



COMMENTARIES

#1

April, 2021

“You sleep with the devil; you wake up in hell!”: On the new EU-Turkey Deal

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Executive summary: Right from the start in 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Amnesty International challenged the legitimacy of the so-called refugee deal between Turkey and the EU. Toward the end of 2020, the EU concluded another agreement with Turkey as part of the €6 billion in funding covered by the refugee deal, in spite of Turkey’s deteriorating human rights record. Against a backdrop of Turkey’s weaponizing of refugees against Europe and Europe’s treatment of the refugee issue as a local problem, the European border and coast guard organization Frontex has been practicing illegal pushbacks. It is clear that once you toy with the devil, you cannot escape hell

The EU-Turkey refugee deal

The 2015–16 refugee crisis saw a sharp increase in flows of migrants into the EU from the Middle East and North Africa across Mediterranean Sea routes and overland, through Southeast Europe. This mass movement produced a suffocating political, economic, and social context in Europe and elsewhere in the region. In an effort to stem the flow of refugees, the EU and Turkey signed an agreement in [March 2016](#). Several more followed [in the years after](#), which provided *inter alia* that [Turkey](#) would accept the immediate return of illegal immigrants from Greece, and develop measures to guard its

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borders and that the EU would fund the implementation of specific projects in the field of health, nutrition, education, infrastructure through the Facility of Refugees in Turkey (FRiT). Additionally, the EU promised to advance visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, upgrade the EU-Turkey customs union and reactivate accession procedures. Toward the end of 2020, the EU concluded another agreement with Turkey as part of the €6 billion in funding covered by the FRiT mechanism.

Legitimacy of the agreement

Right from the start, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Amnesty International challenged the legitimacy of this agreement, in particular, whether it would ensure the principle of non-refoulement under the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Then there are the compromises that had to be made within the EU (especially with countries with a hostile approach to asylum seekers) that led to this agreement. Against this backdrop, the strongest criticisms appear to have been directed at Turkey, given its human rights record and the illiberal, even authoritarian, shift of both the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, over the past decade. However, given that Turkey continues to host the largest population of refugees on earth (c. 4 million people), mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the EU has been more than willing to turn a blind eye to Turkey's democratic deficit and poor human rights record to dramatically restrict the number of refugees reaching European soil.

Ankara's evident shift to [neoliberal authoritarianism](#) was accelerated after the failed July 2016 coup attempt, and the subsequent purges and crackdown on dissent, as well as the sanctioning of a powerful executive presidency *alla Turca* in April 2017. Furthermore, Turkey's foreign policy orientation has shifted markedly from the more open approach in the 2010s. Having re-securitized its diplomacy, discourses, and practices in the past two years, Turkey's foreign policy has become overtly confrontational on numerous fronts, from Syria to the recent Nagorno-Karabakh flare-up. Turkey's more confrontational stance has produced challenges for policymakers in neighboring states, arguably most obviously in Greece, but also the Mediterranean region more generally. Indeed, since the failed coup, Turkish foreign policy-making has been driven primarily by a desire to "[pull the country up by its bootstraps](#)." Against this background, one of the most critical outcomes of Ankara's re-securitization in foreign policy after 2019 has been a rekindling of longstanding rivalry and enmity with Greece, including also Cyprus. It has once again thrown the long history of the two countries' "never-ending Cold War" into sharp relief.

The "blue homeland doctrine"

The deployment of Turkish warships to watch over drilling activities in Cyprus's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and attempts at riding roughshod over Crete's maritime boundaries exemplify this securitization. Although

signs of low-level conflict between the two countries appear sporadically, Ankara's approach has recently shifted from diplomatic objections at the United Nations to deploying military force, a clear escalation in Turkish strategy. The ideological backbone of Turkish conduct in the Eastern Mediterranean is the so-called "[Mavi Vatan](#)" (Blue Homeland) doctrine. Through this doctrine, policymakers in Ankara see Turkey's exclusion from the EastMed Gas Forum and the alignment of both adversaries (such as Egypt) and Western partners with Greece and Cyprus as affirming the urgent need for self-reliance. Turkey's hostile and provocative actions have led the EU and international organizations to adopt harsh language criticizing the Turkish government and impose sanctions (albeit quite limited ones) on Turkey concerning its resumption of oil and gas drilling in EU member states' [territorial waters](#). This triggered a scathing reaction from Turkey's president, who boasted about Turkey's military capacity to alter the map with Greece and insulted Emmanuel Macron, the French President, further escalating tensions between Turkey and the EU.

Indeed, tensions between Turkey and Greece (as well as the leading EU states) were already at boiling point, after statements in 2020 made by the Turkish government threatening to let hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers on its territory cross the borders into the EU, blatantly violating the aforementioned Euro-Turkish agreement. Ankara's announcement was quickly followed by attempts by many people to enter Evros, located in the north-east Greek land border with Turkey, which the Turkish authorities appeared to tolerate, if not openly support. Fearing mass incursions, Greek security forces— supported by Frontex and assisted by an Austrian Cobra team — used extensive force and tear gas to push the asylum seekers back. In October 2020, detailed investigative [journalism](#) led by Lighthouse Reports, Bellingcat, *Der Spiegel*, the ARD, and TV Asahi, reported on Frontex's involvement in illegal and dangerous pushback operations in the Aegean Sea. The reports said that asylum seekers and migrants were forcibly prevented from reaching EU soil or were forced out of EU waters. Although such pushbacks violate international law, Human Rights Watch [noted](#) that the EU again seems incapable or unwilling to prevent EU border forces from becoming "complicit" in illegal campaigns to stop refugees landing.

Tensions between Greece and Turkey rose precipitously in February and March 2020 when thousands of refugees and immigrants attempted to storm the Greek-Turkish border at Pazarkule/Kastaneai near Edirne, in what the Greek and other European governments deemed a deliberate attempt by Turkey to weaponize the refugee question against Greece and Europe. For example, in 2019, then EU Council President [Donald Tusk](#) sharply criticized Ankara's action stating that "we will never accept [refugees being] weaponized and used to blackmail us," referring to Erdogan's threat to "send 3.6 million refugees your [i.e., Europe's] way." Assessing the deal, according to Reuters, a European official, said: "[You sleep with the devil, you wake up in hell – that is where we are now.](#)"

Double standards

However, despite this acknowledgment and EU leaders' harsh criticisms of Turkey, the European Council's conclusion on Turkey suggests something entirely different. Indeed, it begs the question as to what the EU's real intentions and priorities are. After all, and despite increasing pressure from different countries and organizations, the EU continues to treat the refugee issue as if it were an entirely "local" or a bilateral issue between Greece and Turkey, rather than a pan-European (or even global) issue, which it clearly is. Moreover, it has become abundantly clear after five years that the EU itself has never seen the refugee issue in anything but local terms.

What is more, the EU has adopted a double standard, if not a hypocritical approach, in its policies and decisions vis-à-vis Turkey. It is clear to all that Turkey, which hosts almost 4 million refugees on its soil, has the upper hand, in the sense that it can leverage the issue in the pursuit of vital Turkish national interests, even sometimes by blackmailing the EU. It is no secret that the AKP government has complete control of the issue. This allows Turkey to play the "refugee card" almost at will. At the same time, as long as the issue remains "local"—namely, "Greek," in the sense that it is confined within Greek territory—Europe seems satisfied to remain passive, limiting itself to discussing the matter with Turkey on a bilateral basis, without, however, taking a position that would potentially solve the problem, even temporarily.

The most recent incident in Evros has shown once again and in no uncertain terms that people are being instrumentalized in order to achieve (geo)political and economic objectives, something that seems to be working to the benefit of Turkey, despite the latter's provocative policies vis-à-vis EU states and borders. What is more, once again, the EU appears entirely devoid of an alternative plan designed that might solve the refugee crisis efficiently and provide shelter and support to the millions of people seeking protection on European soil. As much was evident in November 2020, when the European Commission launched a [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) to replace the extant European legislation. As a result of many (geo)political compromises, the legal force of the latter was more *ad hoc* and proved to be dysfunctional with the Commission itself. Furthermore, it also underscored Greece's status as "the gatekeeper" of European borders holding back refugees seeking protection in mainland Europe. At the same time, the New Pact declines to put refugee movements on the agenda as a pan-European issue. In line with this, in visiting Evros after the recent events, EU officials have limited themselves to expressing sympathy, offering thanks to Greece for supporting EU borders, and granting [€700 million](#) in financial support to appease the Greek government. Thus, the EU has once again swept the issue under the rug and offered no long-term solution.

Conclusions

Finally, news reports have highlighted a supposedly "chastened" Turkey, with Erdoğan [calling](#) for a restoration of mutual trust between Ankara and

Brussels. This “change” can be viewed from two angles. One perspective (often found in the mainstream media) says Turkey was forced to shift its approach due to its relative “isolation,” and, as a result, the EU agreed to an additional funding mechanism. The second, more likely, conclusion is that the EU was forced to sign the additional fund and grant economic support to Turkey in exchange for Turkey pulling back rhetorically and militarily in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as refraining from “threatening” the EU by “sending” refugees to European borders. Regardless of the underlying truth, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reaffirmed Turkey’s importance to the EU, tweeting, [“We stand ready to continue working on dialogue with Turkey.”](#) However, it remains to be seen what the EU’s response will be. As Greece and Turkey wait for the next round of exploratory talks between them, there seems to be no letup in Turkey’s provocative actions. Ankara issued a new Navtex (used for maritime surveys) between 18 February and 2 March. [The location is not accidental](#), as Turkey’s Navtex is located exactly at the point where Turkey claims the Aegean should be split (i.e., along the 25th meridian), and includes, also, Lemnos, one of the islands in the eastern Aegean, be demilitarized. It is clear that once you toy with the devil, you cannot escape hell.