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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka • Anna Maria Dyner • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Justyna Szczudlik • Marcin Terlikowski • Tomasz Żornaczuk

The Challenges of the EU-Turkey Migration Deal

Jolanta Szymańska, Karol Wasilewski

A statement signed between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016 has become one of the main pillars of the EU's migration strategy, essentially limiting the flow of migrants to the EU. In recent months, tensions between Turkey and Greece and other reasons have made implementation of the deal difficult, reflected in an increase in the level of migration on the route from Turkey. Despite these problems, the lack of an agreement between the Member States on intra-EU reform of migration policy means the EU will continue to base its migration strategy primarily on cooperation with countries in its neighbourhood.

The EU-Turkey statement brought spectacular results in reducing migration to the European Union. In the first months after it was signed, migration on the East Mediterranean route decreased by over 90%. Currently, the number of migrants coming from Turkey to Greece is still significantly lower than before the agreement's entry into force. However, in an EC communication from May, it appears that since March the number of migrants has increased. More than 9,000 have arrived by sea since the beginning of the year. By land to Greece, there have been about 6,000. This is a nine-fold increase compared to the same period in 2017.

The EU-Turkey Statement. The intention of the statement of 18 March 2016, is to end the irregular flow of migrants from Turkey to the EU and fight networks of smugglers. Based on the signed statement, from 20 March 2016, all irregular migrants who travel from Turkey to the Greek islands should be returned to Turkey. Also, in exchange for every Syrian migrant returned from the Greek islands, another Syrian refugee from Turkey should be resettled in the EU (the so-called "1:1" system). Along with a permanent limit on the number of irregular migrants on the East Mediterranean route, a voluntary admission programme for Syrian refugees by EU Member States was to be launched. The Turkish side also undertook to strengthen the protection of its borders and prevent the development of new irregular migration routes to the Union. The EU, in turn, committed to paying out €3 billion under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, and if exhausting these funds, mobilising an additional €3 billion by the end of 2018. In addition to financial support, the EU promised to liberalise the visa regime for Turkey with the aim to completely abolish visas for citizens of that country by the end of June 2016. These actions were to be coupled with re-energising the process of Turkey's accession to the EU.

Implementation. The incentives concerning the acceleration of Turkey's integration with the EU were formulated too simply and have faced numerous hurdles since the beginning. In July 2016, after the failed coup attempt in Turkey and subsequent mass arrests, the EU froze the accession negotiations in practice. Visa requirements for Turkish citizens traveling to the EU still have not been lifted. The latest EC report confirms that Turkey still does not meet the requirements of the visa liberalisation action plan (mainly concerning the adaptation of Turkish anti-terrorism legislation to EU standards), which blocks this process. In view of the limitations of the political dialogue, the EU put in financial incentives. In 2016-2017, €3 billion was allocated to support Syrians in Turkey, and in 2018, the launch of the next tranche of assistance began. The challenge on the EU side is the overloaded Greek asylum system and the related slow rate of return of

illegal migrants from Greece to Turkey. According to EC data from March 2016, only about 2,000 have returned under the EU-Turkey deal. The low return rate may be encouraging irregular migration to the Union.

Tensions between Turkey and Greece. The increased migration from Turkey to Greece coincided with increasing tensions in Turkish-Greek relations¹ over the case of eight Turkish soldiers who, after the unsuccessful coup attempt in 2016, fled to Greece and requested asylum. Although Turkey demanded their extradition, a Greek court rejected it several times, citing doubts about a fair trial in Turkey and other reasons. Since then, the number of violations of the Greek border by Turkish air and naval forces has increased. Turkish decision-makers also intensified their anti-Western rhetoric and declared their willingness to renegotiate the Lausanne Treaty, which regulates, among others, the Turkey-Greece border. Two Greek soldiers who reportedly mistakenly crossed the border were detained in Turkey at the turn of February to March. According to the Greeks, the increase in the number of migrants is an instrument of pressure applied by the Turkish authorities, who turn a blind eye to their departures. This claim may not be unfounded, as evidenced by the fact that when, in the first half of June, the Greek court decided to release the Turkish soldiers from detention and transfer them to a place protected by the Greek security services, Turkey suspended the application of the bilateral readmission agreement. According to the Greek Ministry for the Protection of Public Order and Citizens, under this agreement, signed in 2001, in the last two years, about 1,200 people were deported from Greece to Turkey. Yet, at the same time, the Turkish authorities continue to assert they intend to continue implementation of the agreement between Turkey and the EU.

Situation in Syria. In the longer term, the EU-Turkey agreement may be undermined by the escalation of tensions in the Syrian province of Idlib. Under the Astana agreement, concluded in September 2017 by Turkey, Russia, and Iran, this area constitutes a so-called de-escalation zone under Turkish supervision. Security in the province is maintained by about 1,300 Turkish soldiers, deployed in 12 posts. The Idlib operation carries two risks for Turkey. The first is the possibility of an Assad regime offensive on this territory. Although the presence of the Turkish army should serve as a deterrent, it cannot be ruled out that the authorities in Damascus will try to break the remaining opposition and divide Turkey and Russia. The second risk is related to the situation inside the province and the existence of competing Syrian opposition groups there, including jihadists, between which there is occasional fighting, destabilising the situation. In either case, an escalation of conflict in Idlib would lead to a flow of refugees to Turkey (it is estimated that the province's population is 3 million, half internally displaced persons). If such a scenario materialises, Turkey could have serious difficulties implementing the agreement with the EU under the existing arrangements.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The EU-Turkey agreement remains one of the most effective elements of the EU's strategy towards the mass-migration crisis. Nevertheless, it would be beneficial for the EU to reduce its dependence on Turkey related to migration. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly signalled that the implementation of the agreement has not met his expectations but that he will not terminate it for now. That stance resulted from the fact that the deal matched some of Turkey's interests, including the financial support from the EU and weakening the attractiveness of Turkey as a transit point for migrants heading to Europe. This may change because of the tensions in Turkish-Greek relations, the uncertain situation in Idlib province, or the inability of the EU to implement all the provisions of the agreement, which may in the future induce the Turkish authorities to renegotiate the contract or weaken their resolve to implement it.

The EU summit of 28-29 June 2018² did not bring any concrete decisions on intra-EU reform of migration policy. In the face of disagreements between Member States regarding reform of the asylum system and the EU system of border protection, blocking the flow of migrants to Europe in cooperation with countries outside the Union will remain a key EU priority. In this context, the EU-Turkey statement is a model to be replicated with respect to other irregular migration routes. The concept envisioned in the summit conclusions for the creation of special centres in non-European countries to place migrants rescued at sea draws on the experience of the EU-Turkey deal. This concept though faces far greater difficulties than those observed so far in the EU's cooperation with Turkey. Among the reasons for this are that some neighbourhood states have already signalled their unwillingness to host migrants on their territory and political instability in the region.

¹ K. Wasilewski, "Turkey's Relations with Greece and Cyprus: Old Challenges Resurface," PISM Bulletin, No. 60 (1131), 23 April 2018.

² J. Szymańska, How the EU Summit will Affect Migration Policy, PISM Spotlight, no. 50/2018, 02 July 2018.