

## **THE GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSION OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS AND THE EU'S FAILED ORIENTATION**

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The refugee crisis has specific causes and is setting off a chain reaction of effects. Europe seems to be unequal to the task of dealing with what is currently a 'manageable' situation, but that is evolving into an extremely serious crisis. In fact, Europe is fragmented enough for third powers – capitalizing on and trying to increase Europe's divisions – to take the opportunity to promote their own agendas.

It is certainly a complex state of affairs, involving the disparate interests of a number of players. Countries are being accused of contributing willingly to the perpetuation of a phenomenon with evident geopolitical fallout. The instability in Europe's wider neighbourhood does not bode well for halting or reducing flows. And the efforts being made to iron out differences in Syria have no serious prospect of bringing about a comprehensive normalization in the near future, with Libya and other areas of Africa evolving into the next theaters of conflict for Daesh and similar terrorist networks.

So let's look at how the EU is moving within the Turkey-Russia-U.S. triangle. It cannot satisfy Ankara's aspirations, whether in the context of Euro-Turkish relations or, in more specific terms, in the Middle East (where its usefulness is limited in scope), insisting on an agreement that, as it was set down in recent days, is doomed to failure. Active tolerance for Erdogan's methods sends a message of weakness, giving the Turkish leader – who is lapsing into ever greater authoritarianism and apparently cannot be held in check – more room for maneuvering in negotiations. The danger here is for Europe to be drawn into supporting, albeit indirectly, positions that will allow Erdogan to emerge from a portion of the current impasses he is facing, or, through silence – deriving from the short-term need to bring the influx of refugees to an immediate halt – to allow for the stronger promotion of Turkish claims. On the other hand, the EU's employment of stricter and more rules-based tactics could bring home to Ankara the extent of its isolation, in the hope that, at some point, even if only by necessity, it might come to its senses. In any event, the Turkish leadership should be aware that they will not emerge unscathed from either the refugee crisis or the quagmire of the Syria proceedings, while they are now looking very vulnerable on the domestic security front as well. Thus, there is potential for our turning the dilemma in the direction of minimal losses, should Turkey agree to substantial collaboration with the EU. To this end, we, as Europe, would need to expand the EU-Turkey communication channel to include Russia and the U.S. That is, as long as we appear to be trying anxiously/desperately to communicate exclusively with Ankara – investing all our hopes in that

conversation – we are essentially granting Turkey more power and, by extension, the potential to promote its own ends. The involvement of Moscow and Washington in the refugee equation is needed not just because it will put paid to Turkey's certainty that, essentially, it alone holds the key to the developments, but also because Turkey realizes that the real solutions to the adventurism of recent years lie, for different reasons, with the U.S. and Russia.

This is why Brussels needs to serve – with Washington's consent – as the link between U.S. support and Ankara, with quantifiable goals/trade-offs on the refugee front (indirect source of leverage) and, at the same time, to attempt to mitigate differences and – Why not? – seek a broader understanding with Moscow, particularly, but not solely, on the Ukraine issue. We are currently in the peculiar position of trying to browbeat Turkey without effective tools. And at the same time, having painted ourselves into a corner on the Ukraine issue, we are unable to converse rationally with Russia (increasing the mutual distrust, and perhaps being penalized to a degree), allowing the U.S. to interact with Russia on the Syrian crisis, despite their given differences. And the recent convergence between Ankara and Kiev is characteristic, with the former providing assurances of support for the latter's territorial integrity. All of this points to the fact that certain actors are trying (even unwillingly) to coordinate or at least restore mutual trust, while others "roam in European fields," bringing about a *de facto* curtailing of Europe's role and say in developments. Thus, if the EU wants to pursue a commensurate role on the diplomatic stage – in order to improve conditions for settling the refugee issue through expanded synergies – it needs to "correct" the oxymoron in question; an oxymoron unfavorable to its interests.

### **The unimplemented EU-Turkey agreement and the shaken European architecture**

March's 18 agreement, aside from being unrealistic/difficult to implement, contains elements that are of concern, including recognition of Turkey as a safe third country – in a state of affairs where domestic insecurity and Erdogan's authoritarian methods are sowing uncertainty – or the relocation of refugees on a "voluntary basis," which means that specific countries will again shoulder the burden. It is clear today that the "problem" is being bounced back and forth between Greece and Turkey, and being kept away from "unwilling" Europeans for a satisfactory period of time. It is also obvious that Brussels is trapped in an unfavorable bipolar relationship with Ankara, putting the latter in virtual control of the game.

The EU dragged its feet at the outset, ignoring the calls of first-reception countries for the need to take immediate measures. Subsequently, some member states followed a policy of open borders, while others closed theirs. Later, the activation of Frontex did not have the expected efficacy,

resulting in a request for NATO's assistance, while at the same time we saw what were formerly considered "marginal" voices/methods start to gain ground and, eventually, wide acceptance as an understandable, if not viable/acceptable, approach.

Regardless of individual or collective responsibilities, Europe presently runs the risk of becoming an observer of other powers, from whom there is a clear divergence in terms of priorities and challenges, and who, perceiving the magnitude and repercussions of the refugee crisis for the EU, are attempting to strengthen themselves vis-à-vis Brussels on multiple levels. Indicative of this is the ease with which issues that are virtually taboo for some leaderships are being added to the agenda, as in the case of the revival of Turkey's accession process and the liberalization of visas for 75+ million Turks, in the midst of a general sense of insecurity in the wake of the terrorist attacks in France and the attempt to create bulwarks against free movement even for European citizens. Or, in the case of Greece, the Turkish government's (and not just the military leadership's) worrisome attempt to legitimize its claims in the Aegean. It is clear that the shape developments are taking, as well as their impact, is compelling most European states either to back down, to adapt, or to revise their standards downwards on matters of principles and values – latterly with regard to the making of decisions that force or actually break the boundaries of the legal framework. And herein lies the greatest potential victory not only for those who question the very existence of the EU, but also for players who prefer to spurn the law altogether and communicate in terms of power. Even if much of the aforementioned is not adopted in the end – or is not implemented, or is *de facto* voided, as is the fate of many European decisions – the tone it sets and the footprint it leaves may well lead to mutations in Europe's DNA.