



‘OPEN THE GATES’: ERDOĞAN’S INFAMOUS FOREIGN POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

“They say, ‘Do not open the gates.’ I told them months ago that ‘if you do not share this burden with us, we will open the gates’”, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated on March 2, 2020.¹ While Erdoğan has in previous years announced similar warnings, however, on February 28, 2020, he ordered the opening of the borders to Greece, allowing a vast number of refugees and asylum-seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq to leave Turkey and cross the border to Greece.

The ray of hope for a better life ended for the majority of more than 10,000 people at the Greek border and resulted in additional chaos and heightened suffering. This policy brief sheds light on Erdoğan’s strategic decision to open Turkey’s borders and his instrumentalization of refugees to coerce the EU and extract more financial aid.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The 2016 migration deal has weakened the EU’s position and has made it susceptible to Erdoğan’s threats. It has also appointed Erdoğan to the powerful role of Europe’s gatekeeper.
- President Erdoğan is using his position and strategic timing to weaponize refugees and use them as a bargaining chip to promote his agenda.
- The EU is holding on to the migration deal, however, so far, Europe’s foreign ministers reject Erdoğan’s demands for further financial aid.
- The EU shares responsibility and should uphold the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, protected under international law.

¹ ‘Europe Will Share the “Burden of Refugees”’: Erdoğan - Turkey News’ (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2 March 2020) <[http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/europe-will-share-the-](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/europe-will-share-the-burden-of-refugees-erdogan-152629)

[burden-of-refugees-erdogan-152629](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/europe-will-share-the-burden-of-refugees-erdogan-152629)> accessed 4 March 2020.

ERDOĞAN'S STRATEGIC TIMING AND THE 2016 MIGRATION DEAL

Erdoğan's decision to open the Turkish border is closely linked to the current security situation in north-western Syria. The Syrian regime's military offensive to recapture Idlib from the rebel groups has resulted in increased violence, destroyed villages and a high civilian death toll.² With approximately 4.1 million refugees, Turkey is already hosting the highest number of refugees worldwide.³ With this turn of events in Idlib, Turkey fears an increased influx of refugees.

Erdoğan sought to leverage the situation for additional EU support, both politically and financially. According to him, "the European Union has to keep its promises. We are not obliged to look after and feed so many refugees."⁴ While the Idlib refugee crisis plays an important role in Erdoğan's strategy to demand additional funds, his timing is hardly coincidental. Erdoğan's pressure on Europe coincides with the EU's discussions on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF); the EU's leaders are currently negotiating and working on the long-term budgets for 2021-2027.⁵

The 2016 migration deal between the EU and Turkey, together with its political and social implications, is another factor that has contributed to the current situation and Erdoğan's course of action towards refugees. The deal was primarily agreed upon between the parties to strengthen their relationship and to stop the flow of refugees into the EU in exchange for financial aid for Turkey. However, it appears that the

deal has made the EU susceptible to Erdoğan's threats. In March 2020, Belgium's MP Dries van Langenhove criticized Belgium's current and former Prime Ministers of signing a "blackmail deal" with Erdoğan: "You gave him the keys to our European borders and then paid him many billions of euros, not to make an abuse of these keys" which eventually allowed him to "very easily blackmail Europe with this deal."⁶ This deal assigned Erdoğan to the role of EU's gatekeeper and therefore continues to jeopardize the repetition of threats to open the border if benefits are reaped this way.

Further, the deal meant to save Europe time to develop a sustainable system and policy to address refugee flows, but the EU has not lived up to its promise.⁷ Now both sides, the EU and Turkey, are using this migration deal to allege the other of failing to fulfil the agreement.

ERDOĞAN AND THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF REFUGEES

The migration deal has also unveiled the EU's hypocritical stance during the Greek-Turkish border situation. With Turkey opening its borders and Greece refusing to do the same, refugees and asylum seekers are stuck in the middle. Furthermore, Greek police and security forces did not shy away from detaining, robbing and assaulting refugees. According to interviews with asylum-seekers, the border guards also fired teargas and rubber bullets at people approaching the border.⁸ Even with Greece's questionable harsh

² 'What Is Happening in Idlib?' (*Aljazeera*, 17 February 2020) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/newsfeed/2020/02/happening-idlib-200217100528664.html>> accessed 5 March 2020.

³ 'Turkey | Global Focus' (*UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency*) <<http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2544>> accessed 4 March 2020.

⁴ Kate Ng, 'Greece-Turkey Border Is a "Closed Door", EU Tells Refugees' (*The Independent*, 7 March 2020) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/greece-turkey-refugees-syria-eu-border-erdogan-a9384306.html>> accessed 7 March 2020.

⁵ 'Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027: Negotiations' <<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu->

[budgetary-system/multiannual-financial-framework/mff-negotiations/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-budgetary-system/multiannual-financial-framework/mff-negotiations/)> accessed 25 March 2020.

⁶ GCT A, 'Belgium MP in Parliament Questions Why His Country Allied with Turkey' (*Greek City Times*, 9 March 2020) <<https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/03/09/belgium-mp-in-parliament-questions-why-his-country-allied-with-turkey/>> accessed 13 March 2020.

⁷ Mehreen Khan and Sam Fleming, 'EU Migration Pact with Turkey on Brink of Collapse' (*Financial Times*, 2 March 2020) <<https://www.ft.com/content/81e161e0-5ca3-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4>> accessed 25 March 2020.

⁸ 'Greece: Violence Against Asylum Seekers at Border' (*Human Rights Watch*, 17 March 2020) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/17/greece-violence-against-asylum-seekers-border>> accessed 19 March 2020.

measures at the border and the potentially unlawful, temporary suspension of asylum registrations, the EU is set on supporting Greece's decision to keep refugees out of Greece and Europe.

The EU's support for Greece's decision is partly driven by political anxiety over a possible recurrence of the 2015 refugee wave. However, another key factor is Erdoğan's motive and strategy. The EU and various Member States blame Erdoğan of weaponizing refugees and using them to achieve his aims. Josep Borrell, the current EU High Representative, argues that Turkey "is using migrants as a bargaining chip" and "as a source of pressure."⁹

In contrary to today's situation, in 2010 and 2011, Syrians were welcomed as "brothers" into Turkey as Erdoğan's administration supported an open-door policy intending to marginalize the AKP opposition and to strengthen the neo-Ottoman image.¹⁰ However, recently, Erdoğan has been accused of deliberately organizing the movement of people towards the Greek border to extort the EU.¹¹ According to interviews with asylum-seekers conducted by Human Rights Watch, Turkish military and police transported refugees and asylum-seekers to the Greek border in buses and threatened to kill them if they did not agree to come.¹² There is no doubt that Turkey is struggling with its high number of refugees, nevertheless, Erdoğan's game has been widely criticized. Using refugees and asylum-seekers as tools to advance his agenda and to demand additional financial support from the EU, compares to inhumanity and relentlessness. Erdoğan's decision to

keep borders open for refugees and asylum-seekers to reach Europe until the EU meets his expectations for the migration deal serves as proof for these strong accusations.¹³

THE EU'S STANCE

Throughout this border crisis, the EU has been set on supporting Greece and has at several times discouraged refugees to try to cross the border to Europe because "the news about the alleged openness [of the Greek-Turkish border] is false and people should not try to move there."¹⁴ According to Ursula von der Leyen "the events at the Greek-Turkish border clearly point to politically motivated pressure on the EU's external border."¹⁵ To discuss the migration issue and the underlying migration deal, a much-needed talk between Ursula von der Leyen, Charles Michel, the president of the European Council, and Erdoğan took place in Brussels on March 9th, 2020.

The meeting resulted in the decision to mandate Josep Borrell together with the minister of foreign affairs in Turkey to work on elucidating the 2016 deal, which continues to be valid.¹⁶ However, what remains unclear after the talk, is if additional financial aid will flow towards Turkey. On March 6th, 2020, Erdoğan requested more monetary assistance, but so far, Europe's foreign ministers rejected these demands as they do not want to be further "blackmailed" by Turkey.¹⁷

⁹ Francesco Guarascio and Tuvan Gumrukcu, 'EU, Turkey in Stand-off over Funds to Tackle New Migrant Crisis' *Reuters* (6 March 2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-eu-idUSKBN20T1RH>> accessed 25 March 2020.

¹⁰ Arthur Jennequin, 'Turkey and the Weaponization of Syrian Refugees' [2020] Brussels International Center.

¹¹ Patrick Wintour and Helena Smith, 'Erdoğan in Talks with European Leaders over Refugee Cash for Turkey' *The Guardian* (17 March 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/17/erdogan-in-talks-with-european-leaders-over-refugee-cash-for-turkey>> accessed 30 March 2020.

¹² 'Greece: Violence Against Asylum Seekers at Border' (n 8).

¹³ 'Erdoğan Says Turkey Will Keep Border Open, Slams "Nazi" Tactics' *Reuters* (11 March 2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-eu-idUSKBN20Y14V>> accessed 11 March 2020.

¹⁴ Ng (n 4).

¹⁵ 'Remarks by President Charles Michel after the Meeting with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Brussels' <<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/09/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-the-meeting-with-president-of-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>> accessed 11 March 2020.

¹⁶ 'Remarks by President Charles Michel after the Meeting with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Brussels' (*European Council of the European Union*, 9 March 2020) <<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/09/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-the-meeting-with-president-of-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>> accessed 11 March 2020.

¹⁷ Laura Pitel and others, 'EU Leaders Pledge to Work with Turkey to Revive Migration Deal' (*Financial Times*, 9 March 2020) <<https://www.ft.com/content/8d871bdc-61ff-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>> accessed 11 March 2020.

CONCLUSION

The Turkish-Greek border issue has attracted widespread attention during the previous weeks, with a particular focus on the humanitarian consequences and the dire situation for refugees and asylum-seekers who are trapped between the two countries. This policy brief discusses the migration deal, which made the EU susceptible to threats and allowed Erdoğan to take on the role of Europe's gatekeeper. Further, this research shows that Erdoğan exploits his power position and uses strategic timing to pressure the EU for additional financial aid by weaponizing refugees and using them to promote his agenda.

BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The constant violations of human rights in Turkey and the nearby countries should raise many questions about the credibility of the Turkish ruling party in protecting refugees in Turkey.
- Any discussion over the 2016 migration deal with Turkey should include other regional issues such as, but not limited to, the Cyprus gas dispute.
- The EU should have a clear and decisive stance on Turkey's treatment of refugees. Further, to make itself less vulnerable to imminent threats, the EU should develop a clear and effective migration policy and asylum system to resettle the flow of refugees.
- The EU shares responsibility and should uphold the rights of all refugees and asylum seekers, which are protected under international law; the right to asylum is guaranteed under the 1951 Refugee Convention, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hence, European governments should honour their commitments, and provide asylum-seekers access to fair and timely asylum procedures.

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