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The Ankara-Berlin pact: how to stop the migration crisis?

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On 7 March in Brussels, a European Council meeting was held with the participation of the Prime Minister of Turkey Ahmet Davutoğlu, to find a joint solution to the migration crisis and speed up the process of Turkey's accession to the EU. This is a further element of the intensive dialogue initiated at the summit held on 29 November. The statement significantly expands the previous arrangements for Turkey's containment on its territory of the influx of migrants to Europe, and its proposals include the introduction of a new mechanism for returning illegal migrants leaving Turkey and transferring Syrian migrants from Turkey to the EU. In return, Turkey has been offered the prospect of a significant acceleration of the accession negotiations and the visa liberalisation process (visas may be abolished as early as the end of this June), as well as financial assistance. The decisive influence on the form of the statement came from talks between the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Davutoğlu. The agreement gives Merkel a temporary boost in the run-up to regional elections in Germany, and also represents a short-term success for Turkey. However, this document is merely a blueprint for further action, and will be the subject of the next EU summit on 17 March. It remains an open question as to whether its postulates will be confirmed and the cooperation plan implemented. This will have enormous importance for the further development of the migration crisis, Merkel's position in Germany, and strategic relations between the EU and Turkey.

The achievements of the summit

Despite some concessions from Ankara (opening up the Turkish labour market to migrants, closer police cooperation with Germany), the current intensive dialogue with Turkey has not been satisfactory from the European countries' point of view. The flow of migrants from the territory of Turkey into the EU (mainly Greece) has fallen since last November, although it is hard to assess whether this decline is the result of the weather conditions, or whether it is due to any measurable actions taken by the authorities in Ankara.

On 7 March, as a result of the negotiations between Turkey and EU officials – but above all thanks to the intensive parallel talks carried out between Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Chancellor Angela Merkel – a joint statement was signed. It requires Turkey to accept all illegal migrants from Greek territory (the EU will cover the costs). At the same time, for every person adopted by Turkey from the Greek Islands, Ankara will send one Syrian refugee to the EU. This solution is intended to discourage migrants from entering Greece illegally, and thus to strike at the people-smuggling gangs.

Brussels has promised to pay the first tranche of a financial aid package designed to finance projects aimed at improving living conditions in Turkish refugee camps (including the construction of schools and hospitals) by the end of March. A total of 3 million refugees are currently resident on Turkish territory.

An important provision, which the Turkish leaders have been pushing for in recent months, is the acceleration of the visa liberalisation process, aimed at eliminating short-stay visas to the Schengen zone by June 2016. A decision was also taken regarding cooperation on the issue of joint ventures aimed at improving the living conditions and safety of the population remaining on the territory of Syria.

Along with the points associated with EU-Turkish relations, it was also decided to increase financial and logistical aid for Greece. The declaration accepted by both parties must be confirmed at the next European Council, and the details concerning the implementation of the provisions are being determined by Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council.

Germany's manoeuvres

From the point of view of Germany, the Brussels summit was part of a basic plan created by Chancellor Angela Merkel to avert the migration crisis. Getting Ankara to limit the influx of refugees to the EU is an absolute priority for the German Chancellor, for at least two reasons. Firstly, the fall in the Christian Democrats' poll numbers and the rise in support for the anti-immigrant AfD party are alarming, in the face of the very important regional elections which will be held on 13 March in Baden-Wurttemberg, the Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt. Secondly, and much more dangerously, political and social divisions against the background of the migration crisis in Germany are deepening (59% of Germans are dissatisfied with Merkel's migration policy, while 39% support the policy; 63% supports the introduction of a cap on the number of refugees accepted, and 49% favour the introduction of internal border controls within the Schengen area). Chancellor Merkel is currently acting under enormous pressure, and this negotiating success was highly necessary for her; in the political narrative in Germany, this success has now been duly achieved. At the moment, Merkel has been praised not only from within the ranks of her party, but also from the hitherto very critical Bavarian CSU. German commentators argue, however, that the summit ended with nothing more than Turkey setting its own conditions for strengthening the protection of its borders and accepting the migrants. The narrative of success will be made more plausible if the agreement with Turkey is actually implemented, or at least if it manages to significantly reduce the number of migrants coming to Germany, even if only in the short term.

At the same time, Germany has emphasised that the agreement with Turkey was possible thanks to the unexpected 'last-minute' proposal by the Turkish Prime Minister. It seems that his move was intended to draw a veil over the justified outrage from some EU politicians at the separate, unauthorised negotiations he held with the German Chancellor. The presentation of this part of the talks with Turkey, as having been initiated by the Turkish Prime Minister, is intended to deflect criticism of Chancellor Merkel for acting outside the framework and arrangements established by the EU institutions. If the German-Turkish plan – presented as an EU-Turkish plan – succeeds, even temporarily, then the narrative about Merkel taking unplanned decisions under pressure can be maintained, and the indignation

of the EU politicians and representatives of individual EU member states will be steadily eased.

Turkey's manoeuvres

For Turkey, the ongoing dialogue with the EU over recent months has provided it with an opportunity for a radical change of position in its relations with Brussels. The government in Ankara is aware of the gravity of the migration crisis for the EU, and has been taking advantage of it in its own way. The acceleration of the thaw in the accession process, and in particular the issue of visa liberalisation, is of enormous socio-political importance for the Turkish side, and in recent months it has become a bargaining chip; the leaders of Turkey made it conditional on meeting their commitments to reduce the flow of migrants. It is also important for Turkey that the European Union also commits to carrying out joint humanitarian aid ventures on Syrian territory. At that point, the Turkish Government will present this as a step towards the establishment of the proposed security zone on its southern border.

The fact that the EU referred only summarily to the issue of freedom of expression in Turkey, and totally disregarded the Turkish-Kurdish conflict in the talks, legitimises the increasingly autocratic government in Ankara, both on the international arena (increasing its prestige) as well as domestically. Ankara has strengthened its position in its relations with the EU, and presented this as a success, returning Turkey to its due place on the international stage. Moreover, the Turkish opposition must count on receiving less support from the West. The question of media freedom was noted in the document, although the ostentatious takeover of the country's biggest opposition newspaper on the eve of the summit can be seen as a demonstration of force by Turkey.

Prospects

The programme of cooperation which was adopted in Brussels is only a blueprint for further action, and will require confirmation at the summit on 17 March. Its particularly controversial elements include concerns about whether it complies with the current legislation (in the light of international law on refugees), the question of the abolition of visas for Turkish citizens (the EU stresses the need to meet the 72 specific conditions required to implement the visa waiver programme), as well as the assessment of the rule of law and democracy in Turkey.

These *pro tem* arrangements with Brussels will allow Merkel to maintain her strong position in the CDU, as the party will not seek to undermine its leader, either before the regional elections on 13 March or the decisive EU summit on the 17th (primarily due to the lack of real competition within the party).

It remains an open question as to whether the adopted assumptions can be implemented effectively, both in technical and political terms. Any attempt to reduce the offer made to Turkey would meet significant resistance from Ankara, just as the scale of this offer remains controversial in Europe. The decisive factor is the possibility of real limitations to the influx of migrants to Europe; on this will depend both the credibility of Turkey and the

political position of Chancellor Merkel (in this case, it will be necessary to continue the efforts to strengthen the protection of the Schengen area and its own borders, including the creation of an EU border police).

The current dialogue has radically changed the nature of the relationship between the EU and Turkey, and significantly raises the status of Turkey itself. However, the existing strategic cooperation has become a hostage of the plan to combat the migration crisis. The collapse of this plan in Brussels (together with the possible radical deterioration of the security situation in connection with the crisis in Syria, tensions with Russia and domestic problems) would signal a profound crisis in EU-Turkish relations.