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With or without Erdoğan, we need to talk about refugees again



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The countdown has begun. On the 14th of May there will be presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey. [Polls show a tight race](#) between the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the leader of the biggest opposition bloc, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. After years of tensions in EU-Turkey relations, a victory by the latter would promise [to many](#) a first step towards normalisation. Not only has Kılıçdaroğlu announced a number of changes long called for by the EU – for example, the transition to a parliamentary system, or the implementation of rulings by the European Court of Human Rights – but his overall tone is perceived in EU capitals as more conciliatory and cooperative.

However, this does not apply to the topic of migration and the reception of Syrian refugees in Turkey. In 2016, Turkey and the EU committed themselves to the so-called EU-Turkey Statement with the purpose of ending irregular migration from Turkey to the EU. This statement is still in force, but that could well change should the opposition win the elections, as societal antipathy towards refugees has increased sharply over the years. Kılıçdaroğlu recently [said](#): 'We have to give back our streets and neighbourhoods to their owners.' Furthermore, Erdoğan, too, has taken a tougher stance on the refugee issue, slowly but surely adapting a discourse that would see refugees return to

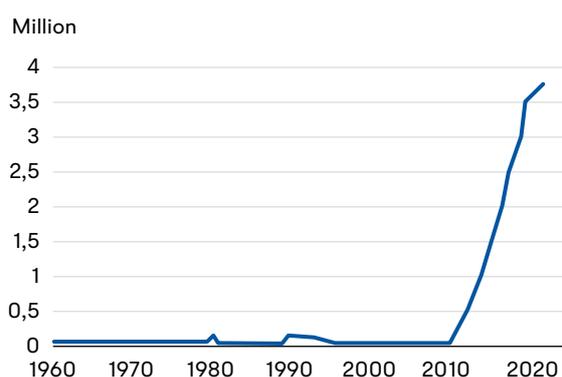
Syria. According to Turkish diplomats, the current government wants neither more money nor moral appeals from the EU, but a joint mission in northern Syria to facilitate this. That means that despite different rhetorical styles, in essence, both share the same aim: fewer Syrians in Turkey.

In this Clingendael Alert, we discuss the characteristics of this societal aversion towards refugees and how it has found its way into the political discourse. On this basis, we argue that renegotiating the EU-Turkey Statement is in the EU's own interest to prevent both any refugee deportation back to Syria and a new refugee crisis at its own borders. Here is why.

Anti-refugee sentiment in Turkey has reached a new peak

When Turkey received the first Syrian refugees in 2011, there was generally a very welcoming atmosphere within Turkish society. As in Europe, if not even more so, many Turkish citizens felt great empathy for the victims of the Syrian civil war and supported the government's [open-door policy](#) to give them shelter from persecution.

Number of Syrian refugees in Turkey



Source: The World Bank

Twelve years later, Turkey now hosts the [most refugees in the world](#), 3.6 million of whom are registered Syrians, compared to only [10,000](#) refugees in 2010. Based on the [EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016](#), Turkey agreed to keep the great majority of these refugees in Turkey. Although President Erdoğan has

long sought to bolster their social acceptance through a [discourse](#) of Ottoman and 'religious brotherhood' between Turks and Syrians, this rhetoric has instead exacerbated the socio-political polarisation inside Turkish society. For many secular Turks, the Syrian refugees have come to [represent an extension of the conservative cultural change](#) that President Erdoğan had initiated in Turkey and that they reject. Driven by suspicions of 'demographic engineering', [they fear](#) that the Syrian refugees may eventually all become Turkish citizens, forever grateful and loyal to the current president. Meanwhile, across society, many Turks working in the informal sector (which makes up one-third of Turkey's economy) feel threatened by the low wages that most Syrians are willing to accept. Moreover, many lament various social nuisances resulting from the destitute conditions in which the Syrians must live, which is accompanied by petty crime, low hygiene, excessive noise and begging. To be sure, while EU funds have enabled many Syrian refugees in Turkey to receive free healthcare and education from the Turkish state, this support is often perceived by Turkish citizens as privileging refugees over themselves.

EU-Turkey statement 2016 key points

EU

- To provide financial aid (6 billion euros) for refugees in Turkey
- To return all migrants irregularly arriving to the Greek islands via Turkey
- To lift the visa requirements for Turkish citizens (visa liberalisation)
- To re-energise Turkey's EU accession process
- To resettle Syrian refugees from Turkey
- To continue the work on upgrading the Customs Union

Turkey

- To suppress irregular migration to the EU

Both

- Improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria

Today, [82% of the Turkish population](#) want the Syrian refugees to leave – be it to Syria or Europe – and public hostility towards them is on the rise, including incidents of [racist attacks](#). How the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria might affect these attitudes is still to be seen.

From family to foe: how politics has changed positions

Unsurprisingly, this growing societal antipathy towards refugees has found its way into the political arena, including the campaign for the 2023 elections. In the early years of the Syrian civil war, the Turkish government implemented an open-door policy towards Syrian refugees fleeing to Turkey. In one of his speeches, President Erdoğan [said](#) ‘We see you as our [Muslim] brothers and sisters [...]. Turkey is your homeland too’, and lashed out at President Assad, calling him a ‘tyrant [...] that escalated the situation up to this point’. Syrian refugees were provided with shelter, food and medical aid, underlining Turkey’s solidarity and new claim to leadership in the Muslim world.

Nevertheless, as the refugee situation has become more permanent over the last few years, anti-immigration sentiment among the population has grown and has led to the establishment of anti-refugee movements. For instance, Ümit Özdağ founded the [Victory Party](#), an ultra-right political party whose main objective is to deport Syrian and Afghan refugees. Furthermore, a group of university students started a movement called ‘Angry Young Turks’ ([Öfkeli Genç Türkler](#)), who argue that Turkish identity is endangered by the large number of refugees in the country. Furthermore, this issue also figured in the 2019 municipal elections. Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) faced an electoral setback in the big cities, even losing Istanbul, to the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP). The CHP, led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, deliberately designed its campaign around the government’s handling of certain issues, including Syrian refugees. In his first interview after his electoral victory, the new Istanbul mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, [stated](#) that ‘the issue

of refugees is a severe trauma [...]. We have to protect our people’s interest.’ Since then, the CHP has been vocal on this topic.

In response, the Turkish government seems to have concluded that it had no choice but to change course. President Erdoğan gradually began to embrace a discourse of return. He announced Operation Peace Spring in northeast Syria in 2019, which would allow for the creation of a so-called safe zone to which Syrian refugees could return. And like the CHP, Erdoğan began to voice the idea of [restoring ties with Syria’s dictator](#), President Bashar al-Assad.¹ This means that all major parties except for the HDP are now advocating for the return of Syrian refugees. However, some important differences remain. The AKP emphasises ‘voluntary’ and ‘dignified’ return but refrains from setting a specific timeframe and occasionally still presents itself as the [Syrian refugees’ protective angel](#). The CHP, however, takes a tougher stance. [The programme](#) of the opposition bloc it is affiliated with, the Nation Alliance, states that it ‘will ensure that Syrians [...] return safely to their country as soon as possible’, which Kılıçdaroğlu later explained would be within two years. The word ‘safely’ is not further elaborated on, although other prominent CHP figures have [warned](#) that deporting refugees would breach international law. Lastly, the Nation Alliance’s programme emphasises that the bloc wants to review the EU-Turkey Statement, ensuring that both the EU and Turkey ‘approach the refugee problem with shared responsibility and burden sharing’.

Ultimately, by looking at the broader beliefs and values upheld by the CHP, it becomes clearer why Kılıçdaroğlu adopted a tougher stance towards the refugee crisis. While often labelled as ‘social democratic’, it would be more accurate to describe the party as ‘left-nationalist’. The common thread throughout the CHP’s election campaign is the prioritisation of the lives of all Turks. They believe that Turks have suffered

1 Also: Violence is on the rise. Last year, Human Right Watch [reported](#) that ‘Turkish authorities arbitrarily arrested, detained, and deported hundreds of Syrian refugee men and boys to Syria between February and July 2022.’

for years under Erdoğan's one-man rule, unfair wealth distribution, erosion of democracy, and also the decision to strike a deal with the EU on the Syrian refugees – basically all to favour one small group of people – the new religiously conservative elite. The [recent statement](#) of İmamoğlu during a rally in Trabzon last April contains an important message: 'They [Erdoğan and his confidants] will lose because the reign of just a few people winning came to an end. [...] We will win by uniting', but also 'If you are looking for a real vein of nationalism, that's us.' In short, the aim of the CHP is to give Turkey back to the people, and the Syrian refugees are not part of [this vision](#).

Potential consequences

How likely is it that a deal with Assad will actually come about and result in the Syrian refugees' truly safe and voluntary return to Syria, as Turkish politicians are currently promising? In short: not very.

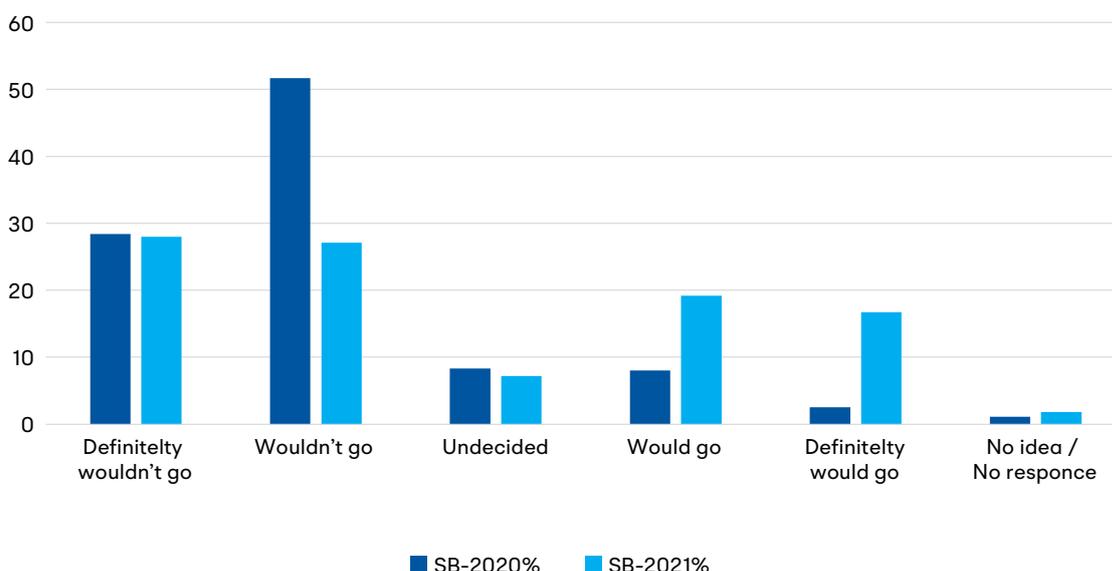
First, the majority of Syrians prefer to stay in Turkey. In 2020, [78% indicated](#) they would not return to Syria under any circumstances. That percentage decreased to 61% one year later, and it is conceivable that the percentage will be even lower for 2022 (no data available yet), but the fact is that a large proportion of the Syrian community still seem to prefer Turkey over Syria. Many of them have been in Turkey for years, building a life, and returning to their home country would mean starting all over again in an earthquake-stricken and destitute place. Second, the civil war in Syria continues, and although the level of violence has diminished, [Syria is still not safe for Syrians to return to](#). Assad continues to commit human rights abuses with impunity and to recruit Syrians for his war against his own people. Any returnee could fall victim to him. For that reason, Syria is still widely considered unsafe, and any potential safety guarantees for returnees by its dictator should be mistrusted. As the UNHCR [emphasises](#), 'all Syrian refugees in Turkey are protected [against refoulement]. This means that no one can be

returned to Syria against his or her will.' Any forced deportations would directly go against the EU's current position as stated in the [2018 Council Conclusions](#).

However, this does not make deportations impossible. Although Turkish politicians across the spectrum have mentioned that the return of [Syrian refugees](#) to northern Syria would happen in accordance with international law and respect for their rights, [reports](#) by Human Rights Watch have cast serious doubts on the extent to which such 'voluntary' returns are genuinely voluntary. While mass deportations remain unlikely, if only for practical reasons as well, even small-scale deportations are a cause for great concern on top of the growing societal antipathy towards refugees. With the EU-Turkey Statement still in place, relying on Turkey's classification as a safe third country for Syrian refugees, the EU bears partial responsibility for their well-being. And no matter the precise policy choices of the next Turkish government, life is very likely to become tougher for Syrian refugees in Turkey, if nothing is done to prevent it.

This inherently leads to a second risk: if Syrians feel they can no longer stay in Turkey because the situation becomes too hostile and returning to Syria is not seen as an option, what alternative do they have? As latest [surveys](#) and [reports](#) suggest, the number of Syrian refugees who are considering irregularly crossing into the EU is on the rise again. In 2020, 52% indicated that they would not leave Turkey should the Turkish government decide to open the European borders. A year later that figure had decreased to 27%.

Would you go if Turkey decides to open the European borders?



Source: Murat Erdoğan, Syrians Barometer 2021 (Ankara: Ankara University Mülkiye Migration Research Center, 2022)

Therefore, no matter how likely deportations actually may be, and no matter how many might eventually take place, the Syrians' escape from the spiralling anti-refugee resentment and from what they are anticipating to happen as a result of it, would inevitably result in another refugee crisis on Europe's shores: more [pictures of brutal border protection](#), more overcrowded and [inhumane reception centres](#), and more [illegal pushbacks](#). Also, new diplomatic clashes among EU leaders are to be expected in this case. Given the EU's [current struggle with the Ukrainian refugees](#) and the trauma of the political crisis in 2015, this outlook presents a serious challenge that needs to be anticipated.

What should the EU do?

Neither of the two scenarios described above is in the interest of EU leaders. That is why a proactive EU strategy is now urgently needed. The aim of this strategy must be to make an offer of support to Turkey that convinces both its leadership and its population that the long-term integration of Turkey's Syrian refugees is the most feasible and favourable way forward, also for Turkey, [all things considered](#).

But money alone will not do the job. Unlike what is often the perception in the EU, most Turkish citizens do not feel that Turkey has benefitted from the Statement. Instead, many think that their country is being turned into the EU's 'migrant store', causing potentially profound changes to their own society, which they heavily oppose – no matter the support they receive. Among the Turkish opposition in particular, many are hugely disappointed that the EU seems to have put migration-related interests ahead of concerns over the state of liberal democracy in Turkey – a feeling they project on to the refugee agreement. The Statement has helped the Turkish government to manage the reception of the refugees; it has failed to contain the resentment of the host society. Now, this is firing back, also at the EU. With the [end of the current funding](#) in sight, it is thus vital to consider the concerns of the Turkish population more and provide solutions that get them on board. As things stand, the sheer idea of 'refugee integration' has become unspeakable in Turkey today.

Therefore, the EU's new offer of support must consist of fresh funds, but also of a change in approach:

- The EU should step up current efforts to increasingly replace humanitarian aid with more general developmental assistance that significantly benefits local Turkish host communities as well and improve public diplomacy.
- Rather than focusing on de facto often endless cycles of skills training for Syrian refugees, the EU should focus on their economic self-reliance, [for example, through entrepreneurial initiatives or agricultural trade](#), as well as on their [integration into the formal labour market](#) in order to [reduce both](#) their exploitation and the uneven wage competition with Turkish citizens, which drives much of the anti-refugee sentiment.
- The EU should develop new integration practices that provide incentives to Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens to improve their social relations, [such as micro loans for specifically Turkish-Syrian joint business ventures](#).
- And finally, more refugees should be resettled from Turkey to the EU to keep providing alternative legal pathways to those most in need² and to express that the EU understands that [hosting refugees is not only a question of finance and economics](#).

Concrete ideas as to what such a new approach could look like in practice already exist.

Examples are the UNDP's proposal for a [Türkiye Compact, praised](#) by experts in the field, as well as proposals by the [German Institute for International and Security Affairs \(SWP\)](#), the [Brookings Institution](#) in Washington DC or the [European Stability Initiative](#) in Berlin.

Finally, the EU should once again consider political benefits for Turkey, such as an update of the Customs Union and visa liberalisation. Many have criticised the conflation of political concessions and migration-related support in the current EU-Turkey Statement as [unrealistic](#) or an immoral '[horse-trade](#)'. However, this only reveals the fundamental misunderstanding that underlies the current Statement: for Turkey, it was never a 'deal' simply about managing migration, but an attempt to bring Turkey and the EU closer together again.³ This will need to be addressed, head on.

The time to do so is now. Based on 115 in-depth interviews we conducted in spring 2022 with Turkish neighbourhood representatives in Izmir, Konya and Şanlıurfa, we have reached the conclusion that where economic inequalities and competition between Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens are reduced and where Syrian refugees learn Turkish and socialise with locals, integration is possible. But if Syrian refugees in Turkey are not given any long-term prospects, and if Turkish citizens continue feeling negatively affected by the presence of Syrians, then the cleavages are likely to harden. Thus, if the solution to Turkey's refugee problem is not found at diplomatic level together with the EU, then the Turkish people are likely to eventually vent their frustration by making life unbearable for Syrian refugees. From an EU perspective, this must be prevented by all means – both for humanitarian reasons and for strategic ones.

Therefore, updating the EU-Turkey Statement is an opportunity for the EU, not a threat.

2 Only 28,000 resettlements actually took place during the first five years before March 2021 ([ESI 2021](#)).

3 Murat Erdoğan and Friedrich Püttmann (2023), "The EU-Turkey Statement is based on a Fundamental Misunderstanding. Implications for Future Cooperation and Ways to Improve Communication", *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen*, 63(2): 75-84.

About the Clingendael Institute

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www.clingendael.org
info@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

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About the authors

Nienke van Heukelingen is a Research Fellow at Clingendael's EU & Global Affairs Unit, where she focuses on the relations between the European Union and Turkey, as well as the political landscape within Turkey. Before joining Clingendael, Nienke worked as a political advisor in the European Parliament, where she was involved in the drafting process of the annual report on Turkey.

Friedrich Püttmann is a Doctoral Researcher at the London School of Economics and Sciences Po Paris, focusing on Syrian refugee integration in Turkey.