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Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

by Bianca Benvenuti

GLOBAL TURKEY  IN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

The Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) project aims at establishing a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. Launched by the Istituto Affari Internazionali, in collaboration with the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator in 2012, in its fourth year the Foundation for European Progress Studies (FEPS) joined the team. In this phase, the project focuses on the refugee crisis and its impact on EU-Turkey relations, as well as on the EU's migration and asylum policies. The third of a series of workshops on the issue took place in Catania (Sicily) to explore the EU-Turkey deal, questioning whether it could be a model to be replicated in other contexts, in particular concerning the Central Mediterranean route.

Turkey | European Union | Migration | Refugees | Italy | Libya | Central Mediterranean

keywords

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Introduction

The Global Turkey in Europe (GTE) project aims at establishing a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. Launched by the Istituto Affari Internazionali, in collaboration with the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator in 2012, in its fourth year the Foundation for European Progress Studies (FEPS) joined the team. In this phase, the project focuses on the refugee crisis and its impact on EU-Turkey relations, as well as on the EU's migration and asylum policies. Public discourse on the issue is polarized and often confused: GTE aims to provide a forum for people with different professional backgrounds, experiences and opinions to meet and discuss various facets of the refugee crisis, alongside field trips designed to better inform the dialogue between participants.

The first of a series of workshops on the issue took place in Istanbul in July 2016¹ to discuss the humanitarian dimension of the refugee crisis in Turkey, including the issue of whether Turkey qualifies as a safe third country – one of the key, implicit, assumptions of the EU-Turkey deal. The second workshop was hosted in Athens in November 2016² to discuss the implications of the deal for the asylum capacities of EU border countries, in particular Greece. The workshop

¹ For details about the event and the report, see: *The Humanitarian Dimension of the Refugee Crisis in Turkey: Challenges and Prospects*, Istanbul, 22 July 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/6636>.

² For details about the event and the report, see: *The EU-Turkey Deal and its Implications for the Asylum Capacities of EU Border Countries*, Athens, 4 November 2016, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/6922>.

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· Report from the field trip and seminar held in Catania on 15-16 November 2016 and organized by Stiftung Mercator, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), and Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) within the framework of the project "Turkey, Europe and the World: Political, Economic and Foreign Policy Dimensions of Turkey's Evolving Relationship with the EU" (Global Turkey in Europe).

Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

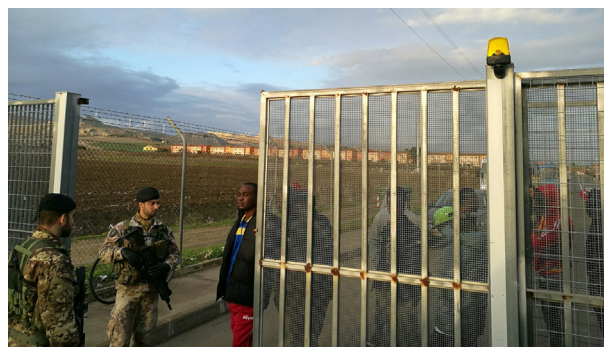
was organized in cooperation with the Mercator European Dialogue (MED)³ and created a unique opportunity for the GTE participants to connect and share views with national parliamentarians across member states. The third event took place in Catania (Sicily) and further explored the EU-Turkey deal, questioning whether it could be a model to be replicated in other contexts, in particular concerning the Central Mediterranean route. All events encompassed field trips to key locations to understand the impact of the migration crisis in the three countries, followed by an interactive workshop.

Catania field trip

Sicily being at the frontline of the movement of people between Europe and Africa, this field trip was an opportunity to show the disproportional impact that the so-called refugee crisis has on border countries and cities such as Italy and Catania respectively. Participants had the unique chance to meet with local authorities, NGOs, volunteers and workers engaged in rescuing and welcoming migrants and asylum seekers. We visited the Mineo CARA⁴ and Augusta Port, one of the main entry points to the EU.

15 December: Mineo CARA

The reception camp at Mineo is located in the countryside, around fifty kilometres from Catania. It was built to host families of the American military personnel working in the nearby Sigonella (District of Syracuse) military base. Since 2011, it has rapidly grown to become the largest first reception centre in Europe, with peaks of 4,000 asylum seekers hosted in the facility. As a first reception



centre, Mineo CARA hosts asylum seekers from the moment they manifest their will to undergo the asylum procedure until its completion. Sebastiano Maccarrone, director of the centre, Tommaso Mondello, Migration Affairs Chief Officer of the Prefecture, and Marcello Ariosto, Executive Director of the Caltagirone State Police, briefed the group about the reception system in Italy and the organizational

³ Stiftung Mercator launched the Mercator European Dialogue in cooperation with the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) in Germany, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Italy, the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) in Spain and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) in Greece; this project aims at encouraging and growing a European network of emerging as well as senior parliamentarians. The exchange of ideas will be enhanced by innovative workshop formats in order to ensure a high level of interaction and dialogue. For more details, see <http://www.iai.it/en/node/4194>.

⁴ The acronym stands for Centro accoglienza richiedenti asilo (Asylum seekers' reception centre).

Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

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structure of Mineo CARA, answering promptly any clarification question. Tommaso Mondello opened the debate by clarifying the rules regulating the reception system in Italy. According to those rules, migrants can stay in the so-called first reception facilities until their asylum claim is fully assessed; when the claim is rejected, they can remain in the camp if they file an appeal. If they obtain international or



subsidiary protection, they access the so-called second-level reception facilities – i.e. SPRAR⁵ –, which is a long-term housing project aimed at integrating migrants into Italian society. Due to high number of arrivals and insufficient capacity of the first-reception facilities, in recent years SPRAR centres have had to provide for many asylum seekers that should normally have been hosted in first-reception camps. Since October 2013, the welcoming sector has boomed and many reception facilities have opened across Italy, to ease the reception burden on Sicily in particular for the first reception phase. SPRAR facilities have opened all across the country; they are all coordinated by a central office that works together with the Ministry of Interior.

Sebastiano Maccarrone provided the group with details about the situation in Mineo CARA: it is a first reception centre, where migrants are accommodated immediately upon arrival. At the time of our visit, there were 3,717 guests in the camp, of whom 1,152 were Eritreans, followed by Nigerians, Senegalese and Gambians. There are approximately 300 ethnicities and 30 nationalities inside the camp, which looks rather like a small city of 404 houses. Given that the conflicts and security problems from which the asylum seekers are escaping are often internal rather than international, in order to increase their safety in the camp, guests are accommodated according to their ethnicity. The camp administration fosters dialogue among the groups to avoid any internal conflicts; additionally elections within each ethnic group are organized to elect representatives who in turn are mandated to engage in dialogue and co-manage the governance of the camp. The election of these representatives is of crucial importance to ensure a shared



⁵ The acronym stands for Sistema di protezione di richiedenti asilo e rifugiati (Protection system for asylum seekers and refugees).

Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

management of the camp between the administration and the guests. Mr. Maccarrone further explained the procedure followed when the migrants arrive at the camp: they receive clothing and hygiene kits, a telephone card to call their family and a badge that they will use to identify themselves as well as access all the services in the camp. Following this, they receive legal information about the procedures for the asylum request. During their stay at the camp, they receive social, legal and psychological assistance from the management team as well as other organizations and NGOs cooperating with the camp. Concerning relations with the local population and administration, the camp Director reported some tensions when the camp first opened, as the mayors of neighbouring towns organized several demonstrations against it. Over time, the situation has calmed down, and currently the camp administration cooperates effectively with local institutions. Answering questions from participants, the Director of the centre was vocal in expressing his frustration towards the EU's inadequate migration policies. In his view, the burden of the migration crisis is disproportionately affecting countries on the external border of the EU, and in particular Sicily. For this reason, it is of crucial importance to reform the Dublin regulation, together with the need to establish a single migration and asylum system.

16 December: Augusta Port

The following day, participants visited the Port of Augusta, one of the main entry points to Europe. Armando Gradone, Prefect of Syracuse, Cettina di Pietro, Mayor of Augusta, Antonio Donato, Captain of the Italian Coast Guard in Pozzallo and Gioacchina Caruso, Health Director of Syracuse, together with representatives of NGOs operating in the Port, explained the disembarkation and welcoming procedures in detail. In recent years, the Port has registered an exponential increase in the arrivals of migrants. Considering that the town of Augusta is home to just over 30,000 people, the burden on Augusta is truly enormous. Particularly after October 2013 and during the Italian Mare Nostrum operation, it became necessary to arrange a first reception camp in the port itself, to conduct the first health checks and identification procedures. Although the Port of Augusta is not an official hotspot, its functioning is regulated under the so-called "hotspot approach": in addition to giving migrants first assistance and operating health checks, the primary task of the personnel in the port is to identify migrants and register their fingerprints in the national and EURODAC system. The judicial police are also on hand to examine situations where a migrant has died during the journey, as well as to identify the migrants sailing the boat (so-called "scafisti"). The Prefect and the representatives of the Coast Guard clarified that they are well aware of the fact that these people are often not traffickers but rather migrants that have been forced into that position and that they are the last link in the criminal network chain: however, they are held accountable for human trafficking.



Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

Dott. Gioacchina Caruso explained in detail the several phases of the health screening procedures, conducted with the support of teams from several NGOs, such as Emergency and the Red Cross. The NGO *Terres d'Hommes* coordinates the psychological support services. Local authorities, organizations, volunteers and NGOs work jointly to offer a prompt response to the migrants needs. The high number of unaccompanied minors reaching Sicily is the greatest problem in the port. Since there is no nationally coordinated reception system for them, they often spend several days in the port camp, while waiting to be transferred to suitable facilities across the country. The group witnessed this issue first hand, since over 60 minors were in the camp at the time of our visit. In addition, local authorities and institutions underlined how assisting migrants who arrived in Augusta weighs disproportionately on the shoulders of local institutions and that mainly volunteers conduct the operations. There was a clear frustration among personnel working in the front line of the migrant crisis regarding the lack of a shared European response to the migration challenge.



To conclude the field trip, we visited the Melilli military base. We had the unique chance to visit the shipwreck from 18 April 2015, in which about 750-800 migrants died. The Italian government is committed to bringing the vessel to Europe as a symbol of the migrants' suffering, as well as of Sicily's efforts and courage in this regard.

16 December: Workshop

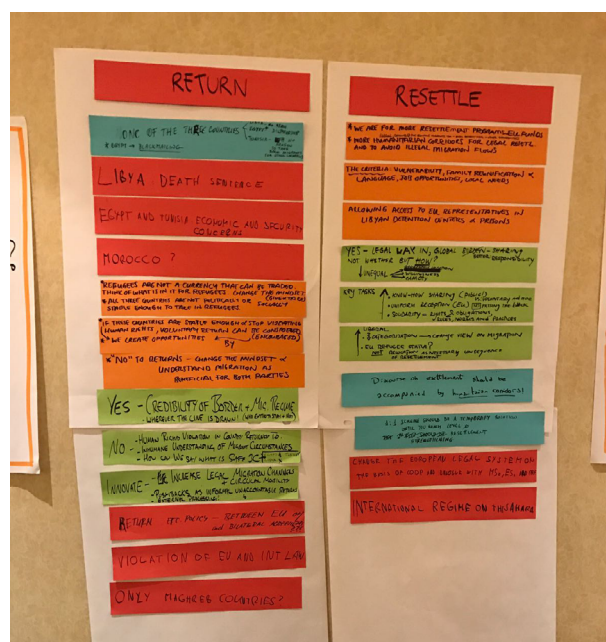
Following the visits to Mineo CARA and Augusta Port, representatives of local organizations and NGOs joined participants to discuss whether the EU-Turkey deal could be a model to be replicated in other contexts, for example concerning the Central Mediterranean Route. The workshop convened approximately thirty NGO representatives, journalists, MEPs, researchers, members of think tanks and academics. Mia Forbes Pire mediated the workshop that was organized to foster discussion among participants. To this aim, participants worked in groups throughout the duration of the workshop. At the end of each session, one representative per table presented the discussion and conclusions to all participants.

We had the honour to hear the Commander in Chief of the Maritime Directory of Eastern Sicily, who briefed the group about their activities and explained the technical details of search and rescue operations at sea. After some initial remarks from Nathalie Tocci, Deputy Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, Hedwig

Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

Giusto, FEPS and Gulcihan Cigdem, the representative of the Istanbul Policy Centre, we got straight to the heart of the issue. In order to give participants a common ground for the discussion, Professor Peter Seeberg presented his paper "The EU-Turkey March 2016 Agreement as A Model. New Refugee Regimes and Practices in the Arab Mediterranean and the Case of Libya,"⁶ prepared for the conference.

In the first session of the workshop, we discussed the positive elements of the EU-Turkey deal worth being replicated in similar agreements, while outlining the negative elements that should be reformed or left behind. On the positive side, participants agreed that financial assistance for origin countries and for third countries cooperating on migration management is key, although it is extremely important to set up mechanisms to ensure transparency. In addition, the deal helped to regain control over the EU external border and ease the tension among member states: it avoided a further crisis of the Schengen system. Participants also agreed that the resettlement element in the "1:1 mechanism" was the best part of the deal, as it represents a first step in establishing a safe passage for asylum seekers en route to Europe, although this part is not being fully implemented. On the negative side, the EU-Turkey deal hardened the artificial distinction between asylum seekers and economic migrants while at the same time institutionalizing the discrimination among asylum seekers from different nationalities (with Syrians being considered more "worthy" of protection than others). In fact, it overlooks the issue of migrants coming from countries other than Syria. As such, it is in breach of several international human rights laws, as observed by several NGOs and human rights organizations. It further endangers EU leverage on third countries and undermines its credibility: indeed, the EU is now in a tougher geopolitical position, as it needs to rely on Turkey to manage the migration flow through the Aegean sea and it is therefore potentially liable to blackmail by Ankara. Considering all the negative aspects of the EU-Turkey deal, participants questioned whether it should be considered as a model at all and whether instead it may be best to explore new solutions.



⁶ Peter Seeberg, "The EU-Turkey March 2016 Agreement As a Model: New Refugee Regimes and Practices in the Arab Mediterranean and the Case of Libya", in *Global Turkey in Europe Working Papers*, No. 16 (December 2016), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/7156>.

Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

After a general discussion of the pros and cons of the EU-Turkey deal, the next two sessions addressed first the “demand” components of the deal (i.e., the EU’s desiderata) and then the “supply” side (i.e. what the EU is willing to give) and the applicability or replicability of both components. Firstly, we considered Libya, Egypt and Tunisia as possible countries for a deal with the EU on migration management. Then, we discussed what the EU could offer third countries in order to gain their cooperation on migration management.



To begin with, we discussed whether Libya, Egypt and Tunisia could be considered safe and if the EU could return irregular migrants to these countries. There was wide agreement that the EU is unlikely to be able to return irregular migrants to all three countries for different reasons. As of today, there is no reliable government in Libya to ensure the safety of migrants sent back. As for Egypt, the quasi-dictatorship ruling the country could use this tool to blackmail the EU to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses in the country. The case of Tunisia is different, often mentioned as a strong democracy and as the sole country where the Arab Spring succeeded; it is thus questionable whether Tunisia itself, precisely because of its greater democratic accountability, would be willing to accept returned (non-Tunisian) migrants from the EU, de facto becoming the EU’s “migrant dumping ground”. To sum up, all countries were considered politically, socially and economically unfit to strike a deal with the EU; in addition, participants underlined that migrants should not be considered a currency that can be exchanged. Broadly speaking, a critical approach to the issue of return could be beneficial: although return policies are necessary for the credibility of border controls, it is difficult to draw the line between those who can be returned and those who cannot. On the opposite side of the spectrum, a no-return policy might undermine the credibility of EU border control, but might also provide a new perspective concerning migration management and change the mindset of countries receiving migrants. In both cases, particular attention should be paid to avoid the illegal pushback of potential refugees.

We then discussed the issue of resettlement from origin and transit countries to destination countries, in particular the EU. There was a broad consensus on the need to fund more resettlement programmes and ensure a safe passage for asylum seekers. Criteria for resettlement should increasingly regard migrant’s preferences and their vulnerability. A key task for the EU is that of ensuring uniform reception services across the EU, including through shared know-how. In addition, solidarity needs to be considered as a pillar of the EU and should comprise rights and duties

Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

for member states from which they cannot simply opt out.

In the second session, we discussed the supply side – i.e. what the EU could offer to third countries in exchange for their cooperation in migration management. The discussion began by deconstructing the assumption that Europe should make an offer, questioning the fact that the migration crisis is seen as a European problem. Participants agreed that we should also discuss the countries with which the EU should cooperate. While the approach today looks at destination and transit countries as preferred partners in stemming the flow of migrants, cooperation should also be enhanced with destination countries such as the USA and Australia. Migration is a global phenomenon and requires a global solution. Generally speaking, the “offer” should be tailored to the partner country’s needs; participants underlined that the EU should commit only on promises it can fulfil, bearing in mind that a fearful Europe will be unable to offer appetizing carrots to its partners: only a stronger Europe can.

The workshop in Catania received much positive feedback, in particular because of the way the format deeply influences the discussion, stimulating each of the participants to contribute with their ideas, thoughts and experiences.

Updated 13 January 2017



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kV0-wumA3A>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ishg9T0I4I>

Click to watch the feedback from two of our participants.

Does the EU-Turkey Migration Deal Represent a Model to be Replicated in Other Contexts?

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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