

Event report:
Digital Migration Conference
“EU-Turkey Statement on Migration 2.0”
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Much to agree on, but no agreement (yet) – Conclusions from the Virtual Migration Summit 2020 of KAS Turkey

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On 15 October, the Turkey Office of Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) organised a two-hour digital conference with invited experts on the topic of migration and EU-Turkish cooperation in this area.

Under the title “**EU-Turkey Statement on Migration 2.0**”, the participants discussed the benefits of a new edition of the refugee agreement of 18 March 2016 for the different parties involved. In doing so, they shed light on what such a new version would have to look like in order to remedy currently existing shortcomings for all sides.

In his opening speech, Walter Glos, head of the KAS Turkey office, emphasised the special role that in particular Germany was playing in this context. Not only does Berlin currently hold the EU Council Presidency, but it remains a partner for Turkey and committed to finding an agreement and strengthening cooperation.

The subsequent guest speakers included the migration expert and mastermind of the current EU-Turkey Statement, **Gerald Knaus**, the chief coordinator of the EU-funded *Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT)* on the part of the Republic of Turkey, **Halil Afşarata**, as well as **Stephan Mayer**, Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Ministry of the Interior, for Construction and Community, and Prof. Dr. **M. Murat Erdoğan**, director of the Research Centre for Migration and Integration at the Turkish-German University of Istanbul. Diplomatic representatives of Greece and Turkey as well as German and Turkish voices from academia and journalism also took part in the concluding discussion.

One sentence that came up remarkably often was: “I completely agree with that”. So, what are the remaining points of disagreement? And what must be done to resolve them?

A new agreement has advantages for all

As **Gerald Knaus** emphasised at the outset, the basic idea of the agreement was in the interest of all parties involved: it opened a legal route of resettlement to the EU for a part of the refugees and improves their situation on the ground in Turkey; it demonstrably stopped the human rush to Greece and as a result drastically reduced the number of deaths in the Aegean; and it financially supported Turkey in providing for the refugees to an extent that exceeded the total budget of the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR for 2019. But also for Knaus it is clear: in practice, the current agreement had largely failed.

The problems were obvious: unlike planned, there had been hardly any repatriations from Greece to Turkey since the agreement was concluded, and hardly any resettlements from Turkey to the EU. Of the 60,000 new arrivals on the Greek islands in 2019, only 200 – i.e. 0.3% – were deported. Meanwhile, the conditions in the Greek first reception centres were so degrading that EU interior ministers said they had never seen refugee accommodation of such a low standard. Knaus believes that there is a method to this: in view of the failure of efficient asylum procedures, Greece was now trying to deter migrants from continuing their journey to the West by scaring them off and illegally pushing them back at sea. This was the end of the Geneva Convention on

Refugees and the European Union's Charter of Human Rights. Only a renewal of the agreement would effectively remedy these shortcomings.

What would have to happen?

Both Germany and Turkey are in favour of extending and improving the refugee agreement.

State Secretary Mayer stressed that he considered the agreement to be much better than many critics claimed. A "revival of its core", however, was indispensable for it to really work. In this respect, he said, it was up to Greece to fully implement the agreement and to actually return rejected asylum seekers to Turkey. Meanwhile, Berlin was ready to take on its share of the resettlements from Turkey to the EU. In the past, almost half of all resettlements to Europe had gone to Germany.

Mayer also acknowledged the great burden that Turkey had to shoulder. All parties to the agreement had to take the challenges Turkey was facing more seriously. Continued financial support for Turkey was therefore "a crucial pillar" of a new edition of the agreement. However, improvements had to be made in terms of content, so that a new "balanced" agreement could be realistically implemented and there would be no further breach.

Halil Afşarata, for his part, likewise stressed the importance of the EU as a partner of Turkey, and that Turkey was currently hosting the largest number of refugees in the world – a fact that also State Secretary Mayer strongly acknowledged. According to Afşarata, the EU underestimated how difficult it was to receive refugees on such a scale. Needs had continued to grow due to new births and now the corona pandemic, making new payments inevitable. Supplying the Syrian refugees was a humanitarian problem for the whole world, not only for Turkey and the EU: other countries, too, should make greater efforts and help.

Afşarata also wanted a new agreement to speed up the flow of EU funds to recipients in Turkey and to reduce the amount of money spent on administration. According to Afşarata, these costs were currently at about €750 million out of the total of €6 billion for the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. Without rapid disbursement, effective help for those in need would be impossible. Afşarata also demanded that Turkish non-governmental and aid organisations be more involved in the planning process. Currently, they were often left out, which was both disrespectful and ineffective.

Afşarata, who is also an advisor to the Turkish vice president, concluded his list of proposals for a new agreement by calling for new negotiations to take a holistic view of EU-Turkey relations and to rebuild trust. The same call has been made several times in the past by the EU High Representative Josep Borrell. For Afşarata, this meant discussing not only migration but also visa liberalisation, the modernisation of the customs union and closer cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

The Turkish Ambassador to the EU, Mehmet Kemal Bozay, strongly supported Afşarata in this respect: Migration was "not a stand-alone problem" and had to be linked to the other issues. He also agreed with Afşarata, pointing out that focusing only on temporary projects financed by the EU was not a sustainable solution. Instead, he said, the problem should be tackled "at its root" and Syria itself should also be discussed: there were already another million refugees at the Turkish border. But Turkey could not take them in, and the EU was not yet sufficiently aware of this. A common solution was urgently needed here.

Based on his research on Syrian refugees in Turkey as documented in his recent publication *Syrians Barometer 2019*, Prof. M. Murat Erdoğan underlined four points that would have to be addressed in the design of an EU-Turkey Statement 2.0:

1. Although a major challenge, the refugee crisis had also given new hope for cooperation between Turkey and the EU. However, Turkey had been hoping to get political concessions from the EU in return for the EU's externalization of refugee reception. This was why the 2016 agreement eventually failed. For Turkey, it only effectively worked in terms of financial support whereas no progress was achieved with regard to the other elements of the Statement.

2. Turkey-EU relations were likely to centre around the issue of migration over the entire coming decade. This raised the question of how the EU was preparing for this. The most concrete development in this regard was the EU's new migration and refugee pact. This proposal showed that the EU was set to pursue a more restrictive migration policy. A new agreement with Turkey was hence likely to consist in financial support only. However, the financial cost of refugee reception was not the only challenge for Turkey. Rather, it also inflicted heavy

social and political costs upon the Turkish government and society. Therefore, a new agreement would have to offer Turkey more than just additional funding.

3. As Prof Erdoğan's research had revealed, the issue of Syrian refugee reception was being increasingly politicised in Turkey. This was due to the fact that the Turkish public's attitude towards the presence of refugees was rapidly worsening. The event of the coronavirus pandemic and a deteriorating economy, causing joblessness and poverty across the country, were significantly adding to this. A more restrictive and less understanding EU migration policy towards Turkey was therefore fuelling an anti-European discourse in Turkey. In the eyes of the Turkish taxpayers, their sacrifices for what was a global humanitarian problem were hardly acknowledged by the EU. Therefore, a lack of support from the side of the EU was likely to be politically instrumentalised and to drive the EU and Turkey further apart overall. It was of major importance that the EU did not forget the great difficulties that Turkish society was experiencing over its tensions with the Turkish government.

4. Finally, the Turkish government was making a substantial mistake in continuing to treat the reception of Syrian refugees as a temporary issue. According to Prof Erdoğan's research, the refugees were highly likely to stay in Turkey in the long run by now. Therefore, the Turkish government urgently had to change its policy towards sustainable social integration. This would also require that a new EU-Turkey Statement would focus its financial support on such projects rather than on temporary humanitarian aid only. This would entail involving Turkish institutions and local organisations more in the dispersion of funds as well.

Overall, Prof Erdoğan was not very hopeful about the future of EU-Turkey cooperation on migration. In his view, bilateral relations such as the one between Ankara and Berlin were becoming more important, and Germany was to play a decisive role in forging a solution.

In the view of the 'inventor' of the current agreement, Gerald Knaus, the most decisive improvement to be made was for Greece, with the help of the EU, to build up the administrative structures to carry out fast and fair asylum procedures directly at its borders. The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), for example, which was the largest asylum authority in the world and had gained a lot of experience in recent years, could help here. However, he said that remedying the conditions in the Greek refugee camps had absolute priority now – and especially to do so before the winter would start.

So, what is the problem?

All participants agreed: without each other no progress was possible; a new agreement was in everyone's interest; Turkey was shouldering an enormous burden and the main problem was on the side of Greece and thus with the EU. But that is not all.

As an envoy from the Greek Ministry of the Interior recalled, Turkey had just recently broken the Statement. This was because from the outset it was only a "gentlemen's agreement", which was decided because the previous agreement between Greece and Turkey had already failed. Migration was "a European issue" and the EU should not only see Greece as responsible for this. His country was at the limit of what it could shoulder, too. In addition, Ankara was currently pursuing a policy of constant provocation against Athens.

The crux of the problem, it became clear over the course of the conference, is the distribution of burdens and the determination of compensation. Moreover, progress in migration cooperation is failing because of the simultaneous conflicts in other policy areas.

What does that mean in concrete terms? If, for example, Turkey demands visa liberalisation from the European Union in return for its efforts in refugee policy, this is made more difficult by the fact that Turkey and the EU disagree on the definition of terrorism and the basis for criminal prosecution inside Turkey. In the same vein, cooperation on migration policy between Greece and Turkey is made considerably more difficult by the simultaneous dispute over natural gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Gerald Knaus also sees another danger: within the EU, there are more and more member states which were willing to do without a new agreement altogether and instead solely ramp up European border protection. These states wanted to repel refugees directly at the border without any asylum procedure. This would mean that human rights principles would be disregarded and Turkey would be left alone. However, Knaus did not consider a comprehensive agreement, which would also address other major issues such as the customs union

or visa liberalisation, as Turkey demands, to be realistic at this point – EU-Turkish relations were at an all-time low and the EU was at loggerheads.

State Secretary Mayer, however, sees things differently. From his experience, all EU member states are aware of the advantages and the importance of a new agreement. The EU was united in its interest in tackling the migration challenges in the Aegean together with Turkey. However, the bilateral tensions between Greece and Turkey would first have to be resolved.

So how to move forward?

Germany's role as the current holder of the EU presidency and a loyal partner of Turkey is of great importance. The participants agreed: Berlin must seize this opportunity and now convince the other EU member states of a new agreement.

But what should it contain? According to State Secretary Mayer and migration researcher Knaus, the key to success lies in a proposal from the Turkish side that Greece can agree to. Then the EU would know what to face and be assured that the new agreement would hold.

As the recent past has shown, the agreement will only work as long as it remains in the interest of all parties. Germany, Greece and Turkey must therefore now lead the way and show that such an agreement is possible so that the rest of the EU can join it.

State Secretary Mayer stressed that there would be no bilateral payments from Berlin to Ankara, as this would send the wrong signal to Brussels. Instead, Ankara must now send a new proposal to Brussels, in line with Athens and in cooperation with Berlin. Because once it is on the table, it can be discussed and possibly adopted. As Gerald Knaus said at the end of the conference, the proponents of a new agreement now need "proof of success".

The KAS Turkey office will work to advance this process.

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