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What Happens After Finding Refuge? The Integration of Syrian Refugees in Germany and Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) project established a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. This year, GTE focused on the refugee crisis and its impact on EU–Turkey relations, as well as on the EU's migration and asylum policies. Public discourse on the issue is polarized and often confused: GTE provided a forum for people with different professional backgrounds, experiences and opinions to meet and discuss various facets of the refugee crisis, alongside field trips designed to better inform the dialogue between participants. The fifth event in this series took place in Berlin on 8 May 2017. The workshop focused on the issue of the integration of refugees in light of the experiences of two leading refugee-hosting countries – Germany and Turkey.

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Introduction

The Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) project established a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. Launched in 2012 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in collaboration with the Istanbul Policy Centre (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator, the team was joined in its fourth year by the Foundation for European Progress Studies (FEPS).¹ This year, GTE focused on the refugee crisis and its impact on EU–Turkey relations, as well as on the EU’s migration and asylum policies. Public discourse on the issue is polarized and often confused: GTE provided a forum for people with different professional backgrounds, experiences and opinions to meet and discuss various facets of the refugee crisis, alongside field trips designed to better inform the dialogue between participants.

The first of a series of workshops on the issue took place in Istanbul in July 2016² 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, albeit implicit, assumptions of the EU–Turkey deal. The second workshop was hosted in Athens in November 2016³ to discuss the implications of the deal for the asylum

¹ For more details, see: <http://www.iai.it/en/node/4194>.

² For details about the event and the report, see: “The Humanitarian Dimension of the Refugee Crisis in Turkey: Challenges and Prospects”, Istanbul, 22 July 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/6636>.

³ For details about the event and the report, see: “The EU-Turkey Deal and Its Implications for the Asylum Capacities of EU Border Countries”, Athens, 4 November 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/6922>.

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· Report from the field trip and seminar held in Berlin on 8 May 2017 and organized by Stiftung Mercator, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Istanbul Policy Centre (IPC) and Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) 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” (Global Turkey in Europe).

capacities of EU border countries, in particular Greece. The third event took place in Catania (Sicily) in December 2016⁴ and further explored the EU–Turkey deal, questioning whether it could be a model to be replicated in other contexts, in particular concerning the Central Mediterranean route. The fourth event took place in Budapest in February 2017⁵ and focused on the refugee debate in Central and Eastern Europe and in particular on the Visegrad countries' resistance to the relocation and resettlement schemes put forward by the European Commission. The fifth and last event in this series took place in Berlin on 8 May 2017 and discussed the issue of the integration of refugees in light of the experiences of two leading refugee-hosting countries, Germany and Turkey. All events encompassed field trips to key locations to understand the impact of the migration crisis in the respective country, followed by an interactive workshop.

Field trip: ICC emergency shelter

In mid-2015, deteriorating circumstances in first countries of reception and increasing migratory pressure led to the opening of the “Balkan route”. Overwhelmed by the humanitarian crisis building at its doors, Germany suspended the Dublin regulation for Syrians and ultimately opened its border in September 2015. This resulted in 890,000 asylum seekers entering Germany in 2015,⁶ of whom only 476,649 were able to file for asylum in the same year, mainly due to lack of administrative capacity.⁷ Because of the shortage of emergency accommodation facilities, school gyms and other public buildings were used to host asylum seekers waiting for their asylum application to be processed and their relocation to a different federal state (on the basis of the so-called *Königstein* formula).

In this context, on 1 October 2015 the Berlin Malteser⁸ was asked by the Berlin Senate to set up a *Notunterkunft* (emergency shelter) in Congress Hall 26. Within a few hours, a small team of five employees with the support of over 100 volunteers had opened a centre with a hosting capacity of 1,200 asylum seekers. In December 2015 the shelter was moved to the disused International Congress Centre (ICC), due

⁴ For details about the event and the report, see: “Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to Be Replicated in Other Contexts?”, Catania, 16 December 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/7226>.

⁵ For details about the event and the report, see: “The Refugee Debate in Central and Eastern Europe: Can the EU-Turkey Deal Survive Without Intra EU Convergence on Relocation and Resettlement?”, Budapest, 23-24 February 2017, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/7407>.

⁶ Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), *Migration Report 2015: Central Conclusions*, 14 December 2016, <http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/Publikationen/Migrationsberichte/migrationsbericht-2015-zentrale-ergebnisse.html>.

⁷ Matthias Mayer, *Germany's Response to the Refugee Situation: Remarkable Leadership or Fait Accompli?*, Washington, Bertelsmann Foundation, May 2016, http://www.bfna.org/sites/default/files/publications/Germanys_Response_to_the_Refugee_Situation_Mayer.pdf.

⁸ Malteser Berlin is a non-governmental organization, part of Malteser International, the relief agency of the Sovereign Order of Malta for humanitarian aid. For more information, see the official website: <http://www.malteser-berlin.de/die-malteser-in-berlin.html>.

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to a fair taking place at the Congress Hall. Since that time a team of 30 employees has managed the centre, which has a current capacity of 600.

This is where Olga Nowak, Deputy Head of the ICC emergency shelter, welcomed the participants. She introduced the history of the shelter and explained that as of today there are still 15,000 asylum seekers sheltered in emergency accommodation in Germany, of whom more than 80 percent (13,400) are in Berlin. The numbers have been strongly decreasing compared to last year (which saw 70,000 hosted in collective emergency accommodation), due to an ongoing



transition from an emergency-focused reception system to a better managed framework with quicker asylum procedures and earlier access to long-term solutions. For this reason, and because of the high cost of its maintenance, the ICC shelter is expected to be shut down in the near future. Indeed, flows into Germany have decreased substantially (also due to the closing of most routes in the Western Balkans and the EU–Turkey deal) and the focus has consequently shifted from emergency management to the integration challenge.

Before showing us around the centre, Olga gave us some background on the asylum seekers hosted in the shelter, mentioning that they come from many different countries with the most represented being Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea and the most spoken languages Arabic and Farsi/Dari. Overall, young single men form the majority, but the centre also hosts many families and, at the moment of our visit, there were 70 minors. She remarked that there has been a steady decrease in the percentage of Syrian refugees over the last years, falling from 55 percent in 2015 to 20 percent in 2017. In her opinion, this is mainly due both to the speeding up of the asylum procedure and most Syrians having moved to other *Gemeinschaftsunterkünfte* (accommodation facilities with shared kitchen), apartments and – the luckiest ones – to hostels. The average permanence at the shelter varies greatly, and is often linked to the nationality: persons with low chance of recognition (e.g., coming from the Western Balkans) are processed faster, whereas those with high recognition rates generally stay longer. The average period of stay for Afghans in the ICC is of 180 days; for Syrians it is even longer. Twenty percent of the hosted asylum seekers stay more than a year at the ICC, and 10 persons have been there since its opening in 2015.

As the participants were very interested in the asylum procedure and in the consequences of a negative outcome, Olga explained that asylum seekers get assigned to the emergency shelters by the German asylum agency and generally stay there until the decision on their case has been made or until they are requested

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to move elsewhere. In the case of a negative decision, a voluntary departure deadline is communicated to the rejected applicants, who must leave the country by that date; if they do not leave voluntarily, the police pick them up and transfer them to an "expulsion camp" pending their deportation. An exception to this scheme applies when the person cannot be sent back because of the conditions in the country of origin or because of his/her health status. Also, often in practice it might be difficult for the state to enforce the deportations – as, for example, the great majority of the rejected applicants awaiting deportation at the ICC simply disappear.

Olga then outlined the services that the Malteser team provides on-site which include registration, an infopoint, medical consultation and psychological counselling, German and so-called "values-mediation" classes, computer labs, childcare and pre-school services, workshops and sports activities. Besides the Malteser team (of which half have a migration background and some are recognized refugees), there are also security, catering and cleaning personnel working in the building. Upon arrival, asylum seekers are registered and interviewed on a voluntary basis in regard to their interests and skills: this is very important, as it allows the Malteser to help them in finding suitable apprenticeships or jobs before they are recognized as refugees or taken in charge by formal employment assistance agencies. Indeed, in Germany asylum seekers are allowed to enter the labour market three months after they have filed their application, but in practice it is highly difficult for them to access employment without the support of a third party. At the ICC they receive job consultancy and have the opportunity to profit from bilateral agreements such as with the Congress Hall and construction companies. Nevertheless, the shortage of opportunities added to the skills and language deficiencies of many asylum seekers (only 10 percent have a higher education degree and many companies request a minimum level of B2 in German) causes inoccupation and a shift to the informal labour market.

Before leaving, Olga showed us around the centre. Only part of the ICC has been reactivated for the purpose of the emergency shelter: the main area is a former concert hall, a big space divided into 25m² "rooms" for a maximum of 8 occupants. These compartments have no ceiling or door, merely wooden dividers which provide minimal privacy. The few rooms with doors have been assigned to families with young children. On both sides of the main space there are separated foyers for men and women, and the former stage has been turned into a playground and a sports court. We did not meet many persons sheltered there, as in the morning they attend German classes either in the building itself or elsewhere.



Workshop

After we enjoyed a delicious lunch provided by *Jasmin*,⁹ a catering service which delivers traditional Syrian dishes and in so doing provides job opportunities for illiterate, middle-aged refugee women, the workshop kicked off with some initial remarks from Nathalie Tocci, Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, Fuat Keyman, Director of the Istanbul Policy Centre and Daniel Grütjen, Head of Istanbul Office of the Mercator Stiftung. They introduced the Global Turkey in Europe project and the innovative



format that was followed in its fourth edition, featuring a field trip before the workshop in order to provide participants with a common background and some food for thought for the discussion. Then the focus of the Berlin event was presented: what Germany and Turkey, as countries hosting the most refugees in their respective regions, can learn from each other about integration issues. The workshop, mediated by Mia Forbes Pirie, gathered approximately 35 representatives from think tanks, academia and NGOs as well as MEPs and journalists. As the workshop's aim was to foster discussion, the participants were divided in small groups and asked to present the findings of their group to the others at the end of each round of discussion.

In order to give participants common ground for the discussion, Asli S. Okyay, Senior Fellow at IAI, introduced the challenge of integration and the situation in the two case study countries, Germany and Turkey. She outlined how both are key refugee host countries in their respective regions and, despite substantial differences, they are currently both engaging in replacing the emergency approach with a greater focus on socio-economic integration of refugees and the bridging of cultural and linguistic differences. In this regard, some points were raised by the participants regarding the huge disparity between different efforts that EU Member States are currently engaging in; the importance of involving Arab countries in global responsibility sharing; how misleading statistics can be; and the importance of engaging in direct dialogue with the target groups.

Then Asli presented her paper "What happens after finding refuge? Labour market integration of Syrian refugees in Germany and Turkey: Challenges and prospects", prepared for the workshop. This presentation was followed by a first round of

⁹ More information available at: <https://www.facebook.com/JasminCatering.Berlin>. Contact: fadizaim@gmail.com.

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discussion on the key positive and negative experiences from both Germany and Turkey.

It emerged that Germany is seen as a positive example regarding the welfare and health services offered to asylum seekers, as well as for the great involvement of NGOs and civil society in the integration process. Further, it has succeeded in granting refugees the basis of a new life, providing equal opportunities to all refugees for a new start. Concerning the shortcomings, the slow registration process, the delays in accessing the formal labour market as well as the passive role that asylum-seekers are put in due to the high degree of formality and the predefined, linear path of integration of the German system were mentioned. Turkey on the other hand has been a great example in providing safety from the very start of the conflict and to a great number of people. Also, social acceptance and the welcoming culture in Turkey encourage faster integration. Nevertheless, the lack of governance as well as the poor working conditions and the high reliance on the informal labour market (including child labour) are negative experiences that must be tackled in future. Participants also discussed the difficult balance between state action and civil society projects (when is the state doing too little and when too much?), between formality and informality (in particular concerning access to the labour market) and between centralization and decentralization in terms of providing integration assistance to refugees.



In the second session, the participants debated if there are any lessons that the two countries can learn from each other, notwithstanding the great cultural and economic differences. It was firstly emphasized that the nature and the structure of the state (centralization vs. decentralization) have a significant impact on management, as well as the pre-existence of a well-working social system. Indeed, the latter is fundamental in view of a balance between the host and migrant communities, encouraging complementary instead of conflict. Regarding what Turkey could learn from Germany, the great advantage of an organized and planned integration framework instead of a patchwork system and the importance of integrating NGOs and the local level in the management of refugees' needs were mentioned. On the other side, the German system could learn from the Turkish flexibility and familiarity and from the importance of encouraging entrepreneurship as well as recognizing some positive aspects of an informal labour market.

Participants were then asked to vote on the topics they deemed most pressing in relation to refugee integration. The three topics that were identified as most important were the impact of public perception of refugees and migrants on integration policies, the role of non-state actors (i.e., NGOs and the private sector)

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and refugees' access to education and information. In small groups the participants discussed the challenges and possible solutions to these issues.

Regarding public perception, participants mentioned the difficulties of reaching out to the general public and the struggle faced by the "educated elite" in delivering their messages without oversimplification. On the side of solutions, participants agreed

on how fundamental importance of first-hand contact with real persons, in deconstructing prejudices. Further, more data (such as on the conditions in the countries of origin) should be made easily accessible to the public particularly to counter misrepresentations. Finally, the opposition (i.e., those raising anti-migrant arguments) should be taken more seriously in order to be able to engage in dialogue with them.

As far as the role of NGOs and the private sector is concerned, the group agreed on their fundamental importance in filling the gaps in services and information not covered by the state, as well as in mitigating conflict, capacity-building and networking. Their involvement in the integration of refugees should therefore be encouraged and, in particular, more space should be given to NGOs established by refugees.

Lastly, the participants discussed the topic of access to education and information. Emphasizing the fundamental importance of education and information in the integration process, it was discussed that greater attention should be paid to *how* languages are taught, including greater involvement of refugee teachers and support for adult education. Greater investments should also aim at developing information campaigns and improving the school infrastructure.

At the very end of the workshop, Nathalie Tocci recalled the Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) project and aim, as well as the thematic focus of its previous phases (economy, energy, civil society and, concluding with the Berlin event, migration). She explained that the next phase will be a two-year round dealing more generally with the future of EU–Turkey relations and including all those components the GTE has been focusing on during its journey. There was mutual agreement among participants on the significance that Turkey and Europe will hold for each other in the coming years and on the relevant role played by the GTE project in promoting dialogue.



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