

TURKEY MAKES ITSELF INDISPENSABLE



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Turkey is an essential part of this refugee crisis for three reasons. First, because it has received more than two million Syrian refugees. Second, because it seems that number will continue to grow – we only need note that more than 50,000 Syrians, mostly from Aleppo, crossed the Turkish border in a little over two weeks to escape the Russian bombing. Third, because it has become a migratory hub, being the main platform from which Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis attempt to enter EU territory at a time when other access routes, such as Libya, are not only further away but also more dangerous.

The number of Syrians and people from other groups attempting to reach Europe through Turkey has grown exponentially in 2015. The dynamic of the Syrian conflict, the fact that it is perceived to be a war without end and the massive amount of destruction caused in four years of violence have all contributed to many Syrians thinking that they will be unable to return to their country in the near future – something similar also happens to Afghans – and that, if they have to be refugees for life, it is perhaps easier to rebuild their lives in Europe than in the countries that have sheltered them until now. Although the intensity and nuances vary, the reception conditions in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq have deteriorated in recent months due to budgetary pressures, the fragility of social protection mechanisms, the precarious labour market and growing social tension. For Afghans it is even more evident, as the governments of Iran and Pakistan, two countries that have provided refuge until now, are inviting them to leave.

The Turkish government sees surveillance of its western border as a lower-order priority, especially when the threats come from the directions of Syria and the spiralling violence with the PKK. Also, the desperation of these refugees has produced a roaring trade for mafia groups (from the sale of boats, motors and life jackets to the falsification of passports) as well as conventional traders. No less important is that many Syrians believe that their chance of getting to Europe is now or never. The announcement of the construction of the fence in Hungary, the absence of safe channels for reaching European territory (for example, with humanitarian visas and ambitious resettlement

plans) and signs on the European side that it is overwhelmed, have contributed to a perception that the gates of Europe will be open for a short time only.

So, paradoxically, a refugee crisis that until now had been a burden for the Turkish government has become an opportunity. Turkey may now ask its European partners to take on part of the responsibility and to do so by taking care of the reception costs. Until now Turkey has spent €6bn of its own money constructing the camps and guaranteeing basic social services such as schooling and medical attention. But it is not just a question of money. If the Europeans want further Turkish cooperation on border surveillance and readmission, Ankara is asking for visa exemptions for Turkish citizens in exchange, something that was already under negotiation, but which will need to be sped up if Turkish demands are to be met. And, while they're at it, how about reactivating the negotiation process for the integration of Turkey into the EU, which has, for years, been in a situation of paralysis. All these issues were discussed in the European Council meeting of October 2015. But there is something more that will never be put in writing in the negotiations. Erdoğan sees this as an opportunity to rehabilitate himself internationally and to recover ground after the criticisms that European politicians and media have made of his method of government. There is no doubt that with this crisis Turkey's stock has begun to rise in the European political and institutional market. And, although it is less obvious, something similar is happening in Ankara. "European anchoring" has begun to regain value in a Turkey that feels isolated and under threat. Russian bombings and the deployment of its troops in Syria have made relations between Ankara and Moscow tense, and the Middle East is not the space, either economically or politically, that Turkey imagined it to be in 2011.

This "mutual rediscovery" may be a necessary condition, but it is nowhere near enough for sustained revitalisation of the European Union accession process. The offer to defrost the negotiations has been seen in Turkey as a move that smacks of desperation and not much sincerity. While in many European countries, Turkish pressure is seen as blackmail. It does not look like the best basis on which to rebuild confidence. Also, in various European countries far-right parties and movements are growing in strength by taking advantage of the crisis. The groups stirring up the fear of "invasion" and "Islamisation" of the old continent are unlikely to applaud Turkey-EU rapprochement. Finally, the situation in Syria is contributing to greater polarisation and tension in Turkey's political and social situation. This climate of tension will not help to produce a social and political majority in the EU that openly supports the need to integrate Turkey.

Turkey and the EU are not on honeymoon together, but it is true that they have rediscovered that they are damned to get along. The EU's capacity to respond to Turkey's needs, on the one hand, and the evolution of the political situation in Turkey after the November 1st elections, on the other, will determine whether this rediscovery can produce real rapprochement.