

GRF Viewpoint: It's Not About Money, It's About Solidarity – How to Save the Migration Deal

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The Syrian civil war has caused a new migration crisis which brings Turkey and the EU at another crossroads. At the heart of the argument is the 18 March, 2016 deal between the two sides. Like many other issues, it is usually encapsulated in a simple manner: “Under the 2016 agreement, Turkey agreed to halt the flow of people to the EU in return for funds.”¹ This is an oversimplification and grossly misrepresents the actual situation. It needs to be put into perspective.

When the Syrian civil war began in 2011 and the refugees crossed over to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, the bulk of international assistance went to these two countries as Turkey was providing better conditions. Turkey set up camps near the Syrian border that housed up to a quarter of a million Syrians. Soon the number of Syrians in Turkey mushroomed to 2,5 million and foreign visitors were congratulating Turkey on its efforts.

Once Chancellor Merkel in the summer of 2015 announced that Germany would open its borders to migrants², the numbers of Syrians and other nationalities streaming into the EU became a torrent and the EU reached out to Turkey to resolve the matter. The European Commission initially suggested disingenuously that the IPA funds allocated for Turkey be used for the Syrian refugees. IPA is an instrument for pre-accession to help candidates prepare for membership. The EU's offer was refused.

That October President Erdoğan made a state visit to Belgium and had a working dinner with the presidents of the EU Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament. One should remember that until then the relationship between Turkey and the EU was stalled and accession negotiations blocked. At this “very friendly” gathering, in exchange for Turkey stopping the refugees, the EU proposed the opening of negotiating chapters, speeding up visa liberalization, upgrading the

¹ https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/28/tensions-rise-between-turkey-and-russia-after-killing-of-troops-in-syria?utm_source=dailybrief&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=DailyBrief2020feb28&utm_term=DailyNewsBrief

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/30/immigration-asylumseekers-refugees-migrants-angela-merkel>

Customs Union and providing financial assistance, the amount of which was to be specified at a later date. Negotiations culminated in the agreement of November 29.³

Although there was a drop in the number of cross overs, it was not sufficient and the EU called on Turkey for more measures such as reintroducing visas for Syrians, providing labor possibilities for them and increasing border control.

However, all these efforts were not enough as the numbers reaching Greece and beyond were still high. The EU then suggested that Turkey accept to take back all those who had crossed over illegally. This meant that anybody leaving Turkey unlawfully, whether Syrian or any other nationality would be taken back. This was a hard choice as Turkey was already hosting close to 3 million refugees at that time.

Turkey decided to accept this, but upped the ante by asking further inducements: speeding up visa liberalization from October to June 2016, opening more negotiating chapters and an additional 3 billion € for the Syrians, among others. This was seen by Turkey as an opportunity to renew the relationship with the EU and bring it back on track. A deal was struck on March 18.⁴

As soon as the agreement was made public the flow dropped dramatically. In fact, the numbers went down more steeply than anyone anticipated. According to UNHCR figures, the average daily arrivals for April 2016, fell 86% compared to the previous month. By 25th of April, irregular crossing went down to zero.

The second important issue was the resettlement of Syrians from Turkey. As Syrians travelling irregularly to the Greek islands were returned to Turkey, an equal number was to be resettled in EU countries. This process had started but the next phase never did. According to Article 4 of the March 18 agreement, *“Once irregular crossings between Turkey and the EU are ending or at least have been substantially and sustainably reduced, a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme will be activated. EU Member States will contribute on a voluntary basis to this scheme.”* This was a further incentive for the Syrians not to look for illegal and dangerous routes to go to the EU; that there would be a regular and legal way. During the negotiations Chancellor Merkel had mentioned that Germany would accept on a yearly basis, around 150 thousand Syrians legally residing in Turkey.

The period between September 2015 and March 2016 was exceptional as contact between Turkey and the EU on all levels became commonplace. This situation increased dialogue between the two parties. In just four months, three Summits with all 28 members were realized. The German Chancellor and Council President Tusk visited Turkey several times.

Just as the migration deal brought the two sides closer, the failed coup attempt of July 15th and its aftermath had an unfortunate cooling effect.

Nevertheless, while Turkey fulfilled its commitments, the EU met its obligations selectively. Once the huge numbers of refugees fell, the EU felt no reason to comply with its promises.

Although there might be some merit of not advancing on the visa issue as some benchmarks remained outstanding, the rest were just excuses.

There is no rationale for not opening chapters 23 and 24, which deal with justice and fundamental rights, areas in which the EU continues to criticize Turkey. The EU used the political situation in Turkey to prevent the upgrading of the Customs Union. This is also difficult to grasp, as the modernization of the Customs Union was to be mutually beneficial, economically and commercially. The 3+3 billion € for the Syrian refugees was sent very slowly. All of the initial 3 billion € reached Turkey only in 2018 and the second tranche has been allocated just recently.

The exact amount Turkey spent on the Syrians and other refugees is hard to calculate as free health care among other welfare benefits were provided. Whatever the exact figure, the EU's contribution is comparatively minimal.

Most importantly, the EU has not fulfilled its promise to accept Syrian refugees legally residing in Turkey.

If the EU had followed up on its pledges and notably this last point, we would not be facing this current dilemma. How can you blame Turkey for not trusting the EU when they find this or that excuse not to fulfill their obligations? The way out of this current situation is to uphold the March 18 agreement as soon as possible and start a process of alleviating Turkey's burden. The two sides should sit down and see how to once again build up confidence. It is not about providing financial assistance but showing solidarity.