

REVISITING EU-TURKEY COOPERATION ON MIGRATION: ROADMAP FOR AN ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP

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Executive Summary

The European Union (EU), its Member States (MS) and Turkey began cooperating on migration matters long before the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis. The framework of this cooperation was mainly built upon the requirements of Turkey's EU accession process. What started following the opening of accession negotiations in 2005 was extended with the launch of a visa liberalisation dialogue in 2013. Building upon the agreement reached in October 2015 between the Presidents of the European Commission (EC) and Turkey, the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement came as a unique agreement for a joint response to a refugee and migration crisis that neither the EU nor Turkey could handle alone. It radically reduced irregular arrivals to the EU, channelled critical support to Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey, and established a *sui generis* framework for regional cooperation on an extremely complex and sensitive topic for both the EU and Turkey. Nevertheless, the implementation of certain elements of the Statement remained sub-optimal due to political complications. Mutual political understanding on revitalising Turkey's accession process to the EU, as well as advancing its bid for visa liberalisation, remain perhaps the most elusive issues. Key operational provisions of the Statement also need to be revisited, including full implementation of the one-to-one mechanism for readmission of ineligible asylum seekers to Turkey in return for the resettlement of Syrians from Turkey, as well as the activation of a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme to offer a rapid, legal pathway for legitimate asylum seekers to Europe. At the same time, while the EU Council invited the EC in March to present a proposal for the continuation of assistance to Syrians in Turkey (and other countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees), until there is a formal agreement on the extension of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT), or a similar mechanism, the future of EU support to refugees in Turkey remains uncertain.

Leaving the crisis of early 2020 at the Turkish-Greek border behind, grounds for a constructive re-engagement between the EU and Turkey seem to have emerged following the most recent European Council meetings and positive messages at leader level on both sides. Strategic interests of both the EU and Turkey align regarding the need for renewed consensus on cooperation in the field of migration, while political hurdles are likely to continue to shadow the broader agenda for the advancement of overall EU-Turkey relations.

The present policy paper by ICMPD looks into ongoing cooperation between the EU and Turkey on migration matters, including implementation of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, in light of the recent migration context in the region and possible implications of the emerging reform of the EU's migration management system with the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, unveiled in September 2020, and advocates five essential elements for enhanced cooperation.

First, an enhanced cooperation framework, either through revision of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement or the conclusion of alternative agreements, need to aim at further extending cooperation between the EU and Turkey to cover all dimensions of migration management based on a shared bilateral and regional agenda. This would be built on a *whole-of-route approach* to cover the coordination of dialogue

and policies vis-à-vis the main countries of origin of irregular migrants arriving in Turkey and the EU (prioritising countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan). Accompanying this would be continued EU assistance to Turkey within the framework of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) III for further enhancing its border management, combatting irregular migration and migrant smuggling, developing voluntary return/reintegration capacities, and further strengthening its asylum system.

Second, given the protracted refugee situation in the region, further strengthening the resilience of refugees and host communities in Turkey remains a priority. The continuation of FRIT or any other EU support mechanism to refugees in Turkey needs to address the gaps in local integration in light of circumstances exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, while addressing reservations raised by Turkey regarding the main modalities and speed of financial assistance disbursement, and improving local ownership and involvement. EU support to refugees in Turkey needs to target not only Syrians but also help address the resilience of an estimated 350,000 refugees of other nationalities (under FRIT or IPA III). More resources need to be made available to local administrations as frontline agents of social cohesion.

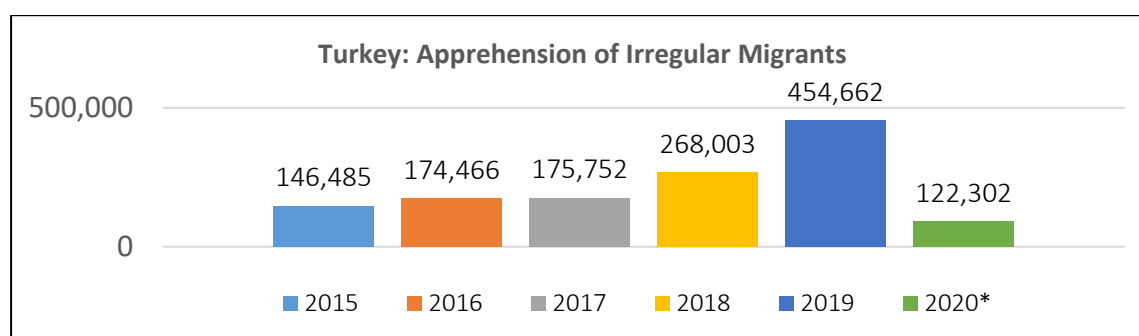
Third, ten years into the conflict in Syria, the EU and Turkey need to focus their joint efforts well beyond meeting basic needs, and on the increasingly pressing need of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey (as well as refugees of other nationalities) for durable solutions (more permanent local integration modalities, increased resettlement and voluntary returns, as well as more effective use of other complementary pathways). The EU and Turkey need to explore the means to resume returns from Greece, increase resettlements from Turkey to the EU and other countries, and activate a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission scheme for a rapid legal pathway for refugees in Turkey to the EU.

Fourth, in the absence of a breakthrough on the horizon for a political settlement in Syria, the EU and Turkey would mutually benefit from improving their dialogue on the future of Syria, including on policies pursued by Turkey in the north of Syria, and advocate more focus on challenges to effective repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in a political settlement. While the conditions for systematic return to Syria may not be in place, the EU and Turkey can actively cooperate to regularly assess conditions for voluntary return to parts of Syria, and target assistance in support of improving the lives of local communities, parallel to the support for the UN-facilitated political process.

Finally, with all its shortcomings, implementation of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement so far demonstrates that cooperation in dedicated areas (migration), despite political hurdles, can work for the mutual benefit of both the EU and Turkey. The emerging positive atmosphere needs to be sustained in order to expand mutual benefits to other areas of EU-Turkey relations. Progress on the modernisation of the Customs Union and advancement of the Visa Liberalisation Roadmap, in particular, would have positive implications and create new momentum towards further extending cooperation on migration matters.

Recent Migration Context in Turkey and the Region

In 2020, Turkey continued to host the largest number of refugees in the world (and has done since 2014), with over 3.6 million registered Syrians under temporary protectionⁱ and close to 350,000 refugees of other nationalities, with Afghans, Iraqis and Pakistanis topping the list.ⁱⁱ This continued to maintain the major strain on the country's absorption capacity, in particular when considered along with **close to half a million irregular migrants** apprehended by the authorities in Turkey in 2019 (down to 122,302 in 2020, mainly due to the Covid-19 impact). It also continued to have a direct impact on the overall demography of the country, with Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey below the age of ten, i.e. born after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, reaching 1.6 million, and on the demography of certain cities making up 74.81% of the population in Kilis, 26.34% in Hatay and 21.53% in Gaziantep. In addition, a total of 31,334 applications for international protection were lodged, compared to 56,427 in 2019, with the decline attributed to the interruption in protection services for the most part of 2020.



Source: Department of Migration Management (DGMM), Turkey (*as of 31 December 2020)

The Covid-19 pandemic has deeply affected migration mobility in the region. While the number of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey has continued to increase incrementally, mainly attributed to new-borns, in 2020 and for the first time in years Turkey registered a decline in the apprehension of irregular migrants at land and sea borders, which was also reflected in a **decrease in secondary movements to Greece (and further into Europe)**.

According to UNHCR, during 2019 Greece registered 59,726 sea arrivals and 14,887 land arrivals. In 2020, this number decreased to 9,687 sea arrivals and 5,831 land arrivals.ⁱⁱⁱ While total numbers remained minimal, there was a slight increase in illegal crossings from Turkey to Italy (by sea) and Cyprus (by sea and through the Green Line), suggesting the risk of the emergence of new routes preferred by smugglers. **Irregular migration to the EU has decreased by 94% since the signing of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.**^{iv} Compared with 2015, arrivals via the Eastern Mediterranean route to the EU were 90% lower in 2019, while further decline was observed in 2020.^v According to FRONTEX, attempted sea border crossings on the Eastern Mediterranean Route (Cyprus, Greek sea borders with Turkey) amounted to respectively 42,319 in 2017, 56,561 in 2018, 83,333 in 2019 and 16,986 in 2020.^{vi} Nationals

of Afghanistan, Syria and Turkey accounted for the largest number of detected migrants in 2020. In addition, the closure of the 'Balkan route' since March 2016 has reduced attempted land crossings. A sharp decline has also been observed in the smuggling of migrants along the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece since 2016. Turkey's law enforcement agencies has arrested 30,167 migrant smugglers since 2015, the highest being 8,996 in 2019 and 4,282 in 2020.^{vii}

Notwithstanding rising tensions at the Turkish-Greek border in late February 2020, the resettlement of Syrians under temporary protection under the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement continued, with a cumulative total of about 28,300 who were resettled from Turkey to an EU Member State by 22 March 2021, within the framework of the One-to-One Mechanism.^{viii} The pace of return of irregular migrants not in need of international protection from the Greek Islands to Turkey within the framework of the One-to-One mechanism, however, has remained slow. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, in March 2020 Turkey introduced a de facto suspension of readmission operations from Greece citing precautions against the pandemic. At the end of 2020, the total number of irregular migrants readmitted to Turkey as part of this agreement stood at 2,140, with Pakistanis and Syrians topping the list.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also affected migrants and refugees within Turkey itself, and they are particularly vulnerable to the overall adverse impact of the pandemic on the Turkish economy. The decrease in public revenue, leading to a decrease in public expenditure and social assistance, is already taking its toll on jobs and income for migrants. The loss/reduction of employment and income in a majority of migrant and refugee households (estimated at 80% via a needs assessment by the UN-led 3RP),^{ix} has resulted in an increase in basic needs, along with increased protection concerns (including a high risk of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV)).^x

Given the bleak outlook in the main countries of origin, exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, immigration from these countries to Turkey and further west can be expected to pick up once circumstances begin a return to normality. With an already crumbling public health infrastructure, and further deterioration of the economy (culminating in the collapse of the Syrian pound in June 2020), there is a risk that the humanitarian situation in parts of Syria will continue to worsen. This could trigger **fresh migratory flows from Syria towards Turkey** in 2021. The **fate of the Afghan Peace Process**, with the withdrawal of US troops from the country, would also impact the security situation in Afghanistan, having a direct reflection on emigration from the country. A post-pandemic scenario where the number of irregular migrants in Turkey would rapidly surpass the 2019 level would overwhelm Turkey, whose capacity to host refugees and manage migration is already stretched to its limits. Meanwhile, given the ongoing restrictions in mobility across the region and the disruption to asylum procedures in EU countries, **the number of irregular migrants 'stranded' in Turkey may become even higher in the coming years.**

The Way Ahead

Ten years into the civil war in Syria, leading to the protracted displacement of over 6.6 million IDPs inside the country and over 5.6 million registered refugees in neighbouring countries and beyond, and five years on from the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, there is a strong need for durable solutions for refugees in the region. The solutions need to reflect on the potential mid-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on migration and refugees, and to prepare for the post-Covid era, as well as to avoid the repetition of tensions witnessed along the Turkish-Greek border in early 2020. These objectives call on the EU and Turkey for a careful rethinking of how to further extend their overall cooperation in the field of migration. Grounds for a constructive re-engagement between the EU and Turkey seem to have emerged following the European Council meetings held in October and December 2020, and March 2021, with the EU renewing its readiness to work towards a concrete and positive agenda (based on three pillars: economic cooperation; migration; and people-to-people contacts and mobility) in its relations with Turkey; and Turkey reciprocating with positive messaging at the highest level. The decision to resume high-level dialogues (including on migration), and to intensify talks on other aspects of EU-Turkey relations, notably on the modernisation of the Customs Union, was reaffirmed at the latest meeting of the Presidents of the EU Council, the EC and Turkey, held on 06 April 2021. This opens the door for some progress in 2021/2022 on the possible extension of the existing cooperation framework between the EU and Turkey on migration, including elements included in the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, provided there is sustained political will on both sides for deepening EU-Turkey relations.

For the EU, defending its broader interests as well as those of its MS, and promoting core values such as the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, will continue to dominate relations with Turkey; while for Turkey a credible accession path and better burden-sharing (politically and financially) for migration management will remain a core demand. The situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, including development on Cyprus, as well as the domestic situation in Turkey, will continue to have direct influence on the way ahead in EU-Turkey relations. Nevertheless, there is a window of opportunity for reaping mutual benefits through further enhancing cooperation in the field of migration, and other areas of common interest.

Recommendations

Both the EU and Turkey have a strategic interest in a stable and secure Eastern Mediterranean, and a mutually beneficial relationship for effective management of the migratory challenges in the region. Avoiding further loss of lives across the Eastern Mediterranean, through providing migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk on perilous journeys, as well as upholding international law and preventing any violations, are also common responsibilities.

Cooperation between the EU and Turkey should be further extended, both geographically and thematically, in order to have a cooperation framework which would not only respond to common challenges in the short term but also ensure mutual solidarity and support in the long run. Such a framework needs to strategically cover *all* dimensions of migration management based on a shared bilateral and regional agenda. This agenda should first all of aim at deepening cooperation on migration management on key issues, such as strengthening border management, combatting irregular migration and migrant smuggling, developing return and reintegration capacities, and reinforcing the international protection system. At the same time, it should also aim at satisfying the immediate needs of over four million refugees in Turkey, including Syrians under temporary protection and international protection applicants of other nationalities, as well as enhancing Turkey's absorption capacity with a long-term perspective on durable solutions for refugees, including further support for local integration, more resettlements and, where possible, facilitation of voluntary returns. These policies need to be supported through the continuation of EU assistance to structural reforms in Turkey (through IPA III) and to refugees in Turkey (through a possible FRIT III or other identified mechanism).^{xi} Different implementation and assistance modalities should be explored for more effective and rapid disbursement of assistance, and to enhance local ownership and involvement.

At the same time, sustainable migration management in Turkey and across the Eastern Mediterranean requires a regional approach, in particular through involving nearby countries in the region, primarily countries of origin. Only through such a holistic approach, can migration management in Turkey and the region become more manageable. It is in the mutual interests of the EU and Turkey to explore means to promoting a regional approach to migration management, through complementary policies and actions along the main migration routes.

- **Extend cooperation strategically to all areas of migration management**

Irregular migration to and through Turkey has a direct bearing on flows towards Europe. Afghans and Pakistanis constitute the largest group of irregular migrants intercepted in Turkey in recent years, together making up 60% and 52% of all apprehended irregular migrants in Turkey in 2019 and 2020 respectively, while also closely following Syrians on the list of applicants for asylum in the EU. Turkey has witnessed a substantial increase in the number of Afghans entering the country through irregular

routes since 2015, for a number of push and pull factors. While the number of irregular migrants coming from Afghanistan reached more than 200,000 in 2019, double the previous year, there is not a similar increase in the number of applications for international protection by Afghans in Turkey, suggesting that due to several reasons many Afghans consider Turkey as a country of transit, *en route* to Europe. Recent field research by ICMPD on the profile of Afghan irregular migrants in Turkey suggests that 81.5% do not consider Turkey as their final destination.

Given the bleak security and economic outlook in Afghanistan and other main countries of origin, exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, immigration from these countries to Turkey and further west can be expected to pick up once circumstances begin a return to normality. The EU and Turkey would benefit from **embracing a whole-of-route approach** and expanding their cooperation to address the root causes of migration in their relations with the main countries of origin (and transit) of irregular migrants flooding to the region (notably Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan). This would also need to be complemented with **continued EU assistance to Turkey**, within the IPA III framework, **to further strengthen its migration management**. This would most notably come from border management, combatting irregular migration and migrant smuggling, having sustainable voluntary return/reintegration programmes and a stronger asylum system, as well as further enhancing cooperation between Turkish authorities and relevant authorities from countries of origin, and the EU and its agencies, especially FRONTEX and EASO. The new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum announced in September 2020 offers fertile ground for the elaboration of such a whole-of-route approach to migration cooperation between the EU and Turkey.

- **Further strengthen the resilience of refugees and host communities in Turkey**

Further strengthening the resilience of refugees and asylum seekers (Syrian and non-Syrian), and of host communities in Turkey, remains a priority. Initial assessments suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic has had significant implications on the livelihoods of migrants and refugees in Turkey, and host communities alike, all of which are particularly vulnerable. It is likely that the burden on economic measures will be asymmetrically shared, with migrants being more strongly affected than host communities. The pandemic is also likely to continue hampering civil society organisation (CSO) activities in the field of migration and overall service provision to refugee populations in Turkey. Constraints on face-to-face CSO service provision will further affect refugee access to rights and services. Humanitarian and development partners active in Turkey have adopted service delivery modalities to continue their efforts to support the affected population. The EU redirected €105 million to support the Covid-19 response in Turkey, notably for the most vulnerable refugees.

With the entire €6 billion of support under FRIT I and II committed by December 2020 to refugees in Turkey, possible continuation of EU assistance to Turkey is high on the agenda. The EC will soon present a proposal to the European Council for the continuation of funding for Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan,

Lebanon and other parts of the region.^{xii} The continuation of FRIT or any other EU support mechanism needs to take into account the accumulation of Syrians under temporary protection along with refugees and asylum seekers of other nationalities since 2016, as well as the exacerbation of needs due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the 2016 Agreement was signed, there has been an increase of nearly one million in the number of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey (with a total of over 3.6 million registered as of March 2021). Assistance should be targeted at further strengthening the resilience of refugees and asylum seekers, without any distinction between Syrians and non-Syrians, as well as that of host communities. Different implementation modalities should be explored to a maximum extent, not only to address reservations repeatedly raised by Turkey regarding the main modalities and speed of financial assistance disbursement for refugees, but to also enhance the ownership and involvement of national and local authorities, with international organisations and CSOs as implementing partners.

While addressing gaps in local integration, improving business support services for migrant businesses, as well as reskilling and upskilling initiatives for migrant communities, and encouraging the formal employment of migrants, there need to be important policy directions. Further support in the field of education, access to basic services and support targeting the most vulnerable among refugees and migrants (notably women and girls) are warranted. Although the solidarity displayed by Turkish society towards Syrians continues, there appears to be a considerable decrease in the level of this acceptance and solidarity, with an increase in society's anxieties.^{xiii} Hence, support to enhance social cohesion remains an overarching priority, which needs to guide continued assistance for refugees in Turkey. More resources need to be made available to local administrations, notably municipalities, as frontline agents of social cohesion.

▪ **Focus joint efforts on complementary durable solutions**

Ten years into the conflict in Syria, and with no breakthrough in sight for a political settlement, there is a pressing need for the international community, including the EU and Turkey, to step up its efforts for durable solutions for Syrians (and non-Syrian refugees) in host countries, including in Turkey. Efforts at durable solutions need to focus notably on granting a status that is more permanent to refugees to reinforce local integration, increasing resettlements to third countries, including through making more effective use of complementary pathways, and working towards the establishment of necessary conditions for voluntary return to parts of Syria.

While Turkey has demonstrated a commendable effort in providing protection and accommodating over four million refugees, the future of the temporary protection status granted to Syrians in Turkey remains an open question. As the regime in Syria has consolidated its position, it has become clear that most refugees will not return to Syria soon, casting doubt on the temporary nature of their stay. The hopes and determination of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey to return is diminishing while their plans are becoming increasingly independent of the developments within Syria. According to the

2019 Syrians Barometer of UNHCR, the percentage of Syrians who demand Turkish citizenship is 78.3%, while there is strong resistance among Turkish society to giving political rights to Syrian refugees.^{xiv} For sustainable local integration of refugees, Turkey may consider granting **long-term residence/work permits or citizenship** for at least a portion of Syrians under temporary protection (and refugees of other nationalities). With over 1.6 million of Syrians under temporary protection below the age of ten, i.e. born after the onset of the civil war in Syria, the demand for application of durable solutions is only expected to increase, too. Provision of citizenship to Syrians under temporary protection has been on Turkey's agenda on and off, whilst continuing to be politically extremely sensitive. In December 2019, the President of Turkey announced that some 110,000 refugees had been naturalised into Turkish citizenship, and that the government planned on further citizenship provisions to Syrians as a method of migration management, while 117,000 hold residence permits. The development of a framework, with clear and transparent criteria, procedures and possible quotas, for Syrians under temporary protection to be able to obtain long-term residence/work permits or citizenship, would significantly boost their local integration and social cohesion in Turkey.

At the same time, **resettlements** from Turkey to third countries remain very limited compared with the sheer number of refugees and asylum seekers in the country. 28,340 Syrians under temporary protection were resettled from Turkey to an EU MS by the end of March 2021, within the framework of the One-to-One Mechanism agreed under the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. An additional 16,902 Syrians had been settled to third countries by the end of March 2021.^{xv} With the announcement of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in September 2020, the EC reiterated commitment to resettlement schemes set with partner countries. However, the core commitment renewed in the new EU Pact is to implement the "2020 pledge delayed by the pandemic", which is to resettle 30,000 refugees in 2020, and to invite fresh pledges from EU MS from 2022 onwards. This points at the lack of a strategic perspective to increase resettlement quotas in the short term. While accepting refugees remains a highly divisive issue for public opinion in EU MS, parallel to support for the integration of Syrians in Turkey, **short- to medium-term resettlement quotas need to be reconsidered** for providing Syrian refugees with prospects for durable solutions and a future in safety and dignity, and for a more equitable burden-sharing with the main countries hosting Syrians, including Turkey. At the same time, the EU and Turkey would also benefit from cooperating to encourage other countries, such as Canada and the USA, to further increase their quotas for the resettlement of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey.

There is also a vital need to **expand the legal pathways** for legitimate asylum seekers to Europe and to **make the use of complementary pathways more effective**, such as for family reunification, labour mobility, education visas and community sponsorships. A decision by EU MS to activate a **Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme**, envisaged in the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, has been pending despite the EU and Turkey having agreed on relevant Standard Operating Procedures in December 2017. The Statement foresaw that such a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme would be activated once irregular crossings between Turkey and the EU were ending or "at least have been substantially and

sustainably reduced”. If endorsed, such a scheme would offer a rapid legal pathway to Europe for eligible refugees from Turkey.

At the same time, Turkey needs to fully comply with its commitment in the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement to accept the rapid **return** of all migrants crossing from Turkey into Greece and not in need of international protection, and to take back all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters, within the framework of the One-to-One Mechanism. Turkey should also resume readmission operations which were suspended in March 2020. Part of the problem has also been the relatively slow procedures on the Greek side. With the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, new asylum procedures are expected to come into force in the EU to expedite status determination and allow for better burden-sharing with MS as the external borders of the EU.

▪ **Enhance cooperation on regional issues**

Security, stability and migration in their shared neighbourhood are common challenges for the EU and Turkey. They both need to step up dialogue on regional issues, including on Syria and Libya, and to reach a common understanding to permanently de-escalate tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. While political differences have placed the EU and Turkey apart on most of these issues over the past few years, recent developments offer a window of opportunity for enhanced dialogue and reconciliation. Following sustained tensions in the **Eastern Mediterranean** throughout much of 2020, a de-escalation and a momentum in dialogue were registered with the relaunch of exploratory talks on maritime issues between Greece and Turkey on 25 January 2021. At the same time, positive signals emerged on the possible relaunch of the UN-led process for negotiations on a settlement in Cyprus, with informal talks held on 27-29 April in Geneva.

In the broader region, it is also encouraging that, throughout the period January-March 2021, the EU and Turkey initiated a diplomatic dialogue to discuss in greater depth their respective interests and mutually beneficial policies vis-à-vis Syria and Libya.^{xvi}

Maintaining **Syria's** territorial integrity and promoting a peaceful resolution of the conflict through the UN-led political process remains a common goal for the EU and Turkey. A breakthrough does not seem to be on the horizon, yet both the EU and Turkey have an interest in pushing for acceleration of the work of the Constitutional Committee, and lasting stabilisation of the conflict. While temporary peace agreements have been established in restricted zones, and the 05 March 2020 ceasefire in the north-west of the country is largely holding, displacement remained a major feature in the country throughout 2020. An estimated 700,000 civilians fled their homes to relatively safer areas near the Turkish border between January and March 2021, following attempts of the regime to consolidate its control around **Idlib**.^{xvii} Some residents were able to return to their homes after a ceasefire was brokered by Russia and Turkey. Meanwhile, Turkey continued its military action to create a safe zone in northern Syria. In October 2020,

the Turkish Minister of Interior announced that Turkey's cross-border operations enabled the return of more than 414,000 Syrians.^{xviii} Considering the current number of Syrians in Turkey, as well as the expected increase due to natural demographic developments, the stabilisation of conditions in northern Syria and facilitation of increasing voluntary returns are key policies for Turkey for the sustainability of migration management.

At the same time, the actual number of Covid-19 cases in the country is unknown due to a low testing capacity, but significant community spreading is assumed and the impact of the pandemic has further aggravated economic decline and led to rising food insecurity, affecting an estimated 9.3 million people. Although political talks will continue throughout 2021, the combined effects of a widely destroyed civilian infrastructure, outbursts of violence, a shattered economy and an increasing health crisis due to Covid-19 will not allow for an easing of the displacement situation or large-scale returns of Syrian refugees.

The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement foresaw cooperation between the EU and its MS, and Turkey to improve **humanitarian conditions inside Syria**. This remained limited mainly due to concerns raised by the EU and its MS over reports of civilian displacement and human rights violations as a result of Turkey's policy to create a safe zone in northern Syria. While Turkey needs to effectively address these concerns, the EU and Turkey need to maintain effective dialogue on the further stabilisation of the situation in northern Syria, and addressing the security and humanitarian needs of IDPs in the region. The return of Syrians under temporary protection can only be facilitated when conditions are conducive for their return in safety and dignity, and when the EU and Turkey can effectively cooperate to regularly assess the **conditions for voluntary return** to parts of northern Syria, in close collaboration with relevant international organisations.

A sustainable political settlement to end the multiple conflicts in Syria will not be possible without a real focus on the challenges of refugee returns. Ensuring long-term peace requires a more focused attention on the challenges for effective repatriation of refugees and IDPs, including significant security and protection guarantees. That would require, in particular, targeting humanitarian aid more effectively, dismantling certain sectoral sanctions and supporting the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure. The EU and its MS have engaged in Syria's reconstruction, conditional on viable steps towards a political settlement. This approach could nevertheless be adopted to align with the current realities and challenges on the ground.

- Leverage the positive momentum on overall EU-Turkey relations

Finally, with all its shortcomings, implementation of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement so far is testament to the fact that cooperation in dedicated areas (migration) can work for the mutual benefit of both sides despite political hurdles. The emerging positive atmosphere needs to be sustained in order to expand mutual benefits to the rest of EU-Turkey relations. Progress on the modernisation of the Customs Union

and the Visa Liberalisation Roadmap, in particular, would have positive implications for cooperation on migration.

Resumption of the work on **modernisation of the Customs Union** between the EU and Turkey, suspended since 2017, would not only bring mutual economic benefits, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic which has brought economic hardship globally, but could also be leveraged for the benefit of refugees. If successfully concluded, the upgrading of the Customs Union would help boost Turkey's economic resilience to cope with the massive flow of refugees and migrants to the country in the past decade, improve the investment climate, and help create jobs, potentially enhancing access for Syrians under temporary protection and refugees of other nationalities to contribute to Turkey's economic growth. Similarly, the conclusion of a **Visa Liberalisation** Agreement between the EU and Turkey, pending fulfilment by Turkey of a remaining six benchmarks out of seventy-two, would offer benefits for the overall resilience of the host communities in Turkey through enhanced opportunities for, inter-alia, business, education and tourism.

Conclusion

1. Migratory challenges in the shared neighbourhood of the EU and Turkey are far from over, while ten years into the civil war in Syria the future of Syrian refugees remains a common dilemma. Further enhancing EU-Turkey cooperation on migration matters, through a structured migration partnership, is a win-win recipe. Such a partnership, among others, should aim to develop a concerted regional migration agenda, embracing a whole-of-route approach and effective cooperation with countries of origin, the implementation of which can be supported not only by the EU and Turkey, but also in collaboration with other like-minded countries and international organisations.
2. Rather than focusing solely on a possible revision of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, the cooperation framework between the EU and Turkey on managing migration in the region needs to be enhanced through a combination of ongoing and possible additional initiatives. The initiatives should encompass cooperation on structural issues such as border management, combatting irregular migration and migrant smuggling, and having sustainable voluntary return/reintegration programmes and a stronger asylum system, as well as on immediate or emerging challenges.
3. Relevant aspects of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, as far as international cooperation and migration partnerships are concerned, could also offer avenues for enhanced cooperation between the EU and Turkey.
4. Given the protracted refugee situation in Turkey and the region ten years into the civil war in Syria, further strengthening the resilience of refugees and asylum seekers (Syrian and non-Syrian), and of host communities in Turkey, remains a priority, while the need to focus efforts on durable solutions, offering more permanent status and a predictable future to refugees, is becoming more pressing by the year.
5. Efforts at improving the humanitarian situation inside Syria, as well as preparing conditions for the voluntary return of Syrians in Turkey when the security situation allows, need to be stepped up within the framework of enhanced EU-Turkey cooperation. Considering the expected increase in the number of Syrians and other refugees and migrants in Turkey, this is not only vital for easing the challenge to the absorption capacity of Turkey, but also an investment for the safe, dignified and sustainable return of Syrian refugees, when conditions allow.

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- ^{xi} <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/06/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-his-meeting-in-ankara-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>
- ^{xii} <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/06/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-his-meeting-in-ankara-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>
- ^{xiii} <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/09/SB2019-SUMMARY-04092020.pdf>
- ^{xiv} <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/09/SB2019-SUMMARY-04092020.pdf>
- ^{xv} <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>
- ^{xvi} <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/10101/2021/EN/JOIN-2021-8-F2-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF>
- ^{xvii} Source: Response Coordination Group
- ^{xviii} <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/over-414-000-syrians-return-home-thanks-to-turkey/2007120>

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