



Claiming for Moral Superiority while Bargaining with Mobility. Turkey-EU Migration Diplomacy in the post-2016 Euro-Mediterranean space

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Introduction

The outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011 and the propagation of the Arab uprisings have triggered a new wave of migration in the Euro-Mediterranean space. Turkey's geographical proximity with the Schengen area and the mixed migratory flows that cross its territory since the 1990s (İçduygu 2015) have been crucial in reinvigorating agreements aimed at externalizing the EU border control. In the 2016-2019 EU "Global Strategy" identified by the EU diplomatic service, the Europeanization narrative has been partially shelved to leave room to two main security challenges: migration and terrorism. This process affected both the legal and operational instruments used to manage and control immigration and redefined the EU's position vis-à-vis third states (Ryan 2019; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2016; Frelick, Kysel, and Podkul 2016; van Munster and Sterkx 2006). Although the Europeanization of Turkish migration and asylum policies has started in the late 1990s and has been fostered in the early 2000s, the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement – aimed to "end irregular" migration¹ – is a landmark for the EU's long-lasting externalization of borders control to Turkey. On the Turkish Foreign Ministry's webpage, the 2016 Statement is indeed presented as a "game changer agreement" and "the most stunning example of burden and responsibility sharing that Turkey has been advocating since the eruption of the Syrian crisis in 2011"². The window dressing of the diplomatic jargon presents the agreement as based on cooperation and absolute gains for the two parts³. However, current developments reflect a more nuanced reality: Four years after the signature of the agreement, Turkey's accession negotiations are suspended⁴ and the country

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¹ Press statement on the 18 March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/> (last consulted 10 November 2020).

² Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Implementation of Turkey-EU Agreement of 18 March 2016, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/implementation-of-turkey_eu-agreement-of-18-march-2016.en.mfa (last consulted 10 November 2020).

³ About the notion of absolute and relative gains in international relations please see Powell (Powell 1991). The EU was committed to 6 billion euros by the end of 2018, the promise of an upgrading of the Custom Union, the fulfilment of the visa liberalization roadmap with a view to lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens and the commitment to re-energize the accession process. Here the European Commission's report "The EU-Turkey Statement Four years on": https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20200318_managing-migration-eu-turkey-statement-4-years-on_en.pdf (last consulted 15 November 2020).

⁴ On March 13, 2019, the EU Parliament called on the Commission to formally suspend the accession negotiations with Turkey. www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0200_EN.html?redirect. (last consulted 15 November 2020).

has increasingly employed migration issue, particularly transit migration and management of refugees, as an instrument to negotiate power relations vis-à-vis the EU. Hence the question: How has the management of a humanitarian crisis and the massive migration flows affected post 2016 Turkey-EU migration diplomacy?

The article relies on the concept of migration diplomacy and focuses on two deeply interconnected elements at the core of EU-Turkey diplomacy: on the one side the management of the refugee's "crisis" and Turkey's image as a humanitarian actor praised as "the country which hosts the largest number of refugees from Syria" (Korkut 2016). On the other side, the proactive role of Turkey as gatekeeper, tasked with preventing irregular migration directed to the EU. The literature that examines the outcomes of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement emphasizes the evolution of the EU's border regime on migrants' lives and deaths in the Mediterranean (İçduygu and Üstübcü 2014; İçduygu and Aksel 2014; Vradis et al. 2020). However, scholars also shine light on how Turkey's claim for "moral superiority" as it pertains to the management of refugees has been used to gain political consensus on a proactive and militarized foreign policy (Polat 2018; Korkut 2016). Polat defines moral superiority as the result of a positive self-representation and negative other representation that is constructed around three dominant discourses: the first one is based on religious solidarity, and Turkey's historical responsibility towards the territories of the wider Ottoman heritage. The second discourse is based on the negative definition of the West as xenophobic, Islamophobic and irresponsible towards refugees. The third discourse is built around a negative narrative affecting the political opponent of the Turkish government as not caring about the refugees and being rootless with regard of Islamic and Ottoman history (Polat 2018:14-15). In line with these considerations, the paper contends that Turkey's international image as both gatekeeper and a champion of solidarity and humanitarian assistance has been an asset in the attempt to galvanize a coercive migration diplomacy and redefine Turkish approach to the EU migration regime⁵. We could thus infer that the moral superiority claimed by the Turkish government reflects those various forms of contestations MENA states employ to resist and renegotiate material power asymmetries vis-à-vis the EU (Del Sarto and Tholens 2020).

The article's first section presents the theoretical framework and the methodology employed while emphasising the importance of the policy context in the development of Turkey-EU migration policy. The second section examines Turkey-EU migration diplomacy as it pertains to the management of refugees under the temporary protection provided by the Turkish state. The attention is particularly devoted to the EU praising Turkish solidarity and how this alimented a moral superiority and a binary opposition vis-à-vis the EU accused of not being able to equally welcome refugees. The third section finally casts light on how Turkey's acceptance and hosting of Syrian refugees has provided the AKP government with the opportunity not only to claim moral superiority vis-à-vis the EU but also to revisit its migration diplomacy in a more coercive way. The claim for moral superiority is undermined when it implies "threats" to send migrants to Europe and a politicization of transit migration as a bargaining tool for domestic and foreign policy goals.

⁵ See Yackley 2020; Ülgen 2020.

1. Turkey's Migration Diplomacy in the post 2016 era: theoretical and methodological perspectives

Migration diplomacy, “how states employ cross-border population mobility management in their international relations, or how they use diplomatic means to obtain goals relating to migration” (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019: 116) has recently been at the core of a scholarship interested in how migration features in interstate relationships (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Tsourapas 2017). This notion is indeed particularly relevant to assess the current developments of what Hollifield defines the “migration state” where the regulation of international migrations is as important as providing for security of the state and the economic well-being of the citizens (Hollifield 2004). Adamson and Tsourapas affirm that states’ use of diplomatic tools, processes and procedures to manage cross-border population mobility also depends on their overall power and available resources. However, the authors underline three main scopes of migration diplomacy: the first refers to state’s action and considers how cross-border mobility is linked to state’s diplomatic aims. This definition thus takes into consideration states’ migration diplomacy vis-à-vis international actors. The second aspect refers to how states employ the management of cross-border population mobility in their international relations, that is how they use diplomatic means to obtain goals relating to migrations. The third meaning refers to the importance of the management of migration as an international issue, that is an issue that impacts on interstate interactions (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019: 116-7).

Moreover, migration diplomacy emphasizes the importance of rationalist framework in international relations according to which intergovernmental agreements that aim to regulate migratory flows are based on states’ interests in absolute versus relative gains and underlines how migration is an important area of states’ bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relations. In this respect, Tsourapas theorizes how migration affects interstate bargaining and affirms that mobility might feature in the conduct of states’ diplomacy engaging in cooperative and coercive migration diplomacy. The author underlines how, although the edges between the two notions are blurred, a “cooperative” approach in migration diplomacy is based on a bargaining aimed at pursuing mutual beneficial arrangements, while a “coercive” approach is resorting to the threat of force and unilateral actions (Tsourapas 2017: 2370).

This aspect allows to problematize migration management in the light of power asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South. The question whether and how the EU engages in strategic issue-linkage through its trade agreements has been examined in relation to the EU’s nature as a foreign policy actor. In this respect, one instrument is the conclusion of bilateral readmission agreements which commit third countries to take their own as well as third country nationals who have crossed their territory while engaging in cooperation on the fight against irregular migration. While the EU has had to define alternative incentives in order to incite third countries’ cooperation (Jurje and Lavenex 2013: 7), the states’ instrumentalization of refugees to pursue domestic and foreign policy goals has been largely diffused: on the one hand,

the EU countries are resorting to a constellation of sailor's promises to stem new arrivals. On the other hand, third countries like Turkey enjoy their haggler position assuring Brussels they will combat border crossings towards the EU (Danış 2016).

Scholars who have focused on how non-binding norms like the 2018 Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees are accepted by the Global South emphasise how policy tools of externalization at the state and the supranational level do not only concern the extension of border control to neighbouring countries but also imply the re-shaping of structural inequalities between North and South, as well as social boundaries in destination and so-called 'transit' countries (Stock, Üstübcici, and Schultz 2019).

While investigating MENA states' forms of resistance to European norms, Del Sarto and Tholens identify two types of contestation: the "explicit" resistance to the competence claim asserted by European actors and the "hidden" processes of contestation. According to the authors, these two aspects are blurred as opposition is also the result of a combination of explicit and implicit actions. Moreover, they contend that resistance may occur after an initial formal acceptance of European norms. Hence the importance of attentively contextualizing migration diplomacy: States "formally agree on European initiatives and policies, but eventually refrain from implementing these policies in the ways intended by their European counterparts" (Del Sarto and Tholens 2020: 4). The literature which analyses the EU-Turkey relations informs about how negotiations have evolved involving the exchange of funding and/or the boosting of EU integration process in exchange of the control migrants' mobility (İçduygu and Üstübcici 2014; İçduygu and Aksel 2014). In the past three decades, Turkey has been co-opted into the managing of the EU's borderlands. However, it has also used migration issue as a leverage to engage in explicit forms of contestations that challenge Europe's competence to set the rules (Del Sarto and Tholens 2020). Against this backdrop, the Turkish side has turned the "refugee crisis" into a great opportunity (Danış 2016).

The article considers the period between 2016-2019 to assess how the EU-Turkey Statement has affected Turkey's migration diplomacy. The policy context alights on significant changes in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy: between 2016 and 2018, the country experienced a rapid authoritarian drift which started with the 15 July 2016 attempted coup and culminated with two years of state of emergency (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016). Following the 2018 currency crisis, the management of almost 4 million refugees from Syria – the majority of whom lives in big cities – has become a crucial issue for the AKP government. Over the past decade, the reception of Syrians in Turkey has been ambivalent: one sector views refugees as a burden and refuse them as an ethnic and political threat to Turkish society. On the contrary, pious and conservative sectors of the society have positively welcomed refugees on the basis of two references: the notion of Islamic fraternity between the "*ansar* and the *muhajir*", as it is mentioned in the Qur'an to describe how Meccan Muslims were welcomed as brothers by the Muslims of Medina. The second is the neo-Ottomanist argument that Turks have historical responsibility towards the peoples of the Ottoman empire (Danış 2016).

The dominant discourses constructed around a religious solidarity for Syrian Muslim brothers and sisters, the country's pride for moral superiority vis-à-vis the rich and irresponsible West has started to fade as episodes of hostility towards refugee population increased⁶. In the same period, refugees from Syria have come to the forefront as a matter of domestic and foreign policy. While denouncing the territorial presence of PKK-linked groups in Northern Syria as a national security concern, the Turkish state has launched military operations in Syria. The intervention of Turkish army has been officially justified as aimed to create a safe zone in Northern Syria to "clean the area" from Kurdish forces and allow Syrian refugees in Turkey to resettle (Adar 2020; İçduygu and Nimer 2020). From 2016 to present, the creation of a "safe zone" as a solution to relocate Syrian refugees has constituted a recurrent topic used by Turkish government as a leverage to obtain domestic and foreign policy goals (Adar 2020).

The article draws on the outcomes of the Council of the EU meetings between 2016 to 2019, the European Commission's Turkey 2018 report, the reports of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on Turkey's transit migrations. The outcomes of the European Union and the United Nations co-chaired Conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" held in Brussels in 2019 and 2020 have been also examined to retrace the international community's reiterated support and "gratitude" to Turkey for its efforts in hosting refugees from Syria. The gathered data also includes official publications such as the magazine *Kırlangiç* and statistics issued by the Turkish General Directorate of Migration Management (*Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü*) under the Ministry of Interior and the publications of the Directorate of EU Affairs under the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, official reports have replaced fieldwork and interviews. However, the research could profit from online blogs and websites which engaged to raise the awareness on the critical points reached by the EU-Turkey migration diplomacy despite the Covid-19 emergency. In particular, it refers to a long ethnographic report published by activists of the online platform *Harekact* in the wake of the events which occurred following Turkey's unilateral decision to open the EU/Greek-Turkish border between February and March 2020.

2. Turkey's Moral Superiority and the Management of Refugees "Crisis"

The massive flows of refugees that reached Turkey since the outbreak of the Syrian war have profoundly affected Turkey's management of immigration. As Turkey maintains a geographical limitation of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the requests for asylum only apply to refugees originating from European countries. However, after the first year of Turkey's "open door policy" towards Syrian refugees considering they would have rapidly gone back to their country, Turkey's legislation concerning asylum and migration was carved within the European framework. However, as Daniş affirms, Turkey followed a pragmatic approach trying to instrumentalize the refugees crisis for both domestic and foreign policy purposes (2016).

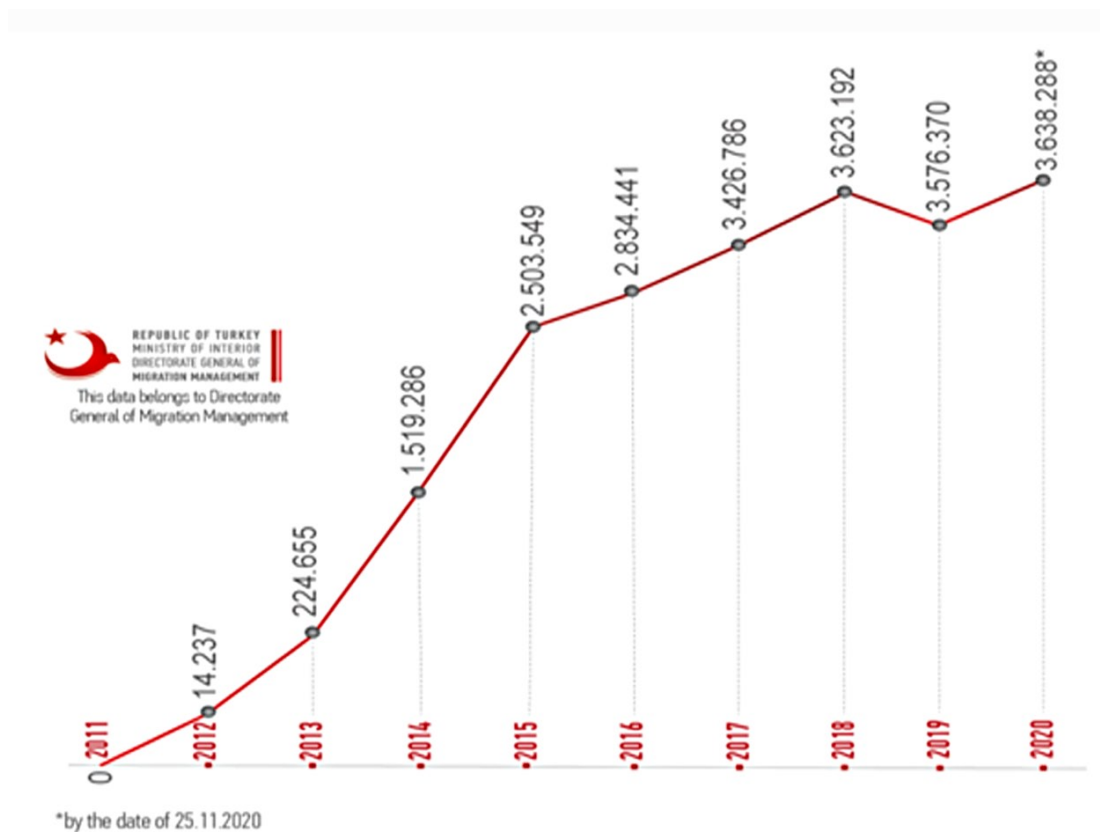
⁶ See Duman 2020.

In 2013, the country adopted the Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) which granted temporary protection to Syrian refugees in Turkey and revitalized the EU-Turkey migration diplomacy (İçduygu and Üstübcü 2014). As defined by the Article 91 of Law No 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection, Temporary Protection “may be provided for foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, cannot return to the country that they have left, and have arrived at or crossed the borders of Turkey in a mass influx situation seeking immediate and temporary protection”.

The Regulation on Temporary Protection for Syrian refugees passed in 2014 and inaugurated a new legal framework for asylum in Turkey. It affirms the country’s obligation towards all persons in need of international protection, regardless of country of origins and also establishes the General Directorate of Migration Management (*Göç İdaresi Müdürlüğü*) under the control of Turkish ministry of Interior as the agency responsible for migration and asylum.

According to the data provided by the General Directorate of Migration Management, in November 2020, 3,6 million Syrians live under temporary protection in Turkey. 59,254 refugees (1,6%) are hosted in one of the seven temporary shelter centres located in five provinces: Adana, Kilis, Kahramanmaraş, Hatay and Osmaniye (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). In 2013, 224,655 Syrian refugees were hosted in Turkey, in 2016 their number reached 2,8 millions.

FIG.1 SYRIAN REFUGEES UNDER TEMPORARY PROTECTION IN TURKEY BY YEAR



Turkey’s Ministry of Interior, General Directorate of Migration Management

FIG.2 DISTRIBUTION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

PROVINCE	NAME OF TEMPORARY SHELTER CENTERS	TOTAL TEMPORARY SHELTER CENTERS	GRAND TOTAL
ADANA (1)	Sarıçam	21.055	21.055
KİLİS (1)	Elbeyli	8.492	8.492
KAHRAMANMARAŞ (1)	Merkez	10.550	10.550
HATAY (3)	Altınözü	2.637	9.574
	Yayladağı	3.619	
	Apaydın	3.318	
OSMANİYE (1)	Cevdetiye	9.583	9.583
Total		59.254	
NUMBER OF SYRIAN REFUGEES THAT NOT IN THE SCOPE OF SHELTER CENTERS		3.576.034	

*by the date of 25.11.2020



Turkey's Ministry of Interior, General Directorate of Migration Management

In 2013, the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement officially disciplined “the rapid and orderly readmission, by each side, of the persons who do not or no longer fulfil the conditions for entry to, presence in or residence on the territory of the other side”⁷. The Agreement has been implemented in 2016 in the aftermath of the 2015 massive flow of refugees from Syria to Turkey. Against this backdrop, the EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan (JAP) of 15 October 2015 and the EU–Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016 (also known as EU-Turkish Deal) have enhanced cooperation to tackle the humanitarian emergency and the political impact of refugees crisis and stem irregular migration (Ozcurumez and Şenses 2011; Karadağ 2019; van Munster and Sterkx 2006). The EU-Turkey Statement was indeed based on the following agreement: Bruxelles agreed to finance 6 billion Euros, revamp Turkish accession process and provide visa-free access for Turkish citizens. Turkey would patrol its external borders and accept the return of irregular migrants from Greece. In particular, for every Syrian returned to Turkey, the European Union pledged to resettle another in one EU country. It is relevant to underline that, similar to what Del Sarto and Tholens observe in the case of MENA states’ involvement in the EU border regime, during the negotiation process Turkey has accepted the rules set by the EU and that subsequently contestations have targeted asymmetric power relations (2020: 4-5).

⁷ EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement, [eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22014A0507\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22014A0507(01)&from=EN) (last consulted 3 December 2020).

While since the outbreak of the agreement the EU and the International Community has championed⁸ Turkey for its efforts in hosting 4 million Syrian refugees on its territory, Turkey’s diplomacy turned its massive humanitarian aid into a moral superiority stance through which voicing a binary opposition vis-à-vis the EU’s lack of solidarity for Syrian refugees. This narrative is grounded on the statistics reported by General Directorate of Migration Management according to which since March 2016, only a limited number of refugees, if compared to Turkey, has been relocated in EU countries (Fig. 3). According to Polat, the AKP’s discourse on Syrian refugees and its positive self-representation as the defender of all oppressed people (*mazlum*) has forged diplomatic relations with the EU while shaping Turkey’s cultural diplomacy and soft power (Polat 2018: 6).

FIG.3 SYRIAN REUGEES RELOCATED TO EU COUNTRIES IN THE SCOPE OF THE 2016 DEAL

COUNTRY	TOTAL
GENERAL TOTAL	27.225
GERMANY	9.765
FRANCE	4757
NETHERLANDS	4464
FINLAND	2176
SWEDEN	2145
BELGIUM	1.344
SPAIN	754
ITALY	396
PORTUGAL	294
CROATIA	250
AUSTRIA	213
LUXEMBOURG	206
LITHUANIA	102
BULGARIA	85
ROMANIA	63
ESTONIA	59
LATVIA	46
SLOVENIA	34
DENMARK	31
SWITZERLAND	24
MALTA	17

*by the date of 25.11.2020

Turkey’s Ministry of Interior, General Directorate of Migration Management

While the active solidarity towards refugees has become a constitutive component of AKP identity (Hintz 2018), it has also enabled the Turkish government to claim moral superiority both *vis-à-vis* the West and its political opponents at home. Fostering a binary opposition between a welcoming Turkish nation and the

⁸ “Deep gratitude and appreciation for Syrian refugees’ hosting states and especially Turkey have been addressed during the international Conferences on Supporting the future of Syria and the region organized by the European Union and the United Nations in April 2017, April 2018, March 2019 and June 2020. Meetings’ main results and declarations are available: European Council – Council of the EU, Supporting the future of Syria and the region - Brussels III conference, 12-14 March 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2019/03/12-14/> (last consulted 3 December 2020).

indifference of the wealthy West, Turkey was thus able to build a positive self-image as the generous host to Syrian refugees and the defender of victims, an operation that, beyond the Syrians, has been employed with the aim to present itself an anti-Western leading actor. Adar and Yenigün have defined this as an attempt to build a counter-hegemonic discourse depicting Turkey as saviour and leader of the so-called Muslim world (Yenigün 2019). This self-congratulatory language presents the refugees as victims and Turkey as a caring host, in sharp contrast with the West (Polat 2018: 8).

The dichotomous nature of this argument is particularly emphasized in Turkey's official publications on migration as well as in Conferences, Summits and meetings concerning the status of Syrian refugees in Turkey. In October 2020, the first number of *Kırlangiç* (Swallow) the Magazine of the General Directorate of Migration Management published an article by the Ministry of Interior, Süleyman Soylu. The Ministry refers to current migration flows denouncing the "deviation of countries which have been the only determinant and follower of values such as civilization, in this first global crisis they face, trying to prevent the contact of this migration with overprotective attitude and even violence." The implicit reference to the West and the "European values" allows to frame a dichotomy between the welcoming Turkey and the West. Turkey is depicted as a country that has followed a different path and "chose to manage migration not prevent migration" (*"Kırlangiç"* 2020: 14).

This narrative's linchpin is twofold: On the one side, it condemns the hypocrisy of Europe/West which talks about human rights and universal values but closes its doors to refugees when in needed. On the other side, Turkey's hospitality and generosity is a leitmotif which is found whenever a prominent AKP actor comments about Turkey's migration policy (Polat 2018: 9). A similar opposition is also displayed concerning the financial burden sharing as it pertains the refugees hosted by Turkey. The AKP's binary discourse which represents the West, Europe and the EU (terms used interchangeably) as 'other' has not only consolidated its political power in Turkish politics (Polat 2018: 14). Such a claim of moral superiority is accompanied with forms of reverse moralism towards Europe accused of teaching about human rights and humanitarian obligation while being unable to deal with refugees' crisis. These explicit resistance to the competence claim laid out by European actors has also contributed to shape the Turkey-EU migration diplomacy in a more coercive way. Albeit the asymmetrical power relations, Turkey could attempt to leverage the issue of migration to enhance its bargaining position vis-à-vis the EU (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019: 118). In the next section, this strategical use of migration as a foreign policy instrument will be examined as it pertains to transit migration.

3. Bargaining on migrants' lives. Turkey's Coercive transit migration Diplomacy

The 18 March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement has also disciplined the return of "irregular migrants" crossing from Turkey into Greece back to Turkey and presented it as an overwhelmed success and a step-change for curbing the number of migrants

and refugees arrived in Greece.⁹ Although the Statement has led to a drastic reduction of the crossings, the European Agency Frontex reported that unauthorized border crossings at the Eastern Mediterranean Route were 42,319 in 2017 and 56,561 in 2018¹⁰. The statistics of the Turkish General Directorate of Migration Management report that in 2019 454,662 “irregular” migrants have been apprehended in Turkey. However, as Daniş affirms, the real effect of the readmission agreements lies in their role of deterrence: only a limited number of immigrants are sent back to Turkey (Daniş 2016).

In the past four years, Turkey’s role as a gatekeeper has resulted in an increasing bargaining power vis-à-vis EU institutions. The coercive approach to transit migration diplomacy is particularly evident if considering the events which occurred at the Greek-Turkish border in March 2020. The cooperative approach of the 2016 Deal by which the EU and Turkey agreed on absolute gains has been eclipsed by Turkey’s unilateral escalation of tensions deriving from the politicization of migrants as a tool for reaching domestic and foreign policy goals. This aspect is particularly relevant as it invites to carefully assess those forms of implicit contestation that occur at the domestic level often in contrast to formally accepted norms or agreements. As Del Sarto and Tholens affirm, some MENA government may use their leverage in specific policy field such as migration to engage in explicit forms of contestations questioning the very definition of competence determined by the EU (Del Sarto and Tholens 2020). In September 2019 to cope with the growing discontent concerning the refugee’s issue in Turkey and the landslide victory of the oppositions at the municipal elections in the country’s largest cities, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, warned he would “open the gates” to allow Syrian refugees to leave Turkey to Europe. The threat was conditional to the international community’s support for the creation of a “safe zone” in north-eastern Syria. Since the first military operation in 2016, the Turkish government engaged in obtaining the EU and international community’s support for the creation of a “safe zone” close to the Turkish border. The operations have been launched to curtail the activities of Kurdish groups identified as terrorists by the Turkish state which accuses them of relations with the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK). Furthermore, the creation of a safe zone has been also aimed to populate the area by Sunni Syrians who would return from Turkey¹¹. In this vein, during the past four years, Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy issues have been instrumentally and strategically linked to migration flows.

⁹ See European Commission, *A Step-Change in Migration Management and Border Security*, ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20190306_managing-migration-factsheet-step-change-migration-management-border-security-timeline_en.pdf (last Consulted 29 November 2020). The number of refugees arrived in Greece from Turkey in 2015 was 861,63, in 2019 74,613. Data available on the UNHCR website: data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179 (consulted on June 15 2020).

¹⁰ Frontex website: *Migratory Routes: Eastern Mediterranean Route*, <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/eastern-mediterranean-route/> (accessed 16 April 2021); Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Interior, Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) website: *Migration Statistics: Irregular Migration*, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration> (accessed 25 September 2019).

¹¹ See McKernan 2019; Seligman 2019.

The “threats” to open the border gates and let migrants enter Europe materialized on February 27, 2020, after thirty-three Turkish soldiers were killed in Syria’s Idlib province, the Turkish authorities announced the opening of the “gates” at the Greek border.¹² All of a sudden, 12,500 migrants reached Turkey’s Edirne region and the coastal area close to Izmir in the attempt to enter Greece via land or by the sea. What happened in the hours and days immediately after Turkish authorities recklessly encouraged migrants to travel to Greece under false pretences and in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic is narrated by the activists and independent media that have been on the field. The online blog *Harekact* published a detailed ethnography written by activists who between February 29 and March 21, 2020 organized in solidarity with migrants at the Pazarkule border in Turkey’s Edirne region¹³. Their long report casts light on the organization of buses from Istanbul to the Pazarkule border area, on migrants stranded in forests at the buffer zone near the border crossing and on the disproportionate use of violence by the Greek police: At least two people were killed at the Greek-Turkish border and a woman remains missing after Greek border forces reportedly fired live ammunition and tear gas against asylum-seekers and migrants¹⁴. The activists have also attentively reported about the role of Turkish police first in pushing migrants to reach the border area and then to transfer them back to Istanbul and to the seven shelter centres located all over the country. Migrants who were stuck at the border had been ping-ponged in camps in Turkish cities where they completed the quarantine before being allowed to resettle in Turkey.

Migrants attempting to cross the Turkish-Greek/EU border pay the risk of being pushed back by the border guards¹⁵. Turkey’s unilateral decision was in contrast to the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement aimed to halt irregular migration by returning to Turkey one migrant for one Syrian refugee settled in the EU. When all migrants left the border zone in March 27, the Turkish Ministry of Interior Suleyman Soylu affirmed that after the pandemic Turkey will not apprehend any migrant¹⁶. While the February 2020 events have contributed to undermine Turkey’s “moral superiority” in welcoming refugees, the EU institutions proved to be deeply committed in what Houtum defines a “war against migrants” rather than against “irregular” border crossings (Houtum 2008). The European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, supported Greece in its efforts to act as a “shield” (*aspida*) to protect the EU external borders and to suspend all new asylum applications across the country for a month¹⁷. It is important to notice how moral superiority has been also combined with forms of reverse

¹² See 33 Turkish soldiers killed in Syrian air raid in Idlib, AlJazeera, February 28, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/28/33-turkish-soldiers-killed-in-syrian-air-raid-in-idlib>; EU ‘strongly rejects’ Turkey’s ‘use’ of migrants at border, Deutsche Welle, March 4, 2020, www.dw.com/en/eu-strongly-rejects-turkeys-use-of-migrants-at-border/a-52640976 (Consulted on 22 October 2020).

¹³ Please see: <https://harekact.bordermonitoring.eu/> (last consulted 20 November 2020).

¹⁴ See Stevis-Gridneff, Kingsley, Willis, Almukhtar and Browne 2020; Greece/Turkey: Asylum-seekers and migrants killed and abused at borders, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/greece-turkey-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-killed-and-abused-at-borders/> (last consulted 14 November 2020).

¹⁵ About the notion of “risk” in border crossing see (Vergnano 2020).

¹⁶ İçişleri Bakanı Soylu: Otobüs seyahatlerine kısıtlama getiriyoruz!, March 27, 2020, <https://www.haberturk.com/son-dakika-haberler-icisleri-bakani-suleyman-soylu-hayat-yuzde-80-durdu-2627041>. See also Filiz (Filiz 2020).

¹⁷ See Rankin 2020.

moralism through which the EU is accused for selectively applying moral standards (human rights, humanitarianism, etc.). Reverse moralism and the claim of moral superiority as it pertains to the refugee's crisis thus speak to those forms of explicit resistance to the competence claim laid out by European actors (Del Sarto and Tholens 2020). Since many EU states are far from reaching high standard of solidarity and capacity to host refugees, refugee host countries in the Middle East fend off criticism for some of their own failings¹⁸.

However, as Kati Piri, the European Parliament's rapporteur on Turkey's EU membership from 2014 to 2019, underlines, on the one hand Turkey is "tantamount to blackmail" the EU weaponizing migrants to get support to its military and political goals in Syria. On the other hand, "Turkey has shouldered a heavy burden on Europe's behalf for very little in return"¹⁹. When the Deal was signed in 2016, to end refugees' influx European governments were ready to negotiate measures that were unpalatable for years such as the visa-free travel for Turkish citizens, an upgrade of the EU-Turkey Custom Union and an opening of new chapter in the stalled EU accession process. According to Piri, these promises were "unrealistic"²⁰.

Hence the need to "decolonize" borders' externalization and consider the counter strategies that peripheral actors activate (İşleyen 2018). Turkey is not only a passive recipient of border policies implementation, it rather interprets them and uses migration issue as a leverage to acquire visa liberalization and revive its accession negotiation talks²¹ (Dursun-Özkanca 2019: 83-97; Okyay and Zaragoza-Cristiani 2016). The creation of a multi-state buffer area has established a complex nexus between the EU core and each buffer state. As Zaragoza-Cristiani affirms: "the refusal to cooperate by any of the buffer states making up part of this borderland, but above all by Turkey, would inevitably provoke a domino effect, with yet more arrivals of refugees at the EU core" (Zaragoza-Cristiani 2017: 72).

The coercive use of transit migration as a leverage whereby to bargain power relations has been also combined with a denunciation of the EU's lack of human conscience and incapacity of hosting refugees compared to Turkey. In the aftermath of the events occurred at the Turkish-Greek border, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu wrote: "EU inaction on Syrian refugees is a stain on human conscience [...] [Turkey] "cannot continue to protect the borders of NATO and Europe alone"²². He also accuses the EU and its parliamentarians of being indifferent and having compromised their prestige:

Greek forces sprayed tear gas and fired on people at their border. Greece also illegally suspended refugee applications. The UN was critical, the EU not. People died, scores were wounded, and *European prestige* was damaged globally. [Italic is mine].

¹⁸ See Dionigi 2017.

¹⁹ Piri 2020.

²⁰ Id.

²¹ In this respect, it is interesting to consider that in March 2020, to ease the desperate conditions in reception camps on Greeks island, the EU offered 2000 € to refugees who decided to voluntarily return. The campaign launched for the duration of one-month is a further step in the EU migration governance and shows how to stem irregular transit migration mostly consists in ordering and governing immobility.

²² Çavuşoğlu 2020.

The reason of the EU lack of prestige is to be found in the EU failure “to develop a policy that projects peace, prosperity and dignity to its near-abroad, and has not worked earnestly with Turkey to achieve that”²³.

Concluding remarks

Since 2016, the EU-Turkey diplomacy has been largely focused on the management of Syrian refugees living under temporary protection in Turkey and the strengthening of border control aimed at stemming migration directed towards the EU. The EU-Turkey Statement aimed to “end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU” has been signed and implemented while the EU-Turkey accession process was in deadlock and the opening of any new negotiation chapters frozen.

The article casts light on how the management of a humanitarian crisis and the massive migration flows have affected Turkey-EU migration diplomacy. It contends that, during the period post the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, a season of reinvigorated EU-Turkey diplomacy on matter of transit migration and refugees protection has been characterized by two related and opposed stances: on the one side the EU and international community have praised Turkey for its solidarity and humanitarian support as the country that hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees and stems migrants and refugees’ flows directed towards the EU. On the other side, Turkey has built on this widely recognized humanitarian role to promote a moral superiority vis-à-vis the West. The 4 millions of refugees living under temporary protection in its territory are employed to blackmail the EU on matter that goes beyond the management of migration and relates to Turkey’s security issues on the opposite (South Eastern) border.

Scholars have recently put emphasis on the Turkish government’s soft power strategies and foreign policy instruments (Adar and Yenigün 2019; Keyman 2016). In this respect, future research should further investigate how the forms and the meanings of Turkey’s “humanitarian diplomacy” (Davutoğlu 2013) have evolved from 2015 to present. In this vein, the mix of humanitarianism, anti-imperialism, moral superiority and blame of the West for its lack of solidarity in the management of migration has indeed contributed to shape a schizophrenic EU-Turkey diplomacy. This shaky and foggy position needs to be further investigated as it contributes to affect mobility in the Euro-Mediterranean space. The EU migration management and borders control is forging a regime of forced and precarious immobility across the Mediterranean and along the Balkan Route. However, the “irregular” border crossings shape the areas located in proximity of the border, informing about forms of bordering solidarity established from below through transversal alliances between migrants and citizens. Stemming from an approach aimed to “decolonise” borders’ externalisation by focusing on the counter strategies which peripheral actors activate in the everyday, it is important to stimulate further research on bordering solidarities (Rygiel 2011; Tazzioli 2019: 151) and the activism of politicized groups composed by non-citizen migrants and citizens working alongside them in solidarity for migrants’ rights.

²³ Id.

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