

FOUR YEARS OF THE EU-TURKEY DEAL

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Everything has changed in the four years since the EU-Turkey agreement was made. On the one hand, Turkey has stopped acting as a gatekeeper state for Europe's borders and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has announced an open border policy as a way to exert pressure on the EU. On the other, increasing numbers of irregular arrivals are reaching Greek coastlines, where the country's slow asylum system is in collapse and the refugee camps are overcrowded, unsanitary and insecure. The four years of this agreement show that containment policies do not work (inside or outside the EU) and that any migration policy that is meant to be effective must consider the lives left on the margins.

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Four years after the agreement was signed between the European Union and Turkey nothing seems the same. Back then, the deal was presented as an infallible solution, and just a week later, on March 20th 2016, irregular arrivals in Greece fell from 1,740 to 47 per day. The EU's eastern border had apparently been sealed and other routes became more important: first it was the central route between Libya and Italy (181,436 arrivals in 2017), and then the western route between Morocco and Spain (58,525 arrivals in 2018). But what seemed back then to be a model that could be followed has become a nightmare. Irregular arrivals on Greek islands are on the rise again, and images of xenophobic attacks in Lesbos and Greek police shooting at migrants in Edirne have had widespread impact. So what happened?

To understand, we have to revisit the bases of the agreement. On paper, Turkey undertook to readmit all irregular arrivals reaching Greek coasts. In exchange, EU member states agreed to relocate one Syrian citizen for every Syrian returned to Turkey. The EU also promised to speed up the process of visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens and to increase financial aid for refugee reception in Turkey (€3bn, to which another €3bn was added some months later). The message was clear: those attempting to reach Greece would be swiftly returned, while those who waited patiently in Turkey would have the chance to enter in their place.

In practice, Turkey had committed to controlling Europe's borders from the outside. But what drastically reduced arrivals in Greece was not just

outsourcing migration control to its neighbour, it was the internalisation of spaces of exception within Europe's own borders. With the Balkan route closed and the entry into force of the Turkey agreement, Greece became a final destination. Those arriving after March 20th 2016 ended up trapped on the islands. The European Commission claimed geographical restriction was a necessary part of fulfilling the agreement, ensuring irregular arrivals would be immediately returned to Turkey or their countries of origin. The result was that Greek islands became open-air detention camps.

Four years on, no mass expulsions have been made from Greece to Turkey, and neither have safe, legal channels for relocation been established from Turkey to the EU. Since 2016, barely 2,000 returns from Greece to Turkey have been carried out. In part, this is because Greek courts refuse to accept Turkey as a safe country. As for relocation, only 25,000 refugees (out of a quota of 72,000) have been relocated from Turkey to the EU. For its part, the Turkish government complains that the EU has not upheld its side of the deal, either in terms of visa liberalisation, customs union reform, or the promised €6bn, which Ankara says continues to arrive in dribs and drabs. It is in this context that Erdoğan has ended up making good on his threats: "We are not obliged to look after and feed so many refugees. If you're honest, if you're sincere, then you need to share."

But beyond the rhetoric and the failures to comply on both sides, the events of the past weeks are really explained by the lives of those left on the margins. Beyond Europe, I am referring to the lives of those still in Syria, where the war has now lasted over nine years, and the lives of the over 4 million refugees who managed to reach Turkey, but are mostly undocumented, and are subjected to labour exploitation, discrimination and exclusion from the most basic social services. It is their future-less present that makes them easy prey for Erdoğan's promises.

Within Europe, even after arriving, the lives of many remain miserable and hopeless. Greece's slow asylum system is in collapse and the refugee camps are overcrowded, unsanitary and insecure. It is not an issue of lack of capacity or resources: the situation on the Greek islands is meant to act as a deterrent to those still thinking of attempting the journey. But so much despair is hard to handle. The misery of those in the camps also affects the lives of those outside. Feeling that the government and the EU have left them to host the refugees alone, those living outside the camps have begun to attack the migrants, seeing them as the source of all their ills. This is a war between the poor and the forgotten. And it is a conflict without end, as the solution lies in the hands of neither.

This is not to justify the xenophobic acts seen in Lesbos in recent weeks. It is an alarm call. Containment policies – whether inside or outside the EU – do not work. Or they only work in the short term. In the medium and long term they are a time bomb. No border can withstand desperation. Along the way, we are not only restricting rights we thought were fundamental, we are sowing the seeds of fascism in a Europe that dreamed it had been banished forever.

But we still have time. Setting aside questions of geopolitics and the balance of power between the EU and Turkey, these four years of the agreement show that any migration policy that seeks to be effective must consider those left on the margins. Three different geographical scenarios

must be addressed. First, the war in Syria and the wider situation in the Middle East cannot be ignored. The best kind of border policy works to promote human security beyond one's own borders. Second, for the same reason, a true buffer state is not one that deploys its army on our borders (like Turkey), but one that offers tolerable living conditions and above all a future even to new arrivals. Third and finally we cannot afford spaces of exception like the refugee camps on the Greek islands. We need swifter asylum procedures that offer all the guarantees. Relocation programmes to other member states must be sped up. The numbers aren't that big and it isn't that difficult. Finally, creating decent living conditions in the refugee camps is essential. Not only to guarantee fundamental rights but also to prevent "wars between the poor", which could otherwise end up becoming Europe's true crisis.