Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 21.10.2015 www.osw.waw.pl

The EU's migration crisis: an offer for Turkey

Krzysztof Strachota, Marta Jaroszewicz, Unijny kryzys migracyjny: oferta dla Turcji

In recent weeks, cooperation with Turkey has been gaining strategic importance for the European Union and its member states in solving the migration crisis, as it is a key transit country into the EU for refugees from the Middle East. As a result of intensive discussions, a framework plan has been developed by the EU to give Turkey financial and political support in order to halt or reduce the influx of refugees. Europe's determination to cooperate with Ankara has been confirmed by the surprise visit of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Turkey in the final period of that country's turbulent election campaign. However, the chances for a quick and effective implementation of the EU plan, by which Turkey will reduce the pressure on the EU from the mass migration, are currently low. The EU's proposal has undoubtedly bolstered Turkey's international position, including by showing how much the EU depends on Ankara's policy, and it has also clearly strengthened Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on the eve of the elections.

The EU's perspective on the crisis, and Turkey's role in resolving it

Since the spring the EU has been facing a serious migration crisis, caused by a massive influx of refugees. Most of them have been arriving via a relatively new route which runs from Turkey through Greece's Aegean islands (around 600,000 people so far in 2015). Cooperation with Turkey is therefore regarded as necessary to limit the migration inflow to the EU. Brussels ascribes the problem, among others, to the weak defence of the Turkish-Greek border, the limits to Turkish legislation (refugees have no right to permanent residence), and the strength of people-smuggling gangs in Turkey.

Just since the beginning of September there has been a series of meetings sounding out Turkey's opinion on how to stem the tide of migration: Turkey has hosted, among others, the Chairman and Vice-President of the European Council, two EU Commissioners and the Chancellor of Germany; Brussels, for its part, has been visited by the President of Turkey and others. This stage of the talks was summed up by the announcement on 16 October of a framework Joint Action Plan by the EU and Turkey aimed at stemming or at least limiting the flow of refugees from Turkish territory into the EU. The plan is primarily focused on rectifying the legal situation and improving the living conditions of the 2-2.5 million refugees who are currently in Turkey, with the help of increased EU financial assistance. The EU has offered €1 billion in the first year of the plan, but Turkey has called for €3 billion euros in aid annually, and most likely Angela Merkel acknowledged this as a 'reasonable' sum during her visit to Istanbul. At the same time the EU has committed itself to increasing assistance to Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq (over €4.3 billion has been announced so far), as well as

humanitarian aid in Syria itself, in order to reduce the migration pressure on Turkey. The money would be spent under EU supervision. Other elements would include tightening control on the Greek-Turkish border (the EU wishes to participate in patrolling the Turkish coast) and reinforcing Turkish border guards and their cooperation with Frontex and Europol. In return, the EU has offered a number of incentives related to accelerating negotiations on Turkey's EU membership, as well as (more realistically) liberalising the visa regime for Turkish citizens in association with the adoption of a readmission agreement. There have also been preliminary and informal discussions about the possibility of immediately resettling some Syrian refugees from Turkey to the EU, but no details have been disclosed.

The German perspective on the crisis, and Turkey's role in resolving it

The EU's definition of the crisis and the role Turkey should play in resolving it were confirmed during German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Istanbul (18 October). Merkel reiterated and reinforced the EU's proposals, announced Germany's greater involvement in cooperating with Turkey, and (contrary to Germany's previous position) pledged to speed up the liberalisation of visa procedures for Turkish citizens, give financial support for the country, and accelerate the opening of new chapters in Turkey's accession negotiations to the EU. Merkel skirted the more difficult issues in relations between the two countries, such as Germany's opposition to Turkey's full membership of the EU, Ankara's observation (or otherwise) of human rights, and the Turkish offensive against the Kurds. Instead, she complimented Turkey's humanitarian commitment so far. The positive message of the Chancellor's visit contrasted with her hitherto mostly distant attitude and recurring criticism of Turkey (which has been reciprocated by politicians and the media in Turkey). Contrary to prior practice, the visit took place on the eve of the Turkish parliamentary elections, which triggered a wave of criticism of Merkel from liberal circles in both Turkey and Germany.

Germany's policy on the migration crisis, and its current approach towards Turkey, is conditioned by the domestic situation and the policy the German government has pursued in recent years. It stems from Berlin's recognition of Turkey as a key country whose favour must be obtained in order to limit the influx of migrants to Europe. Another equally important motive for Merkel's visit was an attempt to authenticate the narrative she has presented, according to which the migration crisis is a global problem that requires cooperation between states. Placing the crisis in a global context is intended to defend Merkel against accusations that her ill-conceived policies and slow responses led to an escalation of the crisis. Merkel is trying to stop the erosion of support for her and her party (if elections were held now, 37% of Germans would vote for the CDU/CSU, the lowest figure since May 2013). Merkel's situation is likely to become increasingly difficult, because the tone of the debate on the migration crisis and its coverage in the media has changed. The initial wave of euphoria, praise and silencing of the problems has given way to mounting criticism.

The Turkish perspective

The migration crisis has directly affected Turkey, where the largest (and still rising) number of Syrian refugees in the world has been living since 2011; the financial cost alone of state aid to the refugees amounts to US$7-8 billion. However, Turkey views the chance to channel the wave of migration onwards to Europe as an opportunity.

The outflow of Syrian refugees from Turkey to the EU at least partially eases the problem of maintaining and integrating them. Another tangible benefit to Turkey is the announcement of financial support from the EU (regardless of the criticism that it is too little, too late). It is likely that in private conversations, Ankara has demanded a declaration from EU leaders that a large group of refugees will be resettled directly from Turkey as part of the extra-EU resettlement scheme currently being negotiated. The EU has decided to accept only 20,000 refugees directly from Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, but this number is expected to increase significantly.

The crisis has placed the EU in the role of a supplicant to Ankara, which has drawn Turkey in from the ongoing marginalisation on the international stage it had been suffering in recent years. This has resulted, among other factors, from recent developments in Syria which have been extremely unfavourable for Turkey (the intervention of the Russian-Iranian offensive has *de facto* propped up Bashar al-Assad's regime) and the weakening of relations with the West, for reasons including differences over Middle Eastern policy, Western accusations of authoritarian tendencies in Turkey, and Turkish accusations of anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic phobia in Europe and of instability being fomented within Turkey itself. In the political sphere, the current dialogue gives Turkey the power to repeat its long-standing grievances and demands of the West.

Turkey has forced the European Union, and above all Germany, to make a radical change of rhetoric; it has openly revived the question of accession negotiations in the EU (the announcement of the opening of further chapters in the negotiations, the prospect of Turkey participating in EU summits), although neither Brussels and Berlin nor Ankara sees any real prospects of membership. The chances have been raised of visa liberalisation and the prospect of Turkey being granted the status of a 'safe country of origin', which implies recognition as a democratic and stable country. Furthermore, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has called for support from the West against 'Kurdish PKK terrorism' and for addressing the issue of Northern Cyprus, both issues which have traditionally been flashpoints in the talks. Emphasising these controversial issues in relations with the EU is intended to underline Turkey's determination and ambition to influence EU policy on issues important for Turkey, and domestically to raise the prestige of the government.

Dialogue with Europe also offers an opportunity to strengthen the government on the eve of the early parliamentary elections scheduled for 1 November, which are being held in the context of strong socio-political divisions, another acute phase of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, spectacular terrorist attacks, and rising authoritarian tendencies in the country. Merkel's visit two weeks before the election was a powerful boost for the AKP and a blow to the opposition. It has confirmed – especially in the Turkish media and political coverage – the rationality and responsibility of the government's policy, and testifies to the important role Turkey plays in the world. The issues of a visa-free regime, the status of a 'safe country of origin' and the opening of new chapters in accession negotiations have blunted the earlier accusations of the AKP's authoritarian tendencies, and suggest that there is no alternative

to identifying Turkey's European aspirations with the government's existing policy, which in the context of the election manifests as a lack of interest in the opposition's demands. Such support from the West (in addition to the government raising the spectre of the country's destabilisation) on the eve of the election may prove to be decisive for an AKP victory (gaining an absolute parliamentary majority) in the elections.

Conclusions

Despite the great determination of the EU's member states and institutions, in particular Germany, to cooperate with Turkey on the issue of finding a solution to the migration crisis, it is doubtful whether the objectives of the EU's plan can be implemented rapidly and effectively. The plans announced are frameworks which require political acceptance and the development of effective mechanisms for implementing them, and in the end are linked to a number of strategic – and controversial among EU member states – decisions concerning Turkey's accession negotiations and visa liberalisation. It remains an open question as to whether Turkey will receive the financial resources declared by the EU, not to mention the global resettlement programme being negotiated, in the face of the slow implementation of the agreed plan to redistribute refugees within the EU itself.

Another challenge is the domestic and regional situation in Turkey. First of all, the conflict in Syria has entered a new phase of escalation, caused by the Russian military intervention and the offensive by government forces. This could lead to another outflow of refugees, comparable with the effects of the Islamic State's offensive in 2014. In this case, the plan of action being prepared by the EU and Turkey would prove insufficient to cope with the growing problems. Another challenge is the continuing risk of serious domestic tensions in Turkey (from the elections, through the Kurdish conflict and terrorism, up to broader concerns about the rise of authoritarianism in the country), which would significantly complicate relations between the EU and Turkey.

This does not change the fact that the migration crisis in the EU has given the Turkish government a chance to break the political deadlock in both international and domestic terms. The success of Turkey in playing the migration card in its relations with the EU is likely to mark the continuation of such a policy.

Developing cooperation with Turkey regarding the migration crisis puts Angela Merkel in a difficult position. She needs a clear easing-off of the growing migration pressure, but must also justify the risk which her visit to Turkey represented. In this way her political position in Germany (but also within the EU) has been linked to the activities of Turkey, both in terms of cooperation on resolving the refugee problem, as well as in the context of Turkey's unpredictable domestic situation.