

Analysis

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Summary: Ultimately, the decision to liberalize visas for Turkish nationals is supposed to be merit-based. However, there are concerns that the decision might become politicized. The EU member states would garner economic benefits from the freer movement for Turkish nationals. The fear that Turkish nationals would violate the terms of visa-free travel lacks evidentiary support. A greater recognition of this reality is likely to enhance Turkey's confidence in the EU's credibility. In turn, this would motivate the Turkish government to implement its end of the deal with greater conviction, especially the part that requires Turkey to combat irregular transit migration of third-country nationals to the EU.

EU-Turkey Visa Liberalization and Overcoming the “Fear of Turks”: The Security and Economic Dimensions

by *Kemal Kirişçi and Sinan Ekim*

Introduction

After long years of hesitation and deep-seated fears that Turkey risks becoming the “dumping ground” of irregular migrants for the European Union, the Turkish government signed a readmission agreement with the EU in December 2013 and ratified it in October 2014. The agreement was linked to a visa liberalization process that promised to streamline the visa application procedure, which Turkish nationals have long viewed as expensive, cumbersome, time-consuming, and largely unfair, since all EU nationals enter Turkey easily, in some cases by only presenting their identity cards. For visa liberalization to occur, Turkey has to implement the terms of the readmission agreement that will enable EU member countries to return third-country nationals that have transited through Turkey back to Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey will need to meet a long list of criteria defined in the “Roadmap towards a Visa-Free Regime with Turkey” that includes revisiting some of Turkey's relatively more liberal visa policies toward third countries. The European concern here is to ensure that Turkey does not

become a staging post for possible transit migrants to Europe.

Ultimately, the decision to liberalize visas for Turkish nationals is supposed to be merit-based. However, there are concerns that the decision might become politicized: a number of EU member states are concerned that visa-free travel will lead to a flood of Turkish nationals arriving in the EU, further aggravating existing problems connected to Turkish immigration and immigrants. FRONTEX¹ and Eurostat² statistics suggest that these fears may be somewhat exaggerated. Actually, in contrast to nationals of the Western Balkan countries that have enjoyed visa-free travel since 2009, Turkish nationals are much less likely to be found in violation of Schengen regulations.

Visa liberalization is likely to enhance tourism, which, in turn, will contribute to the growth of local economies. It will promote the freer movement of

¹ Frontex, “Annex Table 5, Refusal of Entry,” in Annual Risk Analysis 2014, p 73 and p 62.

² Eurostat, “Third Country Nationals found to be Illegally Present – annual data,” <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

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Turkish business people, who are likely to forge greater economic activity between the EU and Turkey. It will also facilitate greater academic, cultural, and educational contacts between Turkey and the EU. The “fear of Turkish nationals” needs to be balanced against these realities, so that a more solid and strategic bond may be built between the EU and Turkey. In turn, a readiness on the Turkish side to give the EU the benefit of the doubt and adopt the necessary reforms would help put into place a virtuous cycle, and eventually bring about a truly win-win outcome for both sides. A key factor will be to make sure that Turkey maintains both political stability and an economy that continues to grow.

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Security Dimension

The notion that Turks would immigrate to the EU in large numbers is deeply engrained in the minds of many in Europe. After all, Turkey was a major source of immigrants, irregular migrants, and asylum seekers in the past. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are around 4 million Turkish nationals currently living in Western Europe. Turkish immigration into EU countries continued until roughly mid-2000s through family formation, illegal migration, and asylum at the rate of almost 100,000 per year. Yet, since the mid-2000s, the tide has turned in the opposite direction, with Turkey serving as an immigration destination for Europeans. For example, the number of asylum seekers from Turkey to Europe, which used to average around 24,000 annually between 1981 and 2005, steadily fell to 5,200 in 2012, to 5,000 in 2013, and 2,240 in the first half of 2014.³

³ Calculated from Ahmet Icduygu and Kemal Kirisci, *Land of Diverse Migrations: Challenges of Emigration and Immigration in Turkey*, (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2009) p 7 and UNHCR, “Table 4: Asylum Applications Lodged in the European Union (28) by origin,” *Asylum Trends First Half of 2014*, September 26, 2014, p 21.

This is actually in stark contrast to the nationals of Balkan countries who have been granted the right to visa-free travel since 2009. There were more than 56,000 nationals of Albania, Serbia, and Macedonia that filed asylum applications in the EU in 2013 out of an overall population considerably smaller than that of Turkey.⁴ A similar observation can also be made with respect to refusal of entry into the Schengen area. In 2013, there were more than 24,000 nationals of Albania, Bosnia, and Serbia denied entry into the EU, in contrast to just about 3,000 Turkish nationals.⁵ In addition to this, roughly 44,000 citizens from Albania, Serbia, Macedonia and Serbia were found to be illegally present in the EU in 2013, compared to about 8,900 for Turkish nationals.⁶

The dramatic fall in asylum applications, refusal of entry, and illegal presence is occurring against a steady increase in the number of Turkish nationals applying for EU visas. Between 2009 and 2013, the number of Schengen applications soared from about 480,000 in 2009 to 780,000 in 2013, almost a two-thirds increase. This was also a period during which visa refusal rates dropped from 6.4 percent to 4.7 percent on average, though they were still considerably higher than the less than 2 percent rate for Ukrainian nationals, for example.⁷ In the meantime, there are almost 1.5 million Turkish nationals who are holders of special passports that are exempted from visa requirements for nearly all EU members. It is difficult to tell what proportion of these passports holders travel to the EU and are denied admission at the border, or deliberately violate Schengen regulations. However, what is clear is that the portrayal of Turkish nationals as people attempting to illegally migrate to the EU is not born by reality. It is therefore difficult to claim that Turkish nationals constitute a threat.

Economic Dimension

The discussions concerning visa liberalization for Turkish nationals often overlook Turkey’s significant economic transformation during the course of the last decade. The Turkish economy doubled in size between 2004 and 2014,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 21.

⁵ Frontex, “Annex Table 5, Refusal of Entry,” in *Annual Risk Analysis 2014*, p 73 and p 62.

⁶ Eurostat, “Third Country Nationals found to be Illegally Present – annual data,” <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

⁷ See note 7, p 73.



while Turkish foreign trade grew almost three-fold. During this period, the EU has remained Turkey's top trading partner. Turkey was the EU's sixth largest trading partner in 2013, just behind Norway and Switzerland but ahead of Japan and Brazil. These developments suggest that, even if at a modest level, Turkey's economic engagement of the EU offers benefits to EU member countries in terms of economic growth and employment as much as it does to Turkey. Visa liberalization can dramatically help this in two ways.

Firstly, Turkish businesspeople have long resented the customs union practice that allows their goods, but not them, to travel to the EU freely. They also complain that this puts them at a disadvantage in relations to their European counterparts who do not face any entry restrictions into Turkey, describing this practice as a form of "non-tariff barrier." Not only would visa liberalization allay these grievances, but it would also enable more Turkish businesspeople to do business much more easily. Greater access to the EU would also enable them to import as much as export, and thus enhance their contribution to the EU's economic growth.

Secondly, due to Turkey's rising GDP per capita, the number of Turkish people travelling abroad is booming. Out of the 8 million Turkish nationals travelling abroad in 2013, one-third of them went to destinations in the EU.⁸ In this regard, Greece has set a remarkable precedent by introducing a "pilot-visa agreement," which allows the country to take advantage of the high volume of Turkish tourism. The agreement is in effect only between April and October of every year and allows an easier visa-application procedure for Turkish travelers to various Greek islands. To maximize its economic gains, Greece has maintained the lowest visa refusal rate of 1.7 percent in 2013 in contrast to Sweden's almost 19 percent. These two practices brought more than 830,000 Turkish nationals to Greece in 2013, a 38 percent increase from the previous year.⁹ Undoubtedly, this has helped the Greek economy in difficult times, demonstrating the benefits that could be derived from a more liberal visa approach for Turkish nationals.

⁸ TURKSTAT, "Arriving Citizens Survey," November 2014.

⁹ Greek Tourism: Facts & Figures (SETE), Table 7, <http://sete.gr/EN/TOURISM/Greek%20Tourism%20Facts%20&%20Figures/>.

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Conclusion

An earlier *On Turkey Policy Brief* on visa liberalization flags the challenges that await Turkey while implementing "the road map" criteria, and highlights the benefits that would accrue to Turkey in terms of enhanced border security, democratization, and foreign policy.¹⁰ The EU member states, too, would garner economic benefits from the freer movement for Turkish nationals. Furthermore, the fear that Turkish nationals would violate the terms of visa-free travel lacks evidentiary support. A greater recognition of this reality is likely to enhance Turkey's confidence in the EU's credibility. In turn, this would motivate the Turkish government to implement its end of the deal with greater conviction, especially the part that requires Turkey to combat irregular transit migration of third-country nationals to the EU.

In the meantime, two confidence-building measures could be considered, one of which is increasing the number of multiple entry visas being issued, especially to businesspeople. This would help expand economic relations between the two sides but also become a kind of a "confidence-building measure." Secondly, the European Commission could encourage Bulgaria and Greece to explore the possibility of a "local border traffic permit" that is currently in

¹⁰ Diba Nigar Goksel, "Turkey's Visa Free Travel Process with the EU: Trap or Gift?" in *GMF Turkey Policy Brief Series*, December 19, 2014, <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/turkeys-visa-free-travel-process/>.



effect along several Eastern European borders.¹¹ This regulation allows for those third-country nationals who reside in an area within the 30-km radius from the closest border with a member state to cross the border for social, cultural, and economic purposes for up to three months per year. If concluded along Greek/Turkish and Bulgarian/Turkish borders, this agreement would likely produce largely favorable effects on the economic development of the borderlands and could also become an incentive for Turkey to consider an early implementation of the terms of the readmission agreement. In return, the Turkish government has to recognize that ensuring political stability and reforming its economy to help it return to its dynamic performance of the previous decade will be critical to allaying the European “fear of Turks.”

¹¹ European Parliament and Council, “Regulation EC 1931/2006,” in *Official Journal of the European Union*, December 20, 2006; European Commission, “Second Report on the Implementation and Functioning of the LBTR set up by Regulation 1931/2006,” February 9, 2011.

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