

Barely Alive? The Costs and Benefits of the EU-Turkey Statement on Irregular Migration*

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Abstract

The EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 - also known as the EU-Turkey deal or the refugee deal - had strong underlying motivations both for the European Union (EU) and Turkey. For the EU, the EU-Turkey Statement aimed to limit if not, end irregular migration from Turkey and its immediate neighbourhood. For Turkey, the Statement provided financial support and strategic diplomatic engagement, putting Turkey back on the EU's political map. With Ankara frequently threatening to withdraw from the deal and with the EU institutions responsible for the deal having been criticized for not taking a "humane" stand toward migration management and for increasing the EU's dependence on the Turkish government, it remains somewhat unclear why the EU-Turkey Statement still perseveres. Taking into consideration both parties' rationalist calculations, this paper offers an analytical overview of the costs and benefits of the implementation of the deal from 2016 to 2024. The findings show that the advantages of the Statement for the EU (governments) and the Turkish government outweigh its costs. Unable to engage in concerted actions and to strengthen the internal dimension of its migration governance, the Statement helped the EU utilize Turkey both as a buffer zone between countries

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of origin and its member states and as a geopolitical space where the refugee Other can reside. The Statement also created a blueprint for similar arrangements of the EU with other neighbouring countries. As far as Turkey is concerned, the Statement specifically equipped the Turkish government with unparalleled leverage in its relations with the EU which remains incapable of instrumentalizing its normative conditionality vis-à-vis Turkey. Thus, at the intergovernmental level, the benefits of the Statement outweigh its costs. How much this satisfactory cost-benefit ratio translates into the public domain remains unclear and is subject to further scholarly investigation.

Key words: EU-Turkey relations, EU-Turkey Statement, irregular migration, refugee deal, asylum policy, transactionalism

1. Introduction

The March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, (also known as the EU-Turkey deal or the refugee deal), remains a cornerstone of European migration management despite ongoing political tensions and challenges between the European Union (EU) and Turkey. The EU-Turkey Statement was a response developed by EU member states under the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership to the sharp increase in irregular migrants crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece. The summer of 2015 tested the limits of the EU's border control mechanisms as well as the capacity of the EU member states to handle asylum applications.

In the summer of 2015, almost 1 million refugees arrived in EU territories uprooted not only from the Syrian conflict but from regions with ongoing conflicts such as Afghanistan and Iraq. It was also the summer when more than 3,700 lost their lives while trying to cross the Aegean Sea (IOM, 2016). Frontex reported that in 2015 EU member states had more than 1,820,000 irregular border crossings along their external borders which was more than six times higher than the previous year (Frontex, 2016). The majority of these irregular detections occurred in the Eastern Mediterranean route with almost 890,000 irregular crossings between Turkey and the Greek islands. Among these irregular migrants, very few applied for asylum in Greece and continued to reach other EU member states as their final destination.

Both the EU and Turkey had reasons to accept the Statement's scope and contents. The EU was motivated to limit the number of irregular crossings, reduce the deaths at the Aegean Sea, and ease the burden on its frontline member states. Turkey aimed to get the EU committed to burden sharing at least through financial mechanisms while revitalizing its fading EU membership prospects and gaining strategic benefits. With different motivations and aims in mind, both the EU and Turkey engaged in this process that created blueprints for the EU's future migration management while impacting its accession process-related engagements and policies as well.

Looking from the accession perspective, it is possible to argue that during the last eight years of the Statement, Turkey's membership prospects diminished even more, to a mere strategic partnership with financial incentives on the sidelines (Pierini, 2023). The deal has also impacted the EU's global ambitions as a normative actor in a negative way while causing legitimacy issues and undermining its normative norms, values and standards. The deal was also a product of the externalization of the EU's migration policies (Cassarino, 2021). At the same time, both the EU and Turkey have a vested interest in maintaining this arrangement, as it offers mutual benefits: Turkey gains financial support and geopolitical leverage, while the EU enhances its border security and political stability. Despite its criticisms and shortcomings, the lack of viable alternatives and shared concerns over migration control and regional stability keep the EU-Turkey Statement in place as a key diplomatic tool in managing the complex relationship between the two "difficult" partners. During the negotiation process and the implementation of the Statement, issues related to conditionality (Börzel and Soyaltin-Colella, 2020), EU's and Turkey's geopolitical strategies (Kirişci, 2016) as well as the accession negotiation items became further impactful in achieving political stability for Turkey (Niemann and Zaun, 2018).

This paper aims to analyse the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement through the lenses of costs and benefits. We argue that the EU-Turkey Statement provided strong motivations for both the EU and Turkey. For Turkey, the Statement provided financial support and strategic diplomatic engagement, putting Turkey back on the EU's political map. The EU delivered the financial promises with some delay while its diplomatic engagement with Turkey gradually dwindled to a minimum. With Ankara frequently threatening to withdraw from the deal due to the EU's unwillingness to deliver certain incentives and with the EU institutions responsible for the deal having been criticized for not taking a "humane" stand toward migration management and for increasing the EU's dependence on the Turkish government, it remains somewhat unclear why the EU-Turkey Statement still perseveres. Taking into consideration both parties' rationalist calculations, this paper offers an analytical overview of the costs and benefits of the implementation of the deal from 2016 to 2024. The findings show that the EU-Turkey Statement created a blueprint for similar arrangements of the EU with other neighbouring countries while diminishing its perception as a global "normative" actor. On the Turkish side, the Statement reduced Turkey's membership prospects to a conflictual partnership with limited financial incentives on the sidelines. At the same time, Turkey was able to reduce the number of irregular crossings and deaths at its sea borders while making changes in its management of migration specifically in the legal and operational domains, while gaining considerable political leverage vis-à-vis the EU and its member states.

Overall, our findings indicate that the EU's and Turkey's commitment to the maintenance of the EU-Turkey Statement perseveres since its benefits – especially for the Turkish government and the governments of EU member states – outweigh its costs. This article will first look at both Turkey's and the EU's motivations to pursue the Statement. After analysing Turkey's gains and losses from the deal, the following section will examine the costs and benefits of the deal for the EU. The concluding section will summarize the key findings and offer an overarching assessment of the Statement's future prospects.

2. The benefits and costs of the 2016 statement on irregular migration for Turkey

2.1. *Benefits for Turkey*

One of the strongest benefits of the Statement for Ankara has been the financial support it received for the refugees residing in Turkey. The international burden sharing has been very minimal until 2016 with Turkey bearing the financial cost of hosting nearly three million refugees. In the initial stages of the Syrian conflict, the Turkish government did not seek international burden-sharing (T24, 2013). The reasons for not accepting international support were due to two main reasons. Firstly, Turkey assumed that the situation would be temporary and that seeking international assistance or cooperation would not be necessary. Secondly, receiving financial or other forms of international aid would require sharing information, opening refugee camps to international organizations, and ensuring financial transparency (Kale, 2016). With these factors in mind, Turkey aimed to address the crisis independently. The deal provided Turkey with financial support of €6 billion to manage the world's largest refugee population. This EU funding focused on improvements in housing, healthcare, education, and basic services for refugees, easing the strain on Turkey's domestic resources.

The initial financial support was to be €3 billion and was then increased to a total amount of €6 billion through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT). The Facility was set up based on full cooperation with the European Parliament (EP) to provide grants and other financial support to ensure that the needs of the refugees and host communities are addressed in a comprehensive and coordinated manner (European Commission, 2015). Financial contribution efforts started in January 2016 and continued for the next couple of years with increased intensity. This financial assistance has also helped Turkey build respective infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, health and community centres, not just for the Syrians under Temporary Protection (SuTPS), but also for the local Turkish population. Currently, the initial funds have been spent, but there is continued interest in renewing or

expanding this financial support. It is possible to see that both the EU and Turkey benefit from this financial arrangement, which helps stabilize the refugee situation in Turkey while preventing more people from irregularly reaching EU member states.

The financial contribution has improved the living conditions of not only SuTPs but also of the asylum seekers and refugees. It supported the persons needing protection through direct ways such as cash support mechanisms. At the centre of this cash support system lies the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) programme, run by the IFRC and the Turkish Red Crescent Society and funded by the EU. This programme provided regular cash assistance to more than 1.5 million refugees living in Turkey (IFRC, 2024). This was a cash assistance system via prepaid debit cards for the most vulnerable SuTPs in need of protection. The amount was calculated based on the family size and gave the flexibility to each family to decide for themselves how to cover essential needs like rent, transport, bills, and food. In the beginning, it provided the much-needed financial support directly to the persons in need, however over time this direct cash support mechanism was criticized as it was restricting the SuTPs to be self-sufficient and independent. Overall, the ESSN has been the largest humanitarian programme in the history of the EU and the largest programme ever implemented by the IFRC (Cash Hub, 2020).

Turkey also benefited from the Statement by obtaining political leverage in its relations with the EU. By controlling the flow of irregular crossings to EU member states and territories, Turkey gained significant leverage in its political interactions with the EU. It used migration policy as a political tool for issue linkage to integrate other topics of strategic importance for Turkey into the political agenda of the EU, such as trade, the modernization of the Customs Union, visa liberalization, and EU membership talks. Especially the visa liberalization issue has been one of the major points of discussion for the Turkish side, as well as for domestic electoral gains. Turkey aimed at achieving visa liberalization by June 2016 and this date was later postponed to September 2016. After the failed coup attempt of 15 July, visa liberalization has been postponed indefinitely, with six benchmarks remaining to be fulfilled by Turkish authorities. If achieved, visa-free travel to the EU for Turkish citizens would have been a historic diplomatic success (The Guardian, 2016).

Turkey acknowledged the Statement as a further opportunity to enhance its dialogue with the EU with regard to the revitalization of the EU accession process as well as to update its Customs Union with the EU. One of the major political motivations for Turkey to engage in the Statement was to revitalize its accession process, which stagnated over the freezing of various accession negotiations chapters. After Turkey's EU membership talks began in 2005, only one of the 35 Chapters was provisionally closed for negotiations. Several chapters are still

blocked either by the EU Council due to the Cyprus issue or by individual EU member states like Cyprus (UK Parliament, 2012). In the history of the EU enlargement, the blocking of negotiation chapters by the EU and/or its Member States once accession negotiations have been opened has been never heard of (Ibid) until the kick-off of the accession negotiations with the Western Balkans.

The Statement increased Turkey's critical role and leadership in managing a large-scale international (protection) crisis. Additionally, it amplified its international standing and recognition as a key actor in regional security and migration management. The global recognition of Turkey as a key player elevated its global interactions with international organizations such as the UN. In 2019, Turkey was one of the co-convenors of the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) which was co-hosted by the UNHCR and Switzerland (UNHCR, 2019). The GRF aimed at producing the Global Compact for Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration.

The Statement also supported Turkey's maritime and land border control mechanisms, and the number of irregular crossings dropped radically by the end of 2016 (ESI, 2023). In 2015, the number of irregular crossings was 885,386 and in 2017 this number significantly dropped to 182,227. The following years showed a declining trend with 43,319 and 56,561 crossings in 2017 and 2018, respectively (Frontex, 2022). This was due to increased patrolling on both sides as well as the deal's impact on the smuggling business. The reduction of human smuggling in the Aegean Sea has limited organized criminal networks' extensive activities while reducing deaths at the sea. This has also contributed to the prevention of future humanitarian crises in the Greek islands in terms of prospective pushbacks, backlog of asylum applications, and poor refugee protection conditions while reducing social challenges and security issues in the refugee camps. The Statement also included a so-called 1-to-1 principle. According to this principle, all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 would be returned to Turkey and for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian was planned to be settled in EU member states (EC, 2016). This meant further discouragement for irregular migrants, thus contributing to Turkey's maritime border security and control. The Statement thus helped Turkey maintain control over migration in its region and neighbourhood.

2.2. Costs for Turkey

The EU-Turkey Statement, while beneficial in many ways, has at the same time imposed several economic, political, social, security and governance-related costs on Turkey. Over time, the costs became humanitarian in nature reinforcing xenophobia in the host community. This section will analyse the economic, political,

diplomatic, security-related costs of the deal for Turkey and its humanitarian strain on the host community.

As explained in the earlier section, the EU supported Turkey with a financial aid of €6 billion allocated under the Statement. The allocation and the delivery of this financial support did not arrive swiftly and created tensions between the EU and Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused the EU of not delivering its financial promise, as there have been delays in the initial transfer of the funds in 2016 (Politico, 2016). The funds were allocated through various mechanisms such as infrastructure projects, direct cash assistance programmes like Kizilay card and cooperation with INGOs or NGOs. Turkey also argued that this amount was beneficial initially, but became insufficient to fully address the long-term economic costs of hosting nearly 4 million refugees. President Erdogan continuously criticized the amount of this financial aid and the speed of its delivery. In one of his speeches, he argued that “the EU granted Greece 3 billion Euros of support for 100,000 migrants, but it has made no such move for the 4 million refugees in Turkey” (Daily Sabah, 2021).

It was clear that as time passed, the humanitarian aid needs of the SuTPs transformed into integration needs (Kale and Erdogan, 2019). The real cost of the social and political integration of such a large population concerns providing services such as education, healthcare, and legal employment opportunities. These integration costs can far exceed the financial assistance that has been provided by the EU. One has to take into consideration that the pressure on Turkey’s public services in healthcare, education, housing, and municipal work has significantly increased over time. The rapid population increase through the mass movement of refugees also had an impact on Turkey’s governance structures. With increased pressure on public services, the perceptions of the host population changed. Many Turkish citizens started to feel that their access to these services has diminished and that limited resources are stretched thin through the new refugee population.

Another economic impact of the refugee population was its effect on the labour market. The Statement encouraged the Turkish state to prepare bylaws to regulate the integration of refugees into the labour market. While Turkey accepted two bylaws for the employment of refugees and temporary protection holders, the number of refugees or SuTPs formally employed in Turkey stayed relatively low. The Turkey country chapter of the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) 2020-2021 reported that many Syrian refugees have gradually been able to access work opportunities, however, “only 3 percent of working refugees were doing so formally, and 71 percent of households were unable to access skilled or reliable work” (ILO, 2020: 1). As the majority of the refugee population stayed in the informal labour market, increased competition drove down wages, particularly in low-skilled sectors. Over time, this has caused frustration among Turkish citizens,

especially in areas or sectors where unemployment was already high. With the COVID-19 pandemic followed by the February 2023 earthquake, the economic conditions of both the host population and refugee population got worse. The scale of the earthquake's devastation resulted in millions of Turkish citizens and refugees becoming IPDs within and outside the earthquake zone, which persisted until 2024 (Canlar and Kale, 2024).

As far as the overarching path of EU-Turkey relations is concerned, Turkey's central role in managing the refugee crisis has transformed its relationship with the EU from a long-term focus on accession negotiations to a more transactional, issue-based cooperation (Turhan and Wessels, 2021). The reasons for this transformation were multifaceted. On the one hand, the political turmoil following the failed coup attempt in 2016 severely impacted Turkey's political and governance structures while the domestic response to the failed coup propelled Turkey's democratic backsliding and its de-Europeanization in various policy areas. On the other hand, the Statement contributed to the rise of a "transactional conditionality" in EU-Turkey relations (Turhan and Yıldız, 2022: 512), which foresaw the issue-specific strengthening of EU-Turkey relations and the dispersal of material rewards and incentives (e.g.; visa liberalization, modernization of the Customs Union) to Turkey by the EU, in exchange for the former's cooperation with the latter in the management of irregular migration. In this, the EU became progressively oblivious to its traditional normative conditionality. Similarly, the reliance on EU funding to manage refugee-related policies has made Turkey further vulnerable to EU political pressure. While the financial aid supported to mitigate domestic costs, it has at the same time tied Turkey's refugee and migration policies closely to its relations with the EU, reducing its autonomy and independence in this policy area.

Hosting the largest refugee population with limited international financial support has put significant pressure on the country's infrastructure, public services (healthcare, education, housing), and social cohesion, especially in areas with high refugee populations. In certain areas, compliance with international refugee protection laws has raised concerns. This was particularly evident in cases where Turkey was criticized to be returning SuTPs to Syria. After February 2023, it is estimated that due to the dire conditions in the earthquake regions and the housing shortage 60.000 Syrians returned to Syria in March 2023 (Canlar and Kale, 2024). The EU-Turkey Statement already had drawn criticism from international human rights organizations in the sense that its essence did concern the protection of human rights. These returns in March 2023 - although voluntary - did indeed damage Turkey's international reputation.

Another major cost for Turkey has been increased border security risks that involve combatting international terrorism. In the last decade, managing Turkey's southern borders, especially with Syria, has become a significant security challenge.

Turkey had to place additional security measures and practices to patrol these borders to manage further refugee flows while combatting terrorist infiltration. This requires significant military and security resources that were placed on both sides of the border. It became clear that Syria's security and stability were going to be a long-term concern for Turkey. Similarly, the intensification of the conflict in Syria or any other country in the southern borders of Turkey was going to create further trans-border population movements toward Turkey. The Statement was initially formulated by focusing and covering only the 2015 crisis, whilst not providing any plans or tactics for prospective refugee movements and a potential escalation of new regional conflicts and crises.

Finally, the humanitarian strain has been an important cost for Turkey. As Turkey continued to keep the Syrian refugee population in its terrain with very limited prospects of resettlement to EU member states, the large refugee presence has exacerbated social tensions between refugees and the local Turkish population. This has led to increased xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment (Aljazeera, 2022). This has certainly strained Turkey's domestic social fabric, particularly in economically struggling regions. The perceived and most of the time politically securitized notion of hosting refugee populations has fuelled nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric in Turkish politics. Especially, during the national and municipal election campaigns, refugees discursively became targets of scapegoating when it came to the drivers of domestic challenges. The shift in refugees' projected perception from "Muslim guests (*ensar*)" to "danger" has developed rapidly and it has been effectively exploited by political parties, leading to further polarization and increasing public pressure on the government to take tougher stances on its refugee policy. President Erdoğan's government has faced criticism for agreeing to host such a large number of refugees, with opposition parties frequently using this issue to challenge the government's policies (Tol, 2018).

3. The benefits and costs of the 2016 statement on irregular migration for the EU

3.1. Benefits for the EU

The EU-Turkey Statement helped the EU find a solution to the so-called refugee "crisis" that had gradually transformed from an external crisis to a litmus test for the European integration, in general, and the Schengen system, in particular, outside the EU's borders. In the initial stages of the refugee crisis, and especially in the summer of 2015, the EU aimed at engaging in "concerted" joint actions and collective measures to find internal solutions to ease the burden placed on frontline member states like Greece and Italy. It was in this context that the June 2015

European Council conclusions endorsed ‘temporary and exceptional relocation over two years from [...] Italy and Greece to other Member States’ (European Council, 2015: 2). This temporary relocation initiative anticipated the re-distribution of the refugees among EU member states taking into consideration their GDPs, domestic unemployment rates and their population. Notwithstanding such concerted plans, only a few member states like Finland, Sweden, and Germany had implemented the conclusions of the June 2015 European Council by taking in a limited number of Syrian refugees, whereas the other member states even refrained from such restrained actions (Carrera et al., 2015). In an effort to provide an example for other EU members to accept refugees (Niemann and Zaun, 2018), the German federal government unilaterally and temporarily suspended its implementation of the Dublin Regulation of the EU which legally provided Germany with the right to deport the irregular migrants back to the initial EU member state they entered. While the German initiative did not culminate in effective burden sharing within the EU with the majority of the member states having refrained from following in Germany’s footsteps, it contrarily enhanced anti-migrant sentiments in key member states like Germany and strengthened the voter base of Germany’s (then) new right-wing, populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) ahead of important local and federal elections (Turhan, 2018).

The EU’s externalization of its migration management in March 2016 to Turkey with the EU-Turkey Statement emerged at the time as the only viable option to ease the immense and unmanageable burden placed on frontline member states, without finding an internal solution to relocation and without instantaneously reforming the EU’s asylum and migration policies at the supranational level. The intergovernmental negotiations and decision-making processes leading up to the formulation of the EU-Turkey deal provided the EU member states with a swift and effective solution outside the supranational boundaries and restraints of the Union. That the EU-Turkey Statement did not enter the ratification process of the European Parliament and remained a merely joint declaration by the governments of the EU member states and the Turkish government signifies the then eagerness of EU member states to surpass the EU’s supranational channels and find an immediate solution to a growing crisis. The European Parliament was indeed critical of the way the EU collaborated with third countries on the management of irregular migration flows as it deemed the externalization of migration management rather a short-term solution to a persistent situation and as it was against forced returns on moral grounds (Gürkan and Roman, 2021). As such, it was more convenient for the EU member states to surpass the supranational control channels and formulate the scope and conditions of the EU-Turkey deal by means of intergovernmental procedures. The deal was indeed the outcome of numerous bilateral and unilateral

intergovernmental negotiations between Turkey and some key member states spearheaded by Germany's Angela Merkel (Turhan, 2016).

Another indirect yet major benefit of the EU-Turkey Statement for the EU has been – as already indicated in the previous part – that the Statement functioned as a major driver of the formulation of a transactional relationship between the EU and Turkey outside the accession framework and its normative conditionality. The growing trend towards transactionalism in EU-Turkey relations has been an opportune development for the majority of EU member states, which had become increasingly sceptical about Turkey's EU bid. Indeed, between 2013 and 2016, only one chapter in Turkey's accession talks with the EU was opened, while negotiations in 14 chapters remained blocked either by the Council of the EU or Cyprus. "Transactionalism" is a foreign policy approach that is based on short-term and interest-oriented exchanges between countries and does not prioritize deep and long-term strategic infrastructures, common values or the functioning of an international order based on rules. In a transactional relationship, if the reciprocity mechanism works well with bilateral interactions and transactions, sectoral policy coordination can be achieved, and negative externalities can be reduced (Bashirov and Yılmaz, 2020). The EU-Turkey summits of 29 November 2015 and 18 March 2016 did not only define the scope, conditions, and content of EU-Turkey cooperation on the management of irregular migration. They also paved the way for the strengthening and facilitation of transactional traits in the EU's relations with Turkey. The decisions taken at the relevant summits did not include a normative conditionality based on the Copenhagen political criteria. On the contrary, the leaders of the member states provided Turkey with a package of rewards in return for its commitment to stop irregular migration. These concerned financial incentives, the revival of accession negotiations, regular thematic high-level dialogues, the launch of negotiations on the modernization of the Customs Union and the acceleration of the visa liberalization process (European Council, 2015; European Council, 2016). This transactional formulation was later again and again utilized by the EU in other moments of crisis requiring policy coordination between Turkey and the EU such as the Eastern Mediterranean crisis (Turhan, 2021). With the gradual evanescence of the EU's normative conditionality in its relations with Turkey, Turkey's EU accession process was naturally and conveniently pushed outside the accession framework.

Last, but certainly not least, the EU-Turkey Statement created a blueprint for similar arrangements of the EU and its member states with other neighbouring countries and firmly expanded the EU's geographical sphere of influence when it comes to the external governance of migration. As a case in point, in 2021 the Greek government declared its intention and readiness to utilize the Statement as a blueprint for its policies vis-à-vis refugees from other nationalities such as

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, which meant that “this procedure would not only apply to those entering after the enacted date, but for those who had already applied before the implementation of the law as well” (Demirbaş and Miliou, 2024: 24). The deal also helped reinvigorate Spain’s similar arrangement with Morocco with Spain convincing the EU to provide Morocco with financial aid to strengthen its border controls (Terry, 2021).

3.2. Costs for the EU

While the benefits of the EU-Turkey Statement seemingly outweigh its costs and its negative externalities for the EU, thereby motivating the Union to utilize the Statement as a blueprint for similar arrangements with other third countries, the refugee deal certainly comes with a set of drawbacks. One of the biggest disadvantages of the deal for the EU, in general, and its key member states, in particular, has been its strengthening of various issue-specific asymmetrical interdependencies between Turkey and the EU in favour of the former (Turhan and Yıldız, 2022). The dependence of the EU on Turkey for the maintenance of the order and stability of European integration in general, and the Schengen system, in particular, weakened the EU’s overarching leverage over Turkey, which is a unique situation when it comes to the EU’s dialogue with individual third countries and especially with EU candidate countries. Turkey’s discursive threats and statements signalling the possibility of its unilateral suspension of the deal (BBC, 2017) coupled with its de facto, temporary withdrawal from the deal in February 2020 when it provisionally opened its Western borders compelled the EU to “review the terms of the 2016 deal, signalling that [it] will capitulate on some of Ankara’s demands for more money and other forms of assistance” (McDonald-Gibson, 2020). This issue-specific interdependence in favour of Ankara also weakened the EU’s and its member states’ discursive criticism of Turkey’s democratic and human rights track record. This became especially noticeable during the bilateral and minilateral meetings between the leading representatives of the EU governments and President Erdoğan. As a case in point, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel held a meeting with President Erdoğan in January 2024, just a few days prior to Turkey’s temporary opening of its borders to Greece amidst its growing dissatisfaction with the (limited) incentives it receives as part of the deal, she did not put specific emphasis on issues related to Turkey’s democratic backsliding. The German Chancellor’s self-restrained stance on Turkey’s democratic track record transpired despite calls by leading human rights organizations like Amnesty International to place human rights issues at the epicentre of her talk with Erdoğan (Duvar English, 2020). Likewise, current Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s latest visit to Turkey in October 2024 and his joint press conference with President Erdoğan did not spotlight normative issues while discursively acknowledging and highlighting Turkey’s

cooperation with the EU in the area of irregular migration (Die Bundesregierung, 2024).

Another drawback of the Statement and its continuing implementation for the EU has been the Statement's negative impact on the EU's perception as a "normative" global actor. The securitization of the Syrian refugees in European political discourses in the sense that the EU's key interest in mitigating the refugee crisis had been in the safeguarding of its stability and internal order from the external risks posed by the refugee Other (Gürkan and Coman, 2021) severely damaged the EU's international normative identity and its perception as a normative power by external actors. Similarly, the EU's insistence on the usage of the crisis vocabulary for immigration-related actions helped legitimize its policies which would have been recognized as unethical otherwise (MAGYC, 2020). The representation of the EU as a normative power in international relations was based on the premise and idea that the EU put notions such as democracy, human rights, peace, rule of law and liberty at the epicentre of its external relations (Jenichen, 2022) without engaging in discriminatory practices based on "any ground such as sex, race, colour, *ethnic or social origin*, genetic features, language, *religion or belief*, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation" (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). The double standards and different framings employed by European political and media circles with regard to the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee dramas and the legitimization of political actions in favour of welcoming Ukrainian refugees as those who were "Europeans, behaved like Europeans, and had cultural and democratic values close to those of Europeans" (Ibanez Sales, 2023: 2), severely disrupted the EU's already contested image as a normative global power by external actors, especially those from the Global South.

Finally, the Statement's strengthening of the external dimension of the EU's asylum and migration policies obscured the further advancement of the EU integration in migration and asylum affairs. By externalizing migration management, the EU has prevented itself from tackling the absence of internal solidarity concerning burden sharing, while also failing to address the lack of policy harmonization and the absence of centralized institutions within the EU that would deal with the internal dimension of its migration governance (Scipioni, 2018). The New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum aims to provide further harmonization without major success with missing components (Conte and Yavcan, 2024). As such, the Statement has transpired as an important brake on European integration.

4. Concluding remarks

The March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement rests on thin ice with Turkey habitually threatening the EU about cancelling the deal and with the EU failing to deliver promised incentives like the launch of talks on the modernization of the Customs Union and the regular arrangement of high-level dialogues and joint summits. Still, our analysis demonstrates that the advantages of the Statement for the EU (governments) and the Turkish government outweigh its costs. Unable to engage in concerted actions and to strengthen the internal dimension of its migration governance, the Statement helps the EU utilize Turkey both as a buffer zone between countries of origin and its member states and as a geopolitical space where the refugee Other can reside. The significance of the Statement for EU member states is likely to increase even more given the surge in anti-migrant sentiments and the mainstreaming of right-wing populism in Europe. That the EU uses the Statement as a blueprint for its relations with other third countries, substantiates this trend as well. As far as Turkey is concerned, the Statement specifically equips the Turkish government with an unparalleled leverage in its relations with the EU which remains incapable of instrumentalizing its normative conditionality vis-à-vis Turkey. The EU's deteriorating function as a normative foreign policy actor in Turkey becomes specifically visible during the bilateral and minilateral meetings between the leading representatives of the EU and Turkish governments. Thus, while at the intergovernmental level, the benefits of the Statement may outweigh its costs, how much this satisfactory cost-benefit ratio translates into the public domain remains unclear and is subject to further scholarly investigation.

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Özet

Güçlkle ayakta? Düzensiz göç temalı AB-Türkiye Ortak Bildirisi'nin maliyetleri ve faydaları

Mart 2016'da ilan edilen ve Mülteci Mutabakatı olarak da telaffuz edilen AB-Türkiye Ortak Bildirisi, hem Avrupa Birliği (AB) hem de Türkiye için önemli motivasyonlar içermektedir. AB açısından bakıldığında, AB-Türkiye Bildirisi, Türkiye ve yakın çevresinden düzensiz göçü sınırlamayı, hatta durdurmayı amaçlamaktaydı. Türkiye için ise Mutabakat, finansal destek ve stratejik diplomatik ilişkiler sağlayarak Türkiye'yi yeniden AB'nin siyasi gündemine taşıyacaktı. Bir yandan, Ankara'nın sıklıkla anlaşmadan çekilme tehdidinde bulunması, öte yandansa, mutabakattan sorumlu AB kurumlarının göç yönetiminde "insancıl" bir duruş sergilemediği ve AB'nin Türkiye hükümetine bağımlılığını artırdığı gerekçesiyle eleştirilmesi nedeniyle, AB-Türkiye Mutabakatının neden hâlâ devam ettiği sorusu akıllara gelebilmektedir. Bu makale, her iki tarafın da rasyonalist hesaplamalarını dikkate alarak, mutabakatın uygulanma sürecinde iki tarafa yansıyan maliyetlerini ve katkılarını analitik bir değerlendirmeye (2016-2024) tabi tutmaktadır. Bulgular, Mutabakatın AB'ye üye devletlerin hükümetleri ve Türkiye hükümeti açısından faydalarının maliyetlerini aştığını göstermektedir. Birlik içinde uyumlu hareketlerde bulunamayan ve göç yönetişiminin iç boyutunu güçlendiremeyen AB, mülteci mutabakatı sayesinde, Türkiye'yi hem menşei ülkeler ile AB'ye üye ülkeler arasında bir tampon bölge olarak, hem de sığınmacı "Öteki"nin ikamet edebileceği bir jeopolitik alan olarak kullanabilmiştir. Mutabakat, AB'nin diğer komşu ülkelerle benzer düzenlemeler yapması için de bir ana model oluşturmuştur. Türkiye açısından bakıldığında ise, mutabakat, Türkiye hükümetine AB ile ilişkilerinde benzersiz bir manevra alanı sunmuştur ve AB'nin Türkiye'ye yönelik geleneksel normatif koşulluluğunu kullanmasını engellemiştir. Bu bağlamda, hükümetlerarası düzeyde mutabakatın faydalarının maliyetlerini aştığı gözlemlenmektedir. Ancak, bu olumlu maliyet-fayda oranının kamuya ve toplumlara ne kadar yansıdığı belirsizliğini korumakta ve bu noktada daha fazla akademik araştırmaya ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: AB-Türkiye ilişkileri, AB-Türkiye bildirisi, düzensiz göç, mülteci mutabakatı, sığınmacı politikası, işlemsellik.