage cooperation with a key ally. In sum, in 2011, Turkey's politics in dealing with the Syrian crisis pointed to generosity and solidarity; its capacity to deliver sustainable protection, however, was limited and its relations with key EU member states very complicated.

In 2013, Turkey's adoption of the Law on Foreigners and International protection (LFIP) was a major step forward in the nation's refugee policy, constituting the first ever integrated national law concerning asylum in Turkey's history. (Suter 2013). The statute created a new body to deal with the issue of migrants and refugees, the General Directorate for Migration Management (GDMM). International actors were key in the process: the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) played a considerable role in drafting the effort (Çorabatir 2016, 7), while the EU congratulated Ankara on its passage, and pointed to the salience of the Visa Liberalization Roadmap in achieving further progress (European Commission 2014). The new law was very much in line with EU legislation and asylum procedures, such as provisions regarding 'safe third countries' and 'first-country-of asylum' (Çorabatir 2016, 7). It defined several categories of foreigners for the first time, and was explicit regarding the terms of entry, stay, and exit in the country (Soykan 2012). Moreover, the formation of the GDMM meant that tasks regarding the management of migration would now fall under the authority of that body instead of the country's General Directorate for Security. The new law also offered refugees and asylum seekers access to specified social services (*Yabancilar ve Uluslararasi Koruma Kanunu* 2013).

In 2014 and in line with its emphasis on EU-inspired reforms, Turkey issued a Temporary Protection Regulation to offer Syrians healthcare and education opportunities in accord with the Geneva Convention (Makovsky 2019). Further, Syrian nationals were given biometric ID cards, the opportunity to work legally in Turkey (many were involved in the informal economy already), and to access psychological support services, a crucial service to individuals frequently suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues. On the other hand, the implementation of these reforms has not proceeded without difficulty. Bureaucratic hurdles to gain access to those services, including ID cards, have meant that most Syrian refugees in Turkey have been unable to benefit from available support structures (Interview 2).

There has been a discernible effect on Turkey's public administration regarding migration and asylum as a result of the reforms mentioned above. The government has cooperated with NGOs in crisis management to an

unprecedented degree, not least because of the central role those organizations have played in project management and capacity building (Interview 1). Moreover, the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have also been directly involved, reinforcing the ability to run relevant projects smoothly, in cooperation with local government and especially municipalities. (Interviews 1, 2 and 4). One of the obstacles Turkey faces however, is its centralized state administration structure: coordination with 'on the ground' municipal authorities remains subject to a top-down relationship with central government officials holding the upper hand in allocating resources (Interview 4).

The progress that Turkey has made notwithstanding, it is worth pointing to deficiencies that persisted throughout the 2010–2015 reform era. First, the 2013 Law did not grant equal protection to all groups entering the country, relying instead mostly on a 2001 EU Directive outlining temporary protection (Çorabatir 2016, 7). Second, the new legislative framework did not include the right to work for Syrian refugees. Instead, individuals had to apply for work permits under a cumbersome and heavily bureaucratic process, which drove most into the underground economy (Kirişçi et al. 2018). Given the sheer number of Syrians in Turkey, these difficulties have had important consequences, as most refugees are unable to sustain decent living standards and remain part of the informal economy. They are also in effect subject to the Turkish government's willingness (or not) to satisfy their demands, resulting in a high level of vulnerability. Finally, Turkey has not lifted the geographic limitation provision mentioned earlier. A credible interpretation of that decision offered by Kirişçi (2012, 75) argues that this decision resulted from Ankara's fears of doing so without securing its EU membership first.

The Second Phase: EU-Turkey Agreements and instrumental Europeanization

2015 was a game-changing year in terms of Turkey's role in the Syrian crisis. The government's approach changed quite quickly as a result of the fact that the crisis now spilled over to its European neighbors. Large masses of people moved westward from Syria and put enormous pressure on EU governments to accept them as migrants and/or refugees. In most EU countries, right-wing populists saw a golden opportunity to proclaim an 'invasion' against 'native cultures,' and European governments were forced to act quickly to reduce the immigration-related pressures they faced. Germany recognized both the magnitude of the problem and the significance of Turkey as a country able to help it fend off those pressures, putting pressure on other member states to reach an agreement with Turkey. As a result, the EU and Turkey reached a series of crucial agreements. Turkey and the Union adopted a Joint Action Plan (JAP) in late 2015 and an EU-Turkey Statement followed in early 2016. Both agreements are crucial in understanding the central role Turkey has played during the Syrian migration crisis as well as the changing relations between Ankara and the EU.

The JAP resulted from the realization in Brussels, expressed in concrete terms through a September 2015 decision by the European Council, that Turkey could play a key role in stemming the flow of refugees heading towards Europe. It was also an EU candidate country and therefore the ability of Brussels to entice Ankara to comply with its demands was relatively high. What is remarkable about the JAP in retrospect was the EU's willingness to ignore Turkey's de-alignment with the EU legislative and political framework. Although cooperation between the two sides had proceeded smoothly since 2010 on migration issues, Turkey had started, as I noted above, to 'de- Europeanize' by the early 2010s.

In line with the agreement, a new EU accession chapter was opened for Turkey (chapter 17 on Economic and Monetary Policy). Further, Ankara would now be able to cooperate with FRONTEX, the EU border guard force, which would be deployed in the Aegean Sea, and to receive financial assistance to continue housing Syrians in its territory (European Commission 2015). The EU agreed to provide additional funds to assist Syrians regarding education and employment opportunities.

Perhaps more significantly, Turkey was able to land a bigger prize: the EU committed itself to enhancing the country's capacity to meet the identified criteria (benchmarks) to enable visa-free travel for Turkish citizens to the EU, a scheme Brussels has been implementing with neighboring countries and which aims at softening the Union's image in the region. Talks with Ankara had begun in 2013 and the country was making steady progress in meeting the 72 criteria that the EU demanded it meet to participate in the initiative, some of which were technical and others more political. For Turkey, achieving visa-free travel had always been the ultimate reward, even more important than

full EU membership and its associated obligations. That is because freedom of movement is prized highly by the Turkish population, offering lucrative employment opportunities in European countries and the chance to visit countries such as Germany or the Netherlands, where large Turkish minorities reside.

The EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 was more significant than the JAP. Turkey agreed in that pact to allow Syrian nationals to gain formal employment in the country. The Turkish government also committed to curbing the illicit trade of smugglers who transported desperate people under dangerous sea conditions across the Aegean Sea to EU member Greece. But the key aspect of the agreement was an effort to stanch the flow of migrants crossing from Turkey via Greece to EU territory. To do so, the Union and Turkey agreed on a 'one-in, one-out' formula. Irregular migrants that had crossed to Greece would now be returned to Turkey and would stay there; in return, the EU agreed to resettle Syrians from Turkey, based on certain criteria and up to a maximum of 72,000 individuals (European Council 2016). This rather artificial number proved not only inadequate, given the scale of human suffering at the time, but also unrealistic given the deep divisions within the Union's nations concerning the subject. The EU admitted that such a solution was far from perfect and claimed that cooperation with Turkey had become a necessity to manage the unfolding extraordinary circumstances. The scant attention paid to human rights in the EU-Turkey statement, and Ankara's track record on the subject, heightened criticism of the agreement (Haferlach and Kurban 2017). Finally, the Statement reenforced provisions already present in the JAP. The Union agreed that Ankara was now entitled to further financial assistance of €3 billion, to negotiations to open another chapter toward accession (the chapter in question was 33 of the *acquis* on financial and budgetary provisions), and to continuing dialogue to accelerate and confirm the visa liberalization process.

For political elites in the EU, and especially those of countries who had welcomed Syrian refugees in 2015 (such as Germany, Sweden and Greece) there is little doubt that the agreement with Turkey has worked well. In 2018, the European Commission released a report on the second anniversary of the EU-Turkey Statement and presented data on developments. Arrivals on the Aegean Sea islands from Turkey had dropped by 97% in two years; daily, this meant an average of about 80 a day, compared to more than 3000 during 2015 (European Commission 2018; Interviews 2–4, 6–7). Further, the Commission underlined that the resettlement of Syrian refugees to member states was continuing apace and that support provided to Greece had allowed the latter to manage the crisis more effectively. Finally, the Commission underscored how its financial aid to Turkey had enabled hundreds of thousands of Syrian children to attend school, 1.2 million people to obtain access to healthcare and hundreds of new schools to be constructed in Turkey (European Commission 2018).

Instrumental Europeanization and the Limits to EU-Turkey Cooperation

Turkey's political turmoil

By the time Turkey negotiated its agreements with the EU, facts on the ground in Syria had changed and the spill over of the crisis had reached major Turkish cities as well. Domestic political developments had accelerated and Turkey was caught in a spiral of violence and instability. As a result, its policy stance, both foreign and domestic, was upended. Its crucial role in tacking the crisis remained, but electoral calculations and growing signs of authoritarianism meant that the partnership with Europe became less a matter of pragmatic cooperation and more of an expedient instrument, or even a bargaining chip (Kaya 2021) to be used at will.

During the Syrian Civil War ISIS had used the power vacuum and chaos in Syria (and neighboring Iraq) to extend its influence and achieve territorial gains. To stop ISIS, the United States and other allied forces worked alongside the Kurdish militia YPG, which fought successfully against ISIS, but is also linked with the PKK in Turkey, an organization depicted as terrorist not only by Ankara, but also by its western allies. A peace process in Turkey that involved the government and the HDP, the Kurdish-dominated political party represented in Parliament, ended in failure in 2015. In that year and for a prolonged period, Turkey was rocked by successive terrorist attacks, mostly carried out by ISIS, including the killing of hundreds of innocent civilians in Ankara and a mass shooting at an Istanbul nightclub on New Year's Eve in 2016. The combination of heightened tensions concerning the 'Kurdish problem,' terrorism and growing nationalism led to a swift securitization of Turkish society and the growth of already existing anti-western sentiment.

Things only worsened when alleged followers of the Islamic preacher Fettulah Gülen infiltrated the state and attempted to carry out a *coup d'etat* in the summer of 2016. The Turkish Parliament was bombed by Turkish air pilots, a first in the nation's history, and tanks were rolled out on the Bosphorus bridge, a scene that most Turks had believed belonged to the past. Eventually the plotters were arrested and mass support for the civilian government restored Erdoğan as the elected President. However, the 2016 coup attempt changed Turkey: the government moved quickly to declare a state of emergency to 'cleanse' the state of conspirators and fellow travelers of the alleged masterminds. In the process, hundreds of thousands of civil servants, and private sector employees lost their jobs and associated rights. The army, police, media, judiciary, and academia all saw alleged conspirators imprisoned or accused of cooperation with the putschists. Whilst the Turkish government called on the European Union to support its anti-terrorist measures to address what it saw as the trauma of 15 July 2016, the EU condemned the coup attempt but also called for respect for democratic institutions and a quick return to the rule of law (IKV 2016).

Second, EU-Turkey acrimony increased further ahead of the controversial 2017 Turkish referendum to change the country's Constitution and political structure towards a Presidential system. As domestic Turkish politics and the associated tensions among different segments threatened to spill over to EU member states with a large Turkish population, President Erdoğan accused Germany and the Netherlands of restricting freedom of speech by prohibiting or curtailing campaign events ahead of the referendum. Turkey's belligerent rhetoric, characterizing German and other officials as 'Nazis', heightened already escalating tensions between Turkey, leading EU countries and the Union (Pierini 2018). Turkey's decision to undertake close economic, political and even military cooperation with Russia, beginning in 2016, drove the EU and Turkey further apart concerning how to deal with the Syrian crisis, an issue that had united them until then. The EU also objected to what the Turkish government called stringent 'anti-terrorist' legislation as preventing visa-free travel with Union countries. Gaining the right to visa-free travel has been a long-cherished goal of every Turkish government since the EU ceased the practice following the 1980s coup, when the army took over for three years, but also managed to cause long-lasting damage to Turkish democracy through the introduction of an illiberal Constitution in 1982 (Kirişçi 2014). The issue remains high on Turkey's agenda, as this is written, but the EU Council remains reluctant to grant Turkey that right, aware of the sharp domestic criticism that such a step would likely elicit.

The Syrian Crisis and its repercussions

Heightened political instability in Turkey has combined with the non-resolution of the Syrian crisis to lead to increasing tensions regarding the integration and accommodation of millions of refugees. The Turkish government is ambivalent regarding the extent to which it wishes to integrate Syrian refugees into the country (Interviews 2 and 3). Some major civil society stakeholder groups, such as some trade unions, argue that informal employment by refugees undercuts minimum wage legislation and penalizes Turkish workers as a result (Interview 6). Integration has also becomes become more difficult because Syrians now constitute a majority in certain cities along the country's southern border and form majorities in certain neighborhoods in the country's 17-million-person metropolis, Istanbul. The once welcoming attitude of the Turkish people has turned to increasing anger, as it is becoming increasingly clear that most Syrians intend to stay in the country even after a political solution is reached in Syria (Makovsky 2019). Worryingly, the issue is no longer a matter of displaying solidarity to those fleeing conflict. When President Erdoğan raised the prospect of granting citizenship to Syrians in 2016, the opposition vociferously opposed such a plan and a popular backlash forced Erdoğan to backtrack.

Although about 95,000 Syrians had been granted citizenship by early 2021, the government now claims that eventually all Syrian refugees will return home, a rather unlikely prospect given the conditions in their home nation (Makovsky 2019). Humanitarian organization representatives argue that the ambiguous status of Syrians in Turkey cannot continue as they are (interview 6-8), although it is equally clear that awarding full citizenship rights to all of them is politically untenable. Incidents of violence between Syrian refugees and locals, sometimes resulting in deaths and widespread urban violence, have been on the increase, especially in the western urban centers where cultural misunderstandings and differences are as deep as those between Syrians and EU member state citizens (International Crisis Group 2018). Public opinion polls suggest that most Turks see Syrian refugees as neither willing nor able to integrate into Turkish society.

The 2019 local elections provided a political platform for open discussion of the issue of Syrian migrants and refugees. Opposition parties sought to capitalize on growing popular discontent and supported more restrictive treatment of Syrians in the country. The governing AKP responded to those claims by promising to deliver on a more stringent approach and thus appease its critics. In October 2019 Turkey engaged in a military operation in Syria with the ostensible aim of resettling more than a million Syrians in a safe zone there (*Deutsche Welle* 2019). This, however, occurred after the political damage had been done. In the March 2019 local elections, the opposition won almost all of the major cities, including the key battleground of Istanbul and the capital Ankara. In Istanbul, in particular, the country's largest city and major financial, commercial, and artistic center, the AKP disputed the first round's results and forced a runoff. Its second defeat, larger in scale, confirmed increasing citizen discontent with government policies, including those addressing the Syrian issue. Metropolitan cities in Turkey are major sources of political patronage, able to distribute goods such as employment and benefits to millions of citizens and voters. In that sense, the result is significant in the medium to long-term in terms of the opposition parties, principally the center left Republican peoples' Party (CHP) to drum up support ahead of national elections.

Caught between growing domestic discontent and its obligations towards the EU, the Turkish government decided to ease a share of that pressure by taking unilateral action. In February 2020, 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in Syria by government-backed rebels. In a swift response, Turkey announced that its western borders with Greece were now open, inviting migrants and/or refugees to leave the country and pass on to EU territory (Evans and Coskun 2020). This unilateral action met with a severe response by Greece; Athens sealed the border and pushed back people caught between the two countries. The resulting human misery is a stain on the reputation of both governments, but also a symbolic expression of the unresolved dilemmas that the Syrian war and resultant migration crisis has created. Greece summoned high ranking EU officials to the Greek-Turkish border and capitalized on their expression of solidarity towards a member state, vowing to prevent a repetition of the 2015 crisis (Politico 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably eased the crisis, but no long-term solution has been found and the ongoing Greek-Turkish dispute regarding their bilateral relations has found another platform through which to find expression.

Conclusion

Turkey has played a critical role in the Syrian crisis. During the first years of the civil war in Syria, its role was widely (and rightly) celebrated: Turkey conducted a huge humanitarian effort, and millions of desperate people found refuge in the country. Although Turkey continues to host record numbers of Syrian refugees, its motives and policy stance have now become much more complicated. Moreover, in recent years Turkey has become part of the crisis, not least through its incursion into northern Syria and the stationing of Turkish troops inside Syrian territory. Ankara's activism, while justified in the name of the fight against terror, has concerned many of its allies worried about its intentions, due to the fact that it is now Turkey, along with Russia, that largely controls Syria's future political trajectory. The absence of a permanent solution to the Syrian crisis allows Turkey to maintain its leverage *vis-á-vis* western states, but it has come with a high degree of uncertainty and an inability to extricate itself from a long-standing conflict.

In theoretical terms, this chapter has argued that close analysis of Turkey's role in the Syrian crisis provides further empirical proof of the aptness of the 'instrumental Europeanization' thesis. From 2010 to 2015 and despite the emergence of tendencies to distance itself from the EU in other policy areas, Turkey benefited greatly from the legal and institutional expertise of international organizations (primarily the EU) in handling the Syrian crisis. The upgrading of its institutional infrastructure paved the way for the 2015 and 2016 refugee-related agreements with the EU and made Turkey popular regarding its readiness to show compassion to desperate civilians. However, the second phase has been less benign. Turkey's domestic political scene became inextricably linked to the ongoing crisis in Syria, not least due to the Kurdish issue, and a wave of political instability was followed by increasing authoritarian tendencies by the ruling party and government. Domestic opposition to the long-term hosting of millions of refugees has grown as the crisis has gone on and relations with the EU have likewise grown progressively more tense. The agreements reached between these two parties remain formally in place, but the transactional, interest-based character of their relations highlights the limits of Turkey's Europeanization process.

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