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STUDI INTERNAZIONALI

# Turkey's role in the management of the Balkan route: developments and policy in the last decade.

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Over the course of the last decade, the Balkan route has revealed itself as one of the main challenges in European migratory policy, assuming a central role as a link between Europe and its political peripheries. The migratory crisis of 2015 forced the European Union to work both on the humanitarian dimension and on a sustainable reception system. In the context of transit routes and migration fluxes, countries like Turkey emerged as strategic and political actors using their geographical position as a way to gain leverage vis-à-vis the European Union. Turkey, as a natural bridge between the Middle East and "geographical" Europe (Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean, 2024), assumed the role of an actor able to "open or close" the Balkan route, as repeatedly declared by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Gall & Gridneff, 2020). Recent European policy has effectively transformed the Balkans into a peripheric area destined to containment, with the establishment of an "inner permanent frontier", whose external border and ultimate barrier is represented by Turkey. This article will retrace the evolution of Turkey's role as a strategic and political actor in the management of the Balkan route, from the onset of the migratory crisis of 2015 to today, exploring the security, diplomatic and domestic implications of this crucial political dynamic between Turkey and the European Union.

**The 2016 EU-Turkey deal as a form of externalization**

Turkey can be considered one of the main experimental arenas of the externalisation of EU migration policies. Externalization can be referred as a "strategy consisting of transferring the management of migration to non-EU countries" (Ulusoy, 2025). Externalization, as a policy, aims at stopping irregular migrants before they can step into the territory of the European Union. One of the first signs of Turkey's growing influence and of the European Union's recognition of its strategic externalizing role was the 2016 statement issued by the European Council and the Turkish government, officialising a joint action plan aimed at limiting the flux of migrants coming through the Eastern Balkan route (Weber, 2016). The deal was brokered by German chancellor Angela Merkel; Turkey had recently established a legal framework for asylum which aimed to redefine dispositions concerning refugee rights and their status. Turkey had ratified the 1951 Geneva refugee convention, but its scope of action was limited to European refugees, with non-European immigrants resettled in third countries after a period of provisional residence (Ulusoy, 2025).

The main influx of immigrants originated from Syria: starting from October 2014, Syrians could benefit from a group-based temporary protection. All the same, 90% of refugees coming from Syria lived in unsanitary and inhuman conditions, working irregularly and prevented from accessing education and public services (Ulusoy, 2025). The deal between Turkey and the European Union aimed at containing the influx of migrants towards Europe and at bettering their living conditions. The plan consisted of funding of up to 3 billion euro aimed at enhancing

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refugee facilities. It also included an agreement between the parties that would lead Turkey to receive all migrants crossing into Greece determined not to qualify for international protection and to manage all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters (Council of the European Union, 2016). According to Ankara's statistics, Turkey seemed to uphold its part of the deal, ramping up the number of apprehended migrants attempting to enter the Balkan route (from 60000 in 2015 to 175000 in 2016) (Ministry Interior of Turkey). The statement officialised the European Union's reliance on Turkey's upholding its part of the deal, alongside the establishment of a form of Eastern externalisation in itself and of a relation marked by a strong transactional character, with a shift from the normative "Europeanisation" model (Ulusoy, 2025) to a securitarian and realist one (Skordas, 2020).

**The Evros Crisis**

The European Union's reliance on Turkey's role as a blockade enforcer led to a highly exploitable relationship expressed through Ankara's open defiance of the EU. On February 28th, 2020, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, announced that the country would open its border to migrants aiming to reach Europe through Greece (Busby, Smith, 2020). Erdoğan had been threatening the European Union ever since the 2016 joint agreement, ultimately justifying the manoeuvre by lamenting the slowness of the transfer of funds destined to the support of the refugees. The Turkish president proposed to amend the modalities of funds allocation, requesting a more direct and straightforward streamlining. However, it is to be noted that Erdoğan's sudden turnaround followed the start of one of the main Turkish military campaigns in Syria's civil war, an attack on the rebel stronghold province of Idlib. The attack had produced an incoming flux of around a million displaced civilians, a number which Erdoğan declared Turkey could not handle, hinting at the possibility of involving the European Union and NATO in the military manoeuvre (France24, 2021). Turkey provided migrants with transportation means like buses, leading them towards the Greek and Bulgarian borders (Busby, Smith, 2020).

**Migration as a tool of consensus: public discourse in Turkey**

The crisis was not casual in its timing. The diplomatic altercation came to be as a consequence of domestic turmoil and perceived vulnerability of the Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, AKP, Erdoğan's party. Turkey's military operations in northern Syria were undergoing a phase of wide internal criticism, with popular dissatisfaction growing strong. Domestic dissent also originated from Turkey's apparent inability to manage its refugee population (which consisted of more than 3.5 million Syrians) amidst a general economic recession. Moreover, Turkey's decision came after a wave of local electoral losses by the AKP (Tsourapas, 2025). Greece's violent response (its border patrols welcomed the incoming refugees with tear gas and stun grenades) was also motivated by Prime Minister Mitsotakis's desire to establish the country as a defender of EU borders after his rise to power in 2019, proving the role of contextual recent electoral history (Irgil & Norman, 2024).

The border crisis provided a threefold benefit to the Turkish government, serving as a political tool and as a strategy to manufacture consensus. Erdoğan managed to redirect public opinion (Arnoux Bellavitis & Ripoll Servent, 2025), transforming the refugee crisis into an occasion to shift the blame on Europe's political needs and supposed inability to respect their part of the deal. The Evros crisis showed to which extent the European Union had become vulnerable to the interconnected dimensions influencing migration policy in Turkey, a weakness that presented itself in other such occasions, such as the Belarus-Polonia and Spain-Morocco crisis.

**Beyond the Syrian Civil War: an assessment of the cooperation between Turkey and EU**

From the 2016 deal to the end of the Syrian Civil war, the European Union has provided Turkey with more than €11 billion euros, with an instalment of six billion in 2016 and a second five-billion one in 2021 for the period 2021-2027 (New Union Post, 2024). The on-and-off strained relationship between the two has been repeatedly criticized for Turkey's disregard of human rights and the EU's "pragmatic" compliance. The European Union turned a blind eye to human rights abuses and arbitrary detentions of migrants and potential asylum seekers (Boitiaux 2026), ignoring the "severe and predictable" consequences on

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people's health, as reported by many humanitarian organizations, among which Médecins sans Frontières (2026).

Indeed, the EU's cooperation with Turkey reflects and incarnates policy trends which can find their full expression in The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, expected to be implemented before the end of 2026. The Pact introduces stricter and expanded screening processes, alongside a general acceleration of asylum and border procedures (Arnoux Bellavitis & Ripoll Servent, 2025). These measures contribute to the institutionalization of detention at the borders of the European Union, forcing refugees to withstand long periods of suspended legal status and uncertain health conditions (Médecins sans Frontières, 2026).

Ultimately, Turkey's case reflects a broader shift in European migration policy towards externalization, carrying unsettling implications regarding human rights and the European Union's dependency on third party states that can gain political and diplomatic leverage contingent upon the management of migration flows such as the Balkan route. Turkey seems to be destined to keep playing a crucial role in the context of the Balkan route, as a main actor of the general securization trend which drives EU migration and asylum policy.

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