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The EU-Turkey Deal and Its Implications for the Asylum Capacities of EU Border Countries

by Bianca Benvenuti

ABSTRACT

The Istituto Affari Internazionali, in collaboration with the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator, launched the Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) Programme in 2012 in order to establish a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. In its fourth edition, the project focuses on the refugee crisis and its impact on EU-Turkey relations. Under the programme, the first of a series of workshops on the issue took place in Istanbul in July 2016. The second workshop was hosted in Athens. Participants here discussed the implications of the deal for the asylum capacities of EU border countries, with a special focus on Greece. The programme included a field trip at an official reception facility in Athens, and a workshop organized in cooperation with the Mercator European Dialogue (MED): this created a unique opportunity for the GTE participants to connect and share views with national parliamentarians across member states.

Greece | Turkey | European Union | Migration | Refugees | Human rights



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Introduction

The Istituto Affari Internazionali, in collaboration with the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator, launched the Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) Programme in 2012 in order to establish a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. In its fourth edition, the project focuses on the refugee crisis and its impact on EU-Turkey relations. Public discourse on the issue is polarized and often confused; Global Turkey in Europe aims to provide a ground for people with different professional backgrounds, experiences and opinions to meet and discuss various facets of the refugee crisis.

Under the programme, the first of a series of workshops on the issue took place in Istanbul in July 2016¹ in order to discuss the humanitarian dimension of the refugee crisis in Turkey, including the issue of whether Turkey qualifies as a safe third country – one of the key, implicit, assumptions of the EU-Turkey deal. The second workshop was hosted in Athens. Participants here discussed the implications of the deal for the asylum capacities of EU border countries, with a special focus on Greece. The programme included a field trip at an official reception facility in Athens, and a workshop organized in cooperation with the Mercator European Dialogue² (MED): this created a unique opportunity for the GTE participants to connect and share views with national parliamentarians across member states.

¹ Bianca Benvenuti, "The Humanitarian Dimension of the Refugee Crisis in Turkey: Challenges and Prospects", in *Global Turkey in Europe Commentaries*, No. 29 (July 2016), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/6676>.

² The Mercator European Dialogue is run by Stiftung Mercator and The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), in collaboration with the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). For more details, see <http://www.iai.it/en/node/4194>.

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Report from the field trip and seminar held in Athens on 3-4 November 2016 and organized by Stiftung Mercator, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), and Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) within the framework of the project "Turkey, Europe and the World: Political, Economic and Foreign Policy Dimensions of Turkey's Evolving Relationship with the EU".

3 November: Field trip

The field trip took place at the Eleonas refugee camp. The group included journalists, researchers, think-tankers, MPs from Greece and other EU member states, and members of the European Parliament. As reception conditions have been heavily affected by the EU-Turkey deal, the visit gave participants a glimpse of the situation in the city of Athens and provided them with information to further encourage discussion during the workshop on the following day. Leteris Papayannakis, Deputy Mayor of the City of Athens, briefed the participants and duly answered their questions.



Eleonas refugee camp, 3 November 2016: Field trip participants with City of Athens' Deputy Mayor Mr. Leteris Papayannakis

Eleonas is one of the main camps in the Attika region, and the only one in Athens.³ The municipality of Athens opened the camp at the end of July 2015, as hundreds of refugees were sleeping on the streets of the capital; its costs are covered by the Ministry of Interior, while the municipality is in charge of its administration. Situated in the western suburbs of the city, it is close to an underground station, which facilitates connections with city centre and allows its inhabitants easier integration into the social fabric of Greek society. The camp has three sectors, which host vulnerable people, families with children under 16 and people over 16. Currently, there are around 2,000 guests in its "box houses," shelter units that can host up to eight people; the main nationalities are Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi. Around 500 are waiting for relocation; if their cases are positively evaluated, they will be moved to a different facility within the city while they wait to be relocated to other EU member states. There are no particular conflicts between the various nationalities, partly due to the no-segregation policy of the camp administration.



Many international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operate in the camp, to provide health care, legal advice, education for children and recreational activities. The camp was distinctly quiet during the field trip, and guests were at ease with visitors walking around their houses.

³ For an overview on Greek facilities, see UNHCR, Greece: Site Profile as of 31 October 2016, 11 November 2016, <https://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=2160>. See also Greek Coordination Body for the Refugee Crisis Management, *Summary Statement of Refugee Flows in Greece*, available at <http://media.gov.gr/index.php/στηρεσιες/προσφυγικό-ζήτημα>.

Eleonas is considered the best facility in Greece. However, it is not a good indicator of the situation nationwide. Papayannakis observed that the Greek Government does not have a long-term policy for the reception of asylum seekers and refugees. This is partly due to the recent Greek economic crisis and lack of adequate support from EU institutions. In addition, Greece is undergoing a rapid transformation from a transit country to a destination country, which requires putting in place new services. However, its public administration is not experienced enough and it is struggling to adapt to this transformation.



Eleonas refugee camp, 3 November 2016

4 November: workshop

Around 25 experts – including researchers, think-tankers, local and international NGOs and activists – together with an additional 20 representatives from local and European parliaments participated in the workshop. The participants brought to the table a very broad spectrum of ideas, perspectives and positions over the implications of the EU-Turkey deal on Greece's asylum system. Mia Forbes Pire mediated the interactive seminar, whose immediate aim was to spark innovative and frank discussion: the floor was organized into six small groups of six participants each. This allowed people from different professional backgrounds to feel at ease in sharing their ideas, offering the unique chance for these professionals to interact first and foremost as individuals.

In order to ensure a disciplined debate, Forbes Pire set up ground rules; these included listening respectfully, using moderate language and seeking to understand others' perspectives. With the aim of providing participants with a middle ground and a shared starting point, Angeliki Dimitriadi, research fellow at ELIAMEP (the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy), presented her paper, *The Impact of the EU-Turkey Statement on Protection and Reception: The Case of Greece*,⁴ which had been prepared for the conference. The EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016 has had significant repercussions for Greece, an already overburdened and capacity-lacking member state. The implementation of the statement resulted in delays in both asylum processing and returns to Turkey. It also produced two separate asylum procedures (for those on the mainland and on the islands), sub-standard conditions for those stranded on the islands and differentiated treatment of nationalities. The paper looks at the core of the statement, the notion of "safe third

⁴ Angeliki Dimitriadi, "The Impact of the EU-Turkey Statement on Protection and Reception: The Case of Greece", in *Global Turkey in Europe Working Papers*, No. 15 (October 2016), <http://www.iai/en/node/6950>.

The EU-Turkey Deal and Its Implications for the Asylum Capacities of EU Border Countries

country,” but also at protection and the challenges of implementation. It further discusses necessary the legal revisions and practical challenges of implementing the statement – with regard not only to asylum but also to reception capacity and standards. At the end of the presentation, Forbes Pires indicated three main areas of concern as illustrated in Dimitriadi’s paper. First, there is a need for better reception conditions; second, access to international asylum should be ensured; lastly, there is no adequate and reliable information on which refugees and asylum seekers can rely.



Workshop, 4 November 2016

With this framework in mind, the workshop moved to its second section, in which participants outlined the perception of the issue from a national, organizational and personal point of view. This first discussion, in small groups, served to break the ice and permitted an initial “brainstorm” over the main issues to be discussed in the following session. Given the heterogeneous nature of the groups, several different perspectives came to the fore. To give just one example, there were different positions on the EU-Turkey deal itself: some regarded it as the only feasible solution, while others considered it a very poorly conceived stopgap measure.

In this part of the workshop, participants in small groups mapped the key issues relating to the deal and its implications for Greece. Thereafter, participants were asked to choose issues that they would be more interested in discussing, in order to unpack the topic and assess what could be done to move towards a solution at EU, national and local level. Four groups covered the four issues regarded as the most currently pressing.



Some participants discussed the need for the EU to find legal ways for migrants and asylum seekers to reach European member states. They agreed that policymakers should look at best practices already in place in order to establish common policies: as an example, there is an

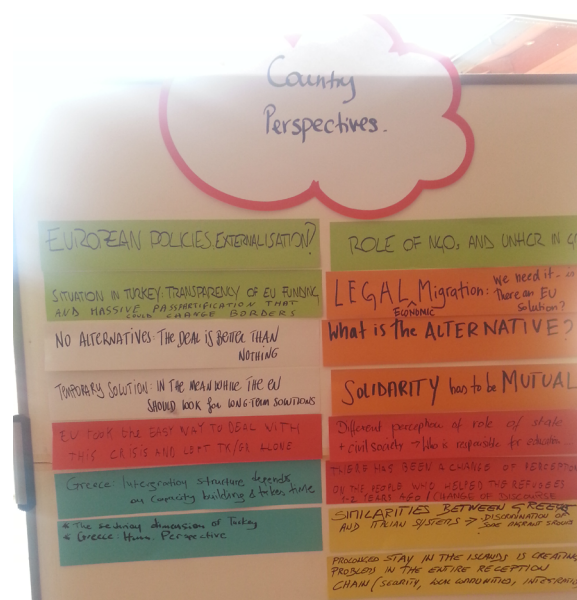
ongoing project to ensure humanitarian corridors from the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea to Italy.⁵ In addition, the group suggested that legal channels into the EU constitute a powerful tool in the fight against human smuggling and organized criminality: in fact, irregular migration and smuggling increased as the Member States reduced or cut off legal migration and asylum channels into

⁵ Community of Sant’Egidio, Humanitarian Corridors, <http://segidio.it/uIbU>.

The EU-Turkey Deal and Its Implications for the Asylum Capacities of EU Border Countries

the EU. In addition, policies should take into consideration migrants' plans and preferences, while simplifying procedures.

Other participants noticed that in the last few years there has been a focus on emergency solutions, combined with a total lack of long-term strategies. Participants concluded that it is at this point essential to address the migration issue in the long run. This long-term strategy should be twofold: on the one hand, governments should focus on how to end conflicts and decrease inequality worldwide. On the other, the EU needs a stronger inclusion policy, which should encompass a simplification of access-to-employment and cultural-integration programmes across EU member states.



Workshop, 4 November 2016

Another burning issue chosen by participants was the need to improve communication strategies and advocacy. The media, civil society and politicians need to communicate better, amongst themselves and with public opinion, on the migration crisis. Nowadays a clear mistrust of politics and traditional media needs to be addressed, considering that “the people” are more caring, interested and empathic than we think. Some ideas for change in the public discourse include being consistent, non-inflammatory and careful with words; framing the issue as a human-rights one, and not only from a technical point of view; and insisting on complexity and focusing on success stories. In addition, this new communication strategy should focus on “myth-busting.”

A final burning topic was EU-Turkey relations and the deal itself. According to participants from this discussion group, EU-Turkey relations need to be reformed considering the authoritarian practices in Turkey, and should project a feeling of inclusiveness towards the Turkish people. The main tools in achieving this aim are: visa liberalization, reopening discussion on Turkey's EU accession chapters and revising the definition of a safe third country.

The workshop ended up with a light lunch, during which participants had the chance to continue discussion and exchange contact details. The format of the workshop contributed towards establishing a positive environment, in which people coming from such diverse cultural and professional backgrounds could freely voice their ideas and views – however different from those of their interlocutors.

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The EU-Turkey Deal and Its Implications for the Asylum Capacities of EU Border Countries

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