

**The instrumentalization of the Syrian refugee crisis:  
Asymmetrical EU-Turkey cooperation**

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**Abstract**

The Syrian refugee crisis, rising numbers of irregular crossings to the EU, and the events of Summer 2015 increased the EU's emphasis on security and control-oriented external migration policy. To combat these challenges, the EU started conducting crisis-induced agreements with refugee-hosting transit countries. Together with the implementation of these agreements, the relationship between the EU and third-countries witnessed a change, and the third-countries started playing a more active role in the EU's external migration policy and gained more power and leverage in migration management. This paper particularly focuses on the migration cooperation between the EU and Turkey and relies on the implementation process of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. Within the framework of the Statement, the EU has been providing financial and technical assistance and offering political incentives, in return for Turkey's agreement to implement a stricter migration management regime at its borders. Relying on Turkey for the success of the management of the refugee crisis resulted in a growing power asymmetry between the two sides, and empowered Turkey over the EU. This study explores the causal mechanisms that led to conflictual cooperation between the EU and Turkey and finds out different layers of governance in Turkey have different experiences. This shows a multi-level cooperation in EU-Turkey migration cooperation.

**Keywords:**

EU's external migration policy, EU-Turkey relations, multi-level cooperation

## I. Introduction

The mass influx of Syrian refugees starting with the 2011 Syrian civil war has brought many political and structural changes in the region and beyond. Neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey have experienced an increasing refugee flow, which soon exceeded the national migration management capacities of these countries. By 2015, the size and scope of the crisis had emerged into an international protection crisis where the EU was urged to step in with a rapid, crisis-induced external migration policy. As a migration management strategy, the EU started offering third-countries various cooperation frameworks.

To curb the number of irregular crossings and fatalities at the Eastern Mediterranean route and to better manage the crisis, the EU accepted Turkey as a safe third-country and agreed on an EU-Turkey Statement in 2016. This Statement, which is also known as the ‘refugee deal’, has been found controversial in ethical, legal, and political aspects, as it instrumentalized the refugee crisis as a policy tool both for the EU and Turkey. The Statement also changed the balance of power between the two sides, where Turkey gained more leverage over the EU in migration diplomacy due to the EU’s dependency on Turkey’s efforts to control and prevent further movement to Europe.

As a result of Turkey’s growing dissatisfaction with the agreement and changes in its national and foreign policy decisions over the years, the EU-Turkey cooperation experienced a crisis in February 2020. Turkish state declared that it will open its borders to the EU and not prevent refugees and migrants from crossing. The February 2020 crisis at the Turkey-Greece border marked a milestone in EU-Turkey relations; it demonstrated how a third-country that is a strategic partner to the EU, could use its power to exercise leverage on the EU by using refugees as a bargaining tool. It has been equally interesting to see that the EU-Turkey cooperation in the field of migration has continued after this deadlock and the joint coordination mechanism is expected to operate until mid-2025.

This paper focuses on the EU’s management of the Syrian refugee crisis through the crisis-induced EU-Turkey Statement and presents how the cooperation framework empowered Turkey’s position as a third-country within the EU’s external relations. The study reveals the causal mechanisms that led to conflictual cooperation (Saatçioğlu *et al.*, 2019a; Saatçioğlu, 2021), which refers to the continuation of cooperation despite conflicts in bilateral relations. It is argued in this paper that Turkey has been a strategic partner and acquired a key role in the EU’s external migration policy with the Syrian refugee crisis. Secondly, migration management has become subject to multi-level cooperation between the EU and Turkey; different levels of governance in Turkey acquired different roles and experiences within the cooperation framework. There is functioning cooperation at the institutional and local levels of governance to a certain extent, while conflict is observed more in interstate relations.

## II. Aim and contribution of the study

Reslow (2019) argues that migration policy outcomes are not only determined by the EU institutions or Member States but also by third-countries. Several studies are looking at the relations between the EU and third-countries, mainly focusing on Mobility partnerships and the EU Compact on migration. Some recent examples include but are not limited to studies on Morocco (Carrera, Sergio, Jean-Pierre Cassarino, Nora El Qadim, no date; el Qadim, 2018, 2019; Tittel-Mosser, 2018), Lebanon (Seeberg, 2018), Jordan (Panizzon, 2019a, 2019b), and African states (Adam, Ilke; Trauner, 2019). Most of these cooperation schemes include the introduction of modern legislation and alignment of visa policy but lack the ‘carrot’ of the eventual EU Membership (Groenendijk, 2019). Here, Turkey’s relationship with the EU stands out differently as it also has a membership aspect.

Despite the fact, that the membership talks have been almost frozen and the relations in this respect have been deteriorating, the EU-Turkey Statement involved clauses that are political incentives and related to Turkey’s accession negotiations, such as opening new chapters and re-energizing accession talks. Therefore, the EU-Turkey Statement is similar yet different from than EU’s other migration cooperation schemes with third-countries. A detailed analysis that takes Turkey as an active participant as a third-country in the course of events within migration management is lacking in the literature. Since the start of the Syrian refugee crisis, the causal mechanisms that led to Turkey’s use of leverage over the EU, the unique cooperation mechanism that includes both compliance and good relations, and conflict at the same time need closer examination. By examining the EU-Turkey cooperation and Turkey as an active actor, this study contributes to the literature on the EU’s external migration policy by showing that third-

countries are key actors in migration management in general, and Turkey's role in particular in migration policy formation and implementation should not be neglected.

In addition, third-countries cannot be seen as a 'black-box', their preferences and characteristics must be included in a multi-level governance approach and the EU should think beyond applying its 'one-size-fits-all' approach in its external migration policy (Wolff, 2014; Reslow, 2019). In a study concerning the Jordan Compact, Tortola (2017) argues that the multi-level governance approach does not automatically imply that the different layers and actors act towards governing migration and refugee flows; for cooperation to qualify for governance, the layers must interact coherently, in a legally compliant way, which was missing from the Jordan Compact. Similarly, Stephenson (2013) asserts that not every 'multi policy-multi-actor, multi-level' implies governance- there can only be multi-level cooperation frameworks and multi-actor schemes, which lack the transfer of power and authority associated with governance (in Panizzon, 2019b).

This discussion applies to the case of EU-Turkey cooperation; there is not a shift of authority and power from the state-level to local levels of governance in Turkey in the implementation of the projects under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. Instead of multi-level governance, this study prefers to refer to the EU-Turkey cooperation as multi-level cooperation. This multi-level approach emerged partly due to Turkey's accession negotiations experience with the EU, Turkey's highly centralized state structure, which has gone through several legal, political, and social changes in the last decade, and lastly the nature of the Statement and the implementation of its elements. The two significant contributions of this study are, therefore, to synthesize various types of literature to critically assess Turkey's increasing role as a third-country within the EU's external migration policy and the multi-level cooperation between the EU and Turkey.

### **III. EU's external migration policy before and after the crisis**

The external dimension of the EU's migration policy was officially accepted at the 1999 Tampere Summit (Lavenex, 2004), and its conclusions stated that the EU's external relations should be used to reach the EU's internal security objectives. It identified the main objectives of a common European migration and asylum policy and emphasized the importance of managing migration flows. Article 11 of the Summit asserted that "the EU needs a comprehensive approach to migration addressing political, human rights, and development issues in countries and regions of origin and transit...Partnership with third-countries concerned will also be a key element for the success of such a policy." (Council of the European Union, 1999). Cooperation with third-countries for migration management has formed the basis of the 'external dimension' (Boswell, 2003), as the external migration policy was rapidly emerging into a security-oriented policy based on extraterritorial control (Lavenex, 2006).

With the growing securitization, third-country cooperation for a comprehensive migration policy required the implementation of 'positive conditionality' (Lavenex, Lehmkuhl and Wichmann, 2009), through which the EU used 'carrots' rather than 'sticks' to initiate cooperation. Positive conditionality required the EU to reward third-countries with development aid, financial and economic assistance, and trade agreements in return for cooperation in migration management. Within the context of external migration policy, positive conditionality has been used as a 'bargaining chip' (Zeilinger, 2011). The bargaining chip had promptly become a tool for the instrumentalization of migration with the start of the Syrian refugee crisis.

When the irregular arrivals and the number of deaths reached from 50.834 in 2014 to 885.386 in the Summer of 2015 (FRONTEX, 2019), the EU dedicated itself to stopping the movement by further externalizing its asylum and migration policy. Zaiotti (2018) stated that "European policy-makers have recognized that targeting only individuals appearing at the continent's gates, or already within it, has not been sufficient to manage contemporary migratory flows efficiently. The answer has been to externalize border management, namely, to stop or regulate incoming migrants before they reach their final destination".

The externalization required urgent cooperation schemes with third-countries, through which the EU can shift the duty of responsibility-sharing of refugee protection to third-countries while providing financial and technical assistance. The third-country national preferences on whether their governments will decide to cooperate with the EU on migration issues started to determine the success or failure of the EU's external migration policy (Reslow, 2012b, 2012a). This means that the EU's external migration

policy was increasingly becoming reliant on the third-country policy responses. One of the most prominent examples of a crisis-induced cooperation scheme became the EU-Turkey cooperation, through which the EU became reliant on Turkey's compliance with migration control.

#### **IV. EU-Turkey cooperation in the management of the Syrian refugee crisis**

Turkey started admitting Syrian refugees<sup>1</sup> with an open-door policy in 2011, assuming the crisis would not last more than a year. Turkey attempted to bear the costs of the crisis and the refugees alone, providing humanitarian assistance at the refugee camps in cities neighboring Syria. With the drastic increase in the crossings, Turkey's physical and financial capacities at refugee camps were overrun. Turkey had also been criticized for not managing its borders effectively and becoming a 'highway' for refugees and irregular migrants who are finding their way to Europe between 2011 and 2015 (Kale, 2016). Following the growing severity of the crisis, Turkey decided to accept international assistance, and the negotiations for a migration cooperation framework speeded up between the EU and Turkey.

With the increasing severity of the crisis, the EU leaders and President Erdoğan came together to discuss a cooperation strategy on the 5th of October 2015. The European Council President Donald Tusk asserted that "it is indispensable that the EU has to better manage its borders and Turkey is expected to do the same. Thus, financial assistance, border management, the fight against human-smuggling, integration policies, and visa liberalization need to be discussed for solving the crisis with Turkey" (Barigazzi, 2015)

It became evident that the EU was willing to offer Turkey financial and political incentives in return for maintaining its border security. Right after the meeting, former German Chancellor Merkel paid a visit to Istanbul to meet with Turkey's former prime-minister Davutoglu, and President Erdoğan to discuss the issue (BBC News, 2015). Merkel stated that 'Turkey plays a key role in solving the refugee crisis and that it should be supported more' (BBC News TR, 2015a, 2015b). Following Merkel's visit, the Joint Action Plan was released on the 15th of October (European Commission, 2015), which was followed by the conclusions of the EU-Turkey Summit on the 29th of November the same year (European Council, 2015).

The Action Plan was a response to the drastically increased irregular crossings and fatalities in the Eastern Mediterranean Route (Öztürk Övünç and Soykan, 2019) and emphasized the need for solidarity, togetherness, and efficiency. It aimed to address the crisis in three main ways; addressing the root causes leading to the massive influx of Syrians, supporting Syrian refugees under temporary protection and affected host communities in Turkey and strengthening cooperation with Turkey to prevent irregular migration (European Commission, 2015). Both the Plan and the Summit addressed migration management, strengthening border controls, combatting irregular crossings, providing 3 billion € of financial support to Syrian refugees in Turkey through the Facility for Syrian refugees in Turkey (FRIT), and visa liberalization dialogue for Turkish citizens that was first initiated in 2013. (European Commission, 2015; Kale, 2016). With these developments, the EU and Turkey entered into a closer cooperation phase.

##### **i. The EU-Turkey Statement**

Following and finalizing the elements of the 2015 Joint Action Plan and EU-Turkey Summit, the third meeting between the EU heads of state and Turkey took place on the 18th of March 2016 (Council of the EU, 2016), which was later recognized as the EU-Turkey Statement, or EU-Turkey Deal. According to the Statement, Turkey agreed to maintain strict measures to prevent irregular crossings at its borders. In addition to it, Turkey agreed to take back all irregular migrants from Greece following the EU and international law. For every Syrian refugee being returned from Greece to Turkey, a Syrian refugee already residing in Turkey was going to be resettled from Turkey to the EU under the UN Vulnerability Criteria. This principle has been known as the '1-1' criteria.

In return for Turkey's cooperation, the EU offered to speed up the disbursement of the allocated 3 billion € under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) and ensure the funding for further projects in the

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<sup>1</sup> Turkey holds a geographical limitation on the 1952 Geneva Convention, which establishes the basis of Turkey's refugee protection. Turkey still complies with the principle of *non-refoulement*, however, does not grant the refugee status to asylum seekers coming outside Europe (Kale, 2018). Syrian refugees are considered under the "temporary protection status" in Turkey. However, this study still uses the 'Syrian refugees' as an inclusive term.

fields of health, education, infrastructure, food, and other living costs for the Syrian refugees. Last but not least, the EU stated that it will ‘work with Turkey in any joint endeavor to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria, in particular in certain areas near the Turkish border which would allow for the local population and refugees to live in areas which will be safer (Council of the EU, 2016).’

The Statement also included clauses that are based on political incentives; accelerating the fulfillment of the visa liberalization roadmap for Turkish citizens when all requirements have been met, updating the Customs Union, and re-energizing Turkey’s accession negotiations by opening new Chapters. By combining the migration management clauses with political incentives, the Statement emerged into a strategic EU-Turkey partnership, through which both sides could realize interests. This strategic partnership empowered Turkey against the EU as the EU became dependent on Turkey’s compliance and cooperation with the clauses related to migration management.

The interdependency between migration management and political incentives became more evident when Foreign-minister Çavuşoğlu declared that Turkey suspended the readmission agreement due to the delay in visa facilitation (Deutsche Welle, 2019). Months later, not finding the support it expected from the EU in its cross-border operations in Syria, and losing 33 Turkish soldiers in the airstrikes in northern Syria on the 27th of February, Turkey announced that it would no longer prevent refugees and migrants from crossing into the EU and opened its borders to Europe (Sözcü, 2020) <sup>2</sup>. Opening its borders on the 28th of February marked the last milestone in EU-Turkey relations as it entered into a conflictual relationship. This relationship will be examined with causal mechanisms in the next sections.

<b>Milestones of EU-Turkey cooperation after the Syrian refugee crisis</b>
• December 2013 Readmission Agreement
• October 2015 EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan
• November 2015 EU-Turkey Summit
• March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement
• July 2019 Suspension of the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement
• February 2020 Temporary Suspension of EU-Turkey Statement

**Table I:** Milestones of EU-Turkey cooperation between 2011 and 2020

**V. The research design**

This study is a significant attempt to develop an interdisciplinary work on the EU-Turkey cooperation in migration management and it is designed through a multi-method approach to carry out a qualitative analysis of Turkey’s role as a third-country within the EU’s external migration policy. The multi-method approach includes a within-case study and process tracing supported by semi-structured interviews and desk research.

The paper uses a causal model that explains how the instrumentalization of the refugee crisis process led respectively to functional cooperation based on mutual dependency, and eventually to a conflictual yet cooperational relationship between two sides. It argues that the EU-Turkey cooperation functions as long as it benefits mutual interests at the state-level, whereas, it ends up with a deadlock when the national and foreign interests of the third-country change. While EU-Turkey relations degenerate at the state-level with repeated conflicts, the cooperation at the institutional and local level functions well with the EU counterparts to a certain extent. This signals multi-level cooperation between the EU and Turkey in migration management.

<sup>2</sup> Turkey closed its borders on the 18th of March 2020 with the start of the pandemic(Deutsche Welle Türkçe, 2020).

### **i. Explaining-outcome process tracing as a methodological tool**

This paper relies on Beach & Pedersen's (2019; 2013) theorization of case-specific explaining-outcome process tracing to examine the asymmetrical relationship between the EU and Turkey in migration management. The explaining-outcome process tracing differs from the theory-building and theory-testing approaches. It intends to come up with a minimally sufficient explanation, accounting for the puzzling outcome under investigation by revealing the causal mechanisms.

Causal mechanisms found in case-specific process tracing are case-specific and cannot be detached from the particular case (Humphreys, 2010: 269,270). Explanations adopt a form of instrumentalism aiming at accounting for outcomes in particular cases (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). This does not indicate that studying the case of Turkey would not have implications for future research consisting of other third-country relations with the EU. Although the case-specific mechanisms cannot be generalized, the outcome that is accounted for can be explored for different cases as well. Finding out an asymmetrical relationship between the EU and Turkey through both systemic and case-specific mechanisms can stand as an example to examine other power asymmetries between third-countries arising from a crisis environment, particularly a migration crisis.

The outcome that is investigated is a result of causal mechanisms of a defined scope and meaning within a specific context. Likewise, Beach & Pedersen (2013) state that the contextual sensitivity of evidence is one of the strongest comparative advantages. Within the scope of this paper, the start of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011 and Turkey's suspension of its prevention duties in 2020 determine the timeframe. The context is shaped by the milestones reached between the EU and Turkey within this period. Based on the main assumptions of the explaining-outcome process tracing, this study takes the use of the political leverage of Turkey over the EU and the ongoing cooperation in migration management as a puzzling outcome and tries to come up with a minimally sufficient explanation for it.

### **ii. Data collection**

The data collection for the analysis is comprised of primary sources gathered from semi-structured expert interviews conducted between 2018 and 2020 in Turkey. The interview partners include but are not limited to the EU Delegation in Ankara, DG ECHO Office in Brussels, Turkish Ministries of Education, Health, Social Policy, Foreign Affairs, EU Affairs, and Directorate-General for Migration Management, UN Offices in Ankara, Turkish NGOs operating in the field, and lastly Academics. Interview data are completed and supported with political speeches of Turkish President Erdoğan, former and current foreign ministers of Turkey, official state documents, secondary sources of both Turkish and foreign newspaper articles, and finally, policy reports prepared by the Facility for Refugees in Turkey.

The refugee crisis has been a highly politicized and sensitive issue in Turkey. This has been a limitation for the study in terms of access to data as publicly available data and resources are very limited. Exploring the preferences of state actors is equivalently challenging due to the political structure of Turkey. The political sensitivity of the subject made it also harder for interviewees to either agree or talk freely during the interview. The aftermath of the 2016 post-coup-attempt considerably decreased the chance of reaching out to experts in state institutions due to rising mistrust. This partially affected the number and the content of the interviews. Triangulation with public speeches, state documents, and newspaper articles allowed the analysis to fill out the gaps left from the interview data, and a considerable width in the data collection is reached.

### iii. The causal design and conceptual framework

Several theoretical approaches are used to assist in accounting for the outcome. The explanations and causal mechanisms that are presented for this particular outcome are both systematic and case-specific. Congruent with the following question that is “How does the instrumentalization of the Syrian refugee crisis affect EU-Turkey cooperation?”, the process-tracing method is employed. This study analyses the following causal design (**Figure I**) to trace Turkey’s conflictual cooperation with the EU in migration management. Relevantly, a five-step causal design that involves securitization, issue-linkage, transactionalism, and coercive-engineered migration is developed to reach the outcome of conflictual cooperation.



**Figure I:** Five-step causal design leading to a conflictual cooperation

The securitization of the refugee crisis constituted the first step of the instrumentalization of the issue (**Step I**). The crisis-induced security concerns led to the agreement of the 2016 EU-Turkey cooperation scheme to support refugees and affected host societies (**Step II**). This step is based on an issue-linkage strategy; which is the simultaneous discussion of two or more issues for joint settlement. It is a bargaining strategy used by states to achieve objectives and to increase the probability of an agreement (Poast, 2013). The Statement initiated the cooperation scheme between the EU and Turkey and created a transactional relationship where mutual dependency has been observed (Müftüler-Baç, 2019; Dimitriadi and Kaya, 2021; Saatçioğlu, 2021) (**Step III**). This causal mechanism has relied on operational cooperation (Dimitriadi *et al.*, 2018), which also refers to sectoral functional cooperation. Accordingly, Turkey had become dependent on the EU’s financial and technical assistance, while the EU had relied on Turkey’s migration control to sustain its internal security.

With the growing dissatisfaction, Turkey started threatening the EU to ‘open the doors to Europe’. Greenhill (2010, 2016) describes this strategy as coercive-engineered migration (**Step IV**), which refers to ‘those cross-border population movements that are deliberately manipulated to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state(s)’. Following a series of threats, using inadequate financial assistance, unmet promises, and the lack of support in its cross-border operation in Syria for justification of its actions, Turkey suspended its migration control and prevention duties in February 2020. This resulted in a serious tragedy at the Greece-Turkey border, and relations with the EU entered the stage of conflictual cooperation (**Step V**).

It should be noted that more causal mechanisms could be added to the causal model in **Figure I**, however, including more possible explanations are beyond the scope of this paper. Only the common key explanatory features are chosen here to present a minimally sufficient explanation for asymmetrical EU-Turkey relations in migration management. These features are analyzed as key elements that constitute the causal pathway with regard to how EU-Turkey relations emerged into conflictual cooperation.

## VI. Tracing back the conflictual EU-Turkey cooperation

### i. Securitization of the Syrian refugee crisis

The Copenhagen School discusses security as a speech act (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998); state actors use speech acts to move an issue from politics into an area of security to legitimize or justify extraordinary means against a socially constructed security threat. The securitization of migration has built upon this definition and it perceives migration as a danger to public order, cultural identity, and domestic and labor market stability (Huysmans, 2000).

The securitization of migration has also created a puzzle between maintaining security and securing human rights (Carlsnaes, Risse and A.Simmons, 2013). States have become constrained within a system

of increasing security concerns and threats while promoting economic growth and being responsible to develop migration and refugee policies that safeguard human rights at the same time. In a sense, the cooperation with third-countries in the field of migration reflected the ‘compensatory measure’ to safeguard internal security (Lavenex, 2004). The same mentality applies to the securitization of the Syrian refugee crisis.

When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, the crisis was perceived as a regional one, however, shortly after with the growing influx of Syrian nationals to neighboring countries, it had become the ‘Syrian refugee crisis’. Reframing the Syrian civil war and the mass influx of refugees as a ‘crisis’ brought a change to the EU’s external migration policy choices and its relations with third-countries.

“With the peak of irregular crossings in 2015, disagreements among the Member States, and failing attempts of establishing a burden-sharing mechanism urged the EU to further externalize its migration policy with a security- and control-oriented approach (Interview, Academic).”

This externalization developed into crisis-induced migration cooperation frameworks, which were based primarily on migration control but also on humanitarian assistance, development, and political incentives. This way, the EU could maintain its internal security while safeguarding human rights and the welfare of the refugees in third-countries to an extent.

## **ii. Issue-linkage**

Issue-linkage appears as the process of simultaneous negotiations on and between a number of issues like migration, aid, trade, development, and security (Geddes, 2009). It is often argued that the issue-linkage creates a mechanism for stronger states to impose their will and power on weaker states, just like the EU’s conditionality mechanism over third-countries. Unlike this common belief, relatively weaker states have also been using migration as issue-linkage in the absence of other forms of leverage (Tsourapas, 2017, 2019). Since the start of the Syrian refugee crisis, it has been extensively used within the context of migration diplomacy for the joint settlement between the EU and third-countries (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019).

Both the EU and refugee-hosting states of Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon have strategically used the refugee crisis to reach agreements. The agreements in the field of migration were often combined with financial assistance, development, and trade agreements (Panizzon, 2019a, 2019b). Turkey and the EU first signed a Readmission Agreement in December 2013 following an intense negotiation process. Turkey agreed to proceed with the agreement only following the EU’s announcement that a visa liberalization process would be launched, thus laying the foundation for a transactional EU-Turkey partnership that was later materialized with the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement (Dimitriadi and Kaya, 2021). The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement is therefore another outcome of the issue-linkage strategy. The Statement combined the EU’s migration management goals with humanitarian and development aid, and political incentives offered to Turkey to meet mutual benefits.

## **iii. Transactionalism in EU-Turkey Relations**

The EU-Turkey cooperation created a high level of transactionalism in the field of migration, where both sides need to deliver (Dimitriadi and Kaya, 2021). Due to the mutual dependency, the only functional relationship had been observed in migration management as long as it had served the interests of both sides. The cooperation in migration management through the ‘Facility for Refugees in Turkey’ has been operationalized at different layers of governance. The semi-structured expert interviews showed that both the DG ECHO in Brussels and EU Delegation in Ankara interpreted the cooperation at the institutional level as well-functioning.

“Our cooperation is at the more technical level between the Commission (EU Delegation) and the line-Ministries in Ankara. Here, we are working pretty well together. Of course, our agenda does not always coincide and we have different priorities. But overall, the cooperation is functioning well.” (DG ECHO, Interview)

The EU Delegation Ankara repeated the functioning relations at the institutional level: “in terms of institutional changes and capacity building, there are good examples. Turkish institutions are learning a lot and there is continuous support from the EU’s side. This is also the case for other Turkish institutions



like the Employment Agency and the Ministry of Education. They now have a more structural system thanks to the projects under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (EU Delegation, Interview)”.

Likewise, Turkish ministries often perceived the cooperation as positive and asked for its continuation for practical reasons. Ministries of Health, and Social Policy, and EU Affairs stated they experienced capacity and learning challenges, mostly due to the re-shuffling process after the post-coup attempt and the regime change in Turkey. However, they all regarded the cooperation under the Statement as necessary and positive despite bureaucratic, financial, and organizational challenges (Interviews). The same can be observed for international organizations and non-governmental organizations that have been working in the field together with the EU experts and Turkish authorities.

The overall consensus had been positive on the implementation of the projects through the Facility mechanism. This is a positive finding of the implementation of the Statement within the context of sectoral functional cooperation. It can be argued that the cooperation among European Commission, Turkish Ministries, IOs, and NGOs operating in Turkey portrays multi-level cooperation to a certain extent. Despite the functioning cooperation among the institutional and local-level counterparts, the political discourse at the state-level gradually became negative after the signing of the agreement.

“I make a distinction between the political scene and the technical one. Speeches of President Erdogan and various Ministries and Ministers state that the EU is not delivering fast enough and/or the EU is not keeping its promises in the overall EU-Turkey context. Of course, all of our relationships fit into this context. Here, of course, I cannot talk about cooperation. The stance here is strongly negative, as opposed to the good relations at the institutional level (DG ECHO, Interview).”

The cooperation displayed a different picture moving from the institutional to the state-level and the political discourse had turned from cooperation to conflict.

#### **iv. Coercive-engineered migration**

Coercive-engineered migration is conceived as a two-level, asymmetric, coercion by the strategy of punishment, through which the weaker actors on the international or regional level seek to influence or change the behavior of their targets by manipulating the costs or risks of non-compliance. These actors often attempt to use migration issues as leverage to improve their bargaining position (Greenhill, 2010). One instrument of coercive-engineered migration is blackmailing, which refers to threatening to overwhelm another actor with the refugee population residing within borders unless its demands are met. Host countries benefit from the crisis environment by using the situation as leverage in an aggressive manner. ‘Refugee-rentier states’ extract ‘revenue’ in material and/or non-material forms, from other actors to keep the refugee population within their state borders. (Tsourapas, 2019) Turkey fits into this category of a refugee-rentier state as it had used the EU-Turkey Statement as leverage to reach its national and foreign-policy goals.

Turkey’s use of leverage against the EU had been shaped by the changes in its national and foreign-policy decisions to a certain degree. Between 2015 and 2020, Turkey experienced a coup-attempt in 2016, a regime change in 2018, and the start of a financial crisis in between. Turkey was also developing a wider regional foreign-policy aiming at maintaining its internal security by establishing a safe zone in Syria through cross-border operations. These developments affected how Turkey has interpreted and perceived the relations with the EU and also what and how it could demand more from the cooperation framework. The EU- Turkey Statement had become a tool for Turkey for bargaining its national and foreign interests.

“Turkey realized that it has a geopolitical power and the cooperation in the field of migration has the potential of a spill-over effect. The cooperation on migration management could successfully be carried to other political fields where Turkey has another interest. Turkey learned to use its geopolitical advantage as political leverage against the EU (Interview, Academic).”

Turkey has started using this advantage with an issue-linkage strategy for matters related to Turkey’s political relations with the EU, financial assistance, and its foreign-policy intentions. Months after signing the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, Turkish president Erdoğan threatened the EU with opening the borders after the European Parliament suggested accession negotiations should be suspended.

“You are reacting even when 50 thousand refugees try to cross the border to Europe. If you go a step further, we would open our doors. Neither I nor my people would accept your threats (BBC News TR, 2016)”.

Here, the conflict in accession negotiations became an excuse for blackmailing the EU over the refugee crisis. The same political discourse continued in the following year. This time Turkey noted that the 3 billion € financial assistance was not delivered (Anadolu Ajansı, 2016), and therefore the EU did not keep its promise (TC Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2017). In response, German Chancellor Angela Merkel responded to the threat and stated she will “work to speed up the delivery of the promised EU aid (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017)”.

While the dissatisfaction continued regarding the delivery of the both first and second tranche of the financial assistance (Milliyet, 2018), Turkey started to ask for support for its cross-border operations in Syria with the changing foreign-policy goals in 2018.

“The best solution for the voluntary and safe return of Syrian refugees is to create a ‘safe zone’ in Syria, which will be under the control of Turkey. Our strategical plans are ready but we need the EU’s logistical support to make these plans happen (President Erdoğan, TC Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2019)”.

When President Erdoğan’s expectations were not met soon after, he stated "we might have to open our borders unless a safe-zone in Syria is not established. The EU is again not keeping its promises (T24, 2019)”.

The continuous threats came to an end in February 2020 when Turkey suspended the prevention duty and opened its borders to Europe. Turkey brought its threats into action, which ended up in a tragedy at the Greek-Turkish border. President Erdoğan justified Turkey’s actions by saying:

“I warned the EU before and said if the EU does not support a fair responsibility-sharing mechanism, I would open the doors... We successfully implemented every single duty that was stated in the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. However, our expectations of fair burden and responsibility sharing were not met by the EU. Why should Turkey weigh all the burden of the refugee crisis? (President Erdoğan, TC Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2020).”

It is open to question whether Erdoğan realized any of his goals by threatening the EU, using the Syrian refugees as a bargaining tool, and opening the borders. He neither got any support for the cross-border operation in Syria nor was there a positive development in any of the political incentives of the Statement. However, it is significant enough to realize that Turkey acquired the confidence and power to exercise such leverage as a third-country against the EU, which was a serious imbalance in bilateral power relations. More critically, by risking the lives and welfare of the refugees at the border, the conflict reminded us at what cost this crisis-induced agreement was made. The humanitarian component of the cooperation failed greatly.

#### **v. Conflictual Cooperation**

The conflict in February 2020 was a result of the power asymmetry Turkey gained over the years against the EU, in addition to its changing national and foreign policies. What has been more striking is, that despite the severity of this tragedy, the cooperation has continued without any changes, mostly due to continuing mutual dependency. It was highlighted that the cooperation should continue within a strategic partnership framework.

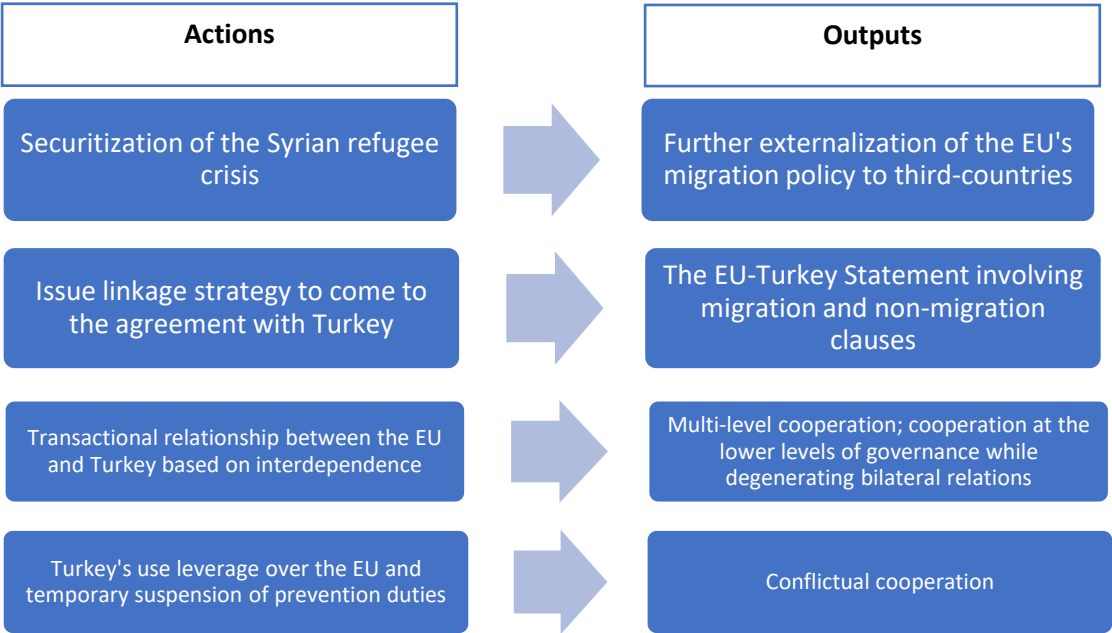
“Providing service to 4 million Syrian refugees is a cost that Turkey cannot pay alone. The cooperation and responsibility-sharing should continue to be able to have a sustainable mechanism in the long-term. There is a need for a long-term strategy for continuing access to services, and standardization of the quality of the services. The EU has to ensure the institutional capacity is ready to sustain this mechanism and increase the resettlement quotas at a much higher extent before pulling out from Turkey (Interview, Directorate-General for Migration Affairs).”

Similarly, the interviewee from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that as long as refugees are in Turkey, the cooperation mechanism should continue irrespective of political problems, with new projects aiming at solving the long-term problems (Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Although the conflict itself was a result of the suspension of the agreement by Turkey and it had serious consequences for the refugees, the EU did not come up with an updated migration policy that would leave Turkey out. The interdependence motivates both sides to maintain a modicum of cooperation at least in order to prevent any sort of escalation of tensions from snowballing into a fatalistic confrontation (Saatçioğlu *et al.*, 2019b).

“The EU’s strategic interest remains a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and a mutually beneficial and positive relationship with Turkey...On migration, we appreciate Turkey’s hosting four million Syrian refugees and agree that the EU assistance must be continued (European Council, 2021)”.

The Syrian refugee crisis has shown how much the EU and Turkey need and depend on each other, the former significantly more so than the latter (Saatçioğlu, 2021). Therefore, as long as the mutual dependency and interests pursue, the EU and Turkey find a way to continue a relationship, which is a combination of cooperation and conflict. The following **Figure II** summarizes the discussion on causal explanations between 2011 and 2020 and presents how the causality is operationalized.



**Figure 2:** Operationalization of the causal model

**VII. Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper presented an interdisciplinary and multi-method approach to see Turkey’s role in the EU’s external migration policy in the aftermath of the Syrian refugee crisis. It showed that Turkey, in its bilateral relations with the EU, is no longer a passive recipient of EU policies. Through the migration cooperation and the implementation of the EU Turkey Statement, Turkey gained relative power and has used leverage over the EU. This has been an outcome of the EU’s crisis-induced migration agreement that further externalized its migration management duties to a third-country. Despite the worsening relationship and deadlocks along the way, the FRIT cooperation mechanism is expected to continue until mid-2025 with the assistance and support of the refugees and host-societies in Turkey.

One could argue that the assistance scheme continues irrespective of EU-Turkey relations because it is developed for the refugees, not for the Turkish state. However, the study supports the idea that legitimizing and justifying Turkey as a safe third-country and a strategic partner in migration control and management could hurt the refugees the most, before anyone else. Here, the EU’s willingness to support the Syrian refugees is not being questioned, whereas the way and how it has been supporting them is open to discussion. Refugee protection should never come at the expense of putting them at the risk of being used as bargaining tools between the EU and any third-country. This study’s finding of the increasing role of third-countries against the EU in migration policy serves the purpose of showing the consequences of such agreements and cooperation frameworks.

The study also found that cooperation has functioned well between the institutional and local-levels to a certain degree, through institutional capacity building, lesson learning and sharing, and communication among the EU and Turkish counterparts. The conflictual relationship, on the other hand, is found more in the political discourse, and state actions due to unrealized clauses of the Statement and Turkey's changing domestic and foreign interests. The difference between the interpretation and implementation of migration management at different levels of governance created a relationship where there is both cooperation and conflict at the same time, which signals the multi-level cooperation through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey mechanism.

Future research in this field can look at other examples of third-countries, which have gained power and leverage over the EU in migration management with other crisis-induced agreements or cooperation frameworks to see primarily, if and how refugees are used as bargaining tools against the EU. Second, EU-third-country relations can be examined at lower levels of governance to look if there is more cooperation and compliance in comparison to the relations at the state and international levels. Local governments, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations potentially have different working experiences in working in the field with each other and refugees. Last but not least, the effect of the pandemic, closed borders, and refugees' access to health and other services in safe third-countries are other possible research issues that can be considered significant within the EU's external migration policy in the post-pandemic era.

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