

EU-Turkey relations in light of the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis

SUMMARY

Approximately 3.6 million refugees have entered Turkey since the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, the highest number in the region. Despite on-going international and European Union financial and humanitarian support, this ever-increasing refugee presence has resulted in heightened social tensions in Turkey. In the 2019 local elections, the loss of the Istanbul mayoralty by the governing Justice and Development (AK) party was perceived as a major setback for the 'imperial presidency' of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Istanbul's new mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu (Republican People's Party, CHP), played a leading role in nurturing aversion for Syrian refugees, stating that Turkey was managing the refugees badly and that 'people are unhappy'. Some Turkish politicians also regard refugees as a security threat – a trend that has grown since September 2019 when the Turkish military began Operation Peace Spring in north-east Syria, with the aim of containing the Kurds and creating a 'safe zone' to which Syrian refugees could return.

The Turkish military operation in Syria, as well as the Turkish incursion into Libya, and other geostrategic issues, such as gas drilling disputes with Cyprus, have led relations between the EU and Turkey, already tainted by the drop in democratic standards since the failed military coup in 2016, to deteriorate further. Repeated threats by Erdoğan that Turkey would 'open the gates' and let the refugees enter the EU materialised on 28 February 2020, when Turkey opened its borders with Greece, setting the scene for a new refugee crisis. A swift European response, with the presence of the presidents of the main EU institutions in Greece on 3 March 2020, demonstrated the unity and will to face this critical situation together. Past experience, in particular the 2015 refugee crisis, has however highlighted the weaknesses in the internal and external dimensions of the EU's migration policy. The current crisis is both a stress-test and an opportunity for the EU to clarify its own strategic position in order to develop a new consolidated geopolitical blueprint for the whole Mediterranean and Middle East that would not only tackle the ambition and behaviour of regional powers such as Turkey, but also place the EU on an equal footing with other global powers active in the region.



In this Briefing

- EU-Turkey relations
- EU support for refugees in Turkey
- Turkey triggers new EU-border crisis (2020)
- Challenges for the 'geopolitical Commission'

EU-Turkey relations

Turkey signed an association agreement with the European Economic Community as far back as 1963 and it entered into EU accession negotiations in 2005. When it comes to EU financial assistance, for the 2014-2020 period around €4.5 billion has been allocated to Turkey, the largest share, around €3.5 billion, from the [Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance \(IPA\) funds](#) (remaining funds came mainly from cross-border cooperation and other programmes). Following the 2016 events in Turkey (failed military coup, and reinforcement of the Erdogan presidency through constitutional amendments), the EU reduced its pre-accession assistance (IPA) to Turkey by €70 million in October 2018. In its March 2019 [resolution](#) on the European Commission report on Turkey, the European Parliament called on the Council and Commission to suspend EU accession talks with the country.

In its October 2019 [resolution](#) on Turkish [military action in Syria](#) and its consequences, Parliament called on the Council to consider suspending trade preferences under the agreement on agricultural products and, as a last resort, suspending the EU-Turkey customs union (which came into force in December 1995). Furthermore, following recent Turkish activities (both drilling in Cyprus' territorial waters and military operations in Libya) a new cut in EU funds earmarked for 2020, within the range of €150 million to €400 million, is under consideration. The European Parliament supports this reduction, recalling however, that the EU should maintain funding for civil society organisations and education programmes such as Erasmus+ in Turkey.

EU support for refugees in Turkey

The European Commission's [2019 country report on Turkey](#) indicates that, 'Turkey has continued to provide generous assistance to refugees, hosting the largest refugee community in the world, with 3.6 million Syrians under Temporary Protection and around 370 000 registered non-Syrian refugees. The number of asylum-seekers continued to increase over the reporting period. In 2018, Turkey had granted international protection to 72 056 applicants'. There are currently 62 'satellite cities' in Turkey where asylum-seekers and recognised 'conditional refugees' are required to reside. Syrians may register in any of Turkey's 81 provinces, but must then stay in that province. Registration was temporarily suspended in some provinces during 2018.

The EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis (2014)

To tackle the difficult situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey, [the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis](#) also known as the Madad Fund, was created in 2014, initially providing funding of €542 million (the amount increased to €1.9 billion in 2019). Dealing with the response to the Syrian crisis, Turkey is among countries that have contributed to the fund and among the main beneficiaries, as it has received approximately €500 million. The fund addresses the educational, economic and social needs of Syrian refugees in both Syria and neighbouring countries (mainly in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan), while also supporting local communities and their administrations.

Humanitarian support for Turkey: EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (2016)

In order to support Turkey's efforts in hosting refugees, and in addition to the regional Madad Fund, Turkey has received EU aid from humanitarian funding of approximately €6 billion under the [EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#). The facility was created following the 18 March 2016 deal when the European Council and Turkey reached an agreement aimed at stemming the flow of irregular migration via Turkey to Europe. According to the [EU-Turkey statement](#), 'All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey'. The facility was funded from the EU budget with additional contributions from EU Member States. By February 2020, 100 % of the €6 billion envelope had been programmed and €3 billion spent. Brussels will pay out the remaining funds, some €3 billion, by the end of 2020. Erdoğan, [accusing](#) the EU of not keeping its end of the agreement, has repeatedly threatened to open Turkey's borders to refugees seeking to cross into Europe.

Turkey triggers new EU-border crisis (2020)

Since launching its military operation in Syria (September 2019), Erdoğan has increased the pressure on Turkey's relationship with the EU. A new refugee crisis, similar to the one in 2015, cannot be ruled out, not least in view of Erdoğan's threat 'to open the gates' and send Syrian refugees to Europe, which materialised on 28 February 2020. The following day, in his first public speech since 36 Turkish troops were killed in Syria, Erdoğan [said](#) 'What did we do yesterday? We opened the doors', adding that, 'We will not close those doors ... Why? Because the European Union should keep its promises'. Erdoğan also complained that the EU had failed to support his military efforts in Syria, in particular in Idlib. Josep Borrell has [said](#) that the Idlib operation created 'one of the most dramatic human rights situations since the Second World War' affecting almost 1 million people.

Following Turkey's decision to open its border with Greece, Athens declared a state of emergency. The visit of EU leaders to Greece on 3 March sent a strong signal of unity and readiness to tackle the brewing crisis, while also providing Greece with support and practical solidarity. At the [joint press conference](#) alongside Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece, Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia (which holds the Council presidency), David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament, and Charles Michel, President of the European Council, the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, said that, 'This border is not only a Greek border but it is also a European border. ... We have come here today to send a very clear statement of European solidarity and support to Greece. Our first priority is making sure that order is maintained at the Greek external border, which is also a European border'.

At the same event, David Sassoli [evoked](#) the need to open humanitarian corridors, and to help the 4 000 unaccompanied minors already present in Greece. EU leaders agreed to give Greece financial assistance of €700 million in addition to a substantial increase in funds for [migration and border management](#) under Heading 4 of the proposed 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) has confirmed that it is ready to deploy a [Rapid Border Intervention Team](#). Frontex is also preparing the deployment of an offshore patrol vessel and six coastal patrol vessels, two helicopters, one aircraft, and three thermo-vision vehicles. Finally, 100 border guards in addition to the current 530 border guards will be deployed at land and sea borders. According to [Deutsche Welle](#), Frontex expects the situation to deteriorate even further, and is warning that 'mass migration flows' will be difficult to stop.

EU solidarity measures: Article 78(3) TFEU

On 1 March, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis [announced](#) that Greece would not be accepting any new asylum applications for one month, invoking [Article 78\(3\)](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) as a means to put in place provisional emergency relocation measures. According to this article, 'In the event of one or more Member States being confronted by an emergency situation characterised by a sudden inflow of nationals of third countries, the Council, on a proposal from the Commission, may adopt provisional measures for the benefit of the Member State(s) concerned. It shall act after consulting the European Parliament'.

The European Union has already applied provisions under this article in 2015, when both Italy and Greece were exposed to increased migratory pressure. With over 500 000 refugees present in the two countries, European solidarity and [legislation on emergency relocation of asylum-seekers](#) were put under a stress test. In September 2015, despite most Member States' willingness to [relocate](#) asylum-seekers, [Decision \(EU\) 2015/1601](#), adopted by a qualified majority vote, was refused by five Member States (Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania voted against, while Finland abstained). Slovakia and Hungary not only objected to their participation in the scheme before the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU), but also challenged the procedural mechanism of the decision, adopted by a qualified majority vote by Home Affairs Ministers, arguing that such politically sensitive matters should be adopted by unanimity by the Heads of State or Government. The CJEU ruled on the legality of the decision in a [judgment](#) of September 2017 ([C-643/15](#) and [C-647/15](#)). In a further

development, Czechia, Hungary and Poland decided not to implement the decision, which resulted in the Commission [referring](#) them to the CJEU for non-compliance with their legal obligations.

The choice of framework for the relocation scheme was very specific. It was a temporary derogation from the Dublin [Regulation No 604/2013](#) on allocation of responsibility for reception and determining asylum applications, valid for 24 months. According to a [study](#) conducted for the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, even countries that supported the relocation decision have not complied with it in full. While the total number of approximately 160 000 asylum seekers to be relocated fell to around 100 000 following the March 2016 agreement with Turkey, according to the European Court of Auditors report on [Asylum, relocation and return of migrants: Time to step up action to address disparities between objectives and results](#) published in November 2019, only 34 705 eligible migrants – 12 706 from Italy and 2 999 from Greece – have been relocated to 22 Member States and three associated countries – Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

Challenges for the 'geopolitical Commission'

The Greek-Turkish border crisis is a test of both the EU's unity and its strategic capacity to act in its neighbourhood. Ursula von der Leyen's [remarks](#) stressed European unity. As Parliament already noted in its 2016 report on [the situation in the Mediterranean and the need for a holistic EU approach to migration](#), the refugee crisis offers an opportunity for reform but also risks failing to implement that reform. When it comes to a ['geopolitical Commission'](#) the challenge for the EU is to develop a realistic policy toolkit, in line with its discourse, in order to uphold its credibility and influence in the region, including towards regional powers such as Turkey. From a positive perspective, at the Extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council in Zagreb, Josep Borrell [said](#) that the Union can re-examine its common interest in ending conflict in Syria and cooperating on the refugee crisis with other actors present in the country. The current crisis could also help to redefine the Union's strategic position and develop a consolidated geopolitical blueprint for the whole Mediterranean and the Middle East that would secure Europe's place on an equal footing with global powers active in the region.

MAIN REFERENCES

Guild E., Costello C. and Moreno-Lax V., [Implementation of the 2015 Council Decisions establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and of Greece](#), Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament, March 2017.

Radjenovic A., [Protection of EU external borders](#), EPRS, European Parliament, June 2019.

Stanicek B., [Turkey's military operation in Syria and its impact on relations with the EU](#), EPRS, European Parliament, November 2019.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2020.

Photo credits: © punghi / Shutterstock.com.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

