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## Greek–Turkish Relations, UE and Migration Problem<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *In 2015 the European Union was faced with a huge problem – the migration crisis, which saw more than a million migrants crossing the EU borders. Almost 900,000 came to the EU from Turkey. Migrants travelled from the Turkish Anatolian coast to the nearby Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. The Aegean has for decades seen territorial disputes between Greece and Turkey concerning delimitation of the boundaries of the continental shelf, territorial waters, airspace. Turkey also claims the right to the Greek islands at its shores. Mass migration of Muslims to Greek islands contribute to escalations of tensions between Athens and Ankara. Greece is getting increasingly concerned about the possibility of Turkey using the ‘demographic weapon’.*

**Keywords:** Greece, Turkey, European Union, foreign policy, international dispute, migration crisis

### Introduction

The relations between Greece and its Turkish neighbour have been characterised by hostility and distrust since the very emergence of mod-

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ern Greece. For a long time, the Greek society considered Turkey its traditional enemy, who had occupied the Hellenic territory for 400 years and had prevented the restoration of the Greek state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The Turkish perception of Greeks is very similar and in turn involves the Greek aggression on western Asia Minor between 1919 and 1922. In Turkey the campaign is considered a part of the Turkish War of Independence, which prevented Greek occupation and contributed to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.

The relations between Greece and Turkey were regulated in the Treaty of Lausanne of 1924, which determined the Greek–Turkish border in Thrace and ownership of islands in the Aegean Sea. Additionally, the treaty also addressed the issue of population exchange between the two countries.<sup>3</sup> The treaty brought about a rapprochement in the relations between Athens and Ankara that lasted for the next three decades.

After World War II, given the two-block nature of the international order, the two countries maintained relatively good relations, cemented by the existence of a common enemy – the Soviet Union – and their membership in NATO since 1952. The relations between Athens and Ankara deteriorated in the mid-1950s with the emergence of the Cyprus issue.<sup>4</sup> The agreements signed between Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom concerning the independence of Cyprus only temporarily stabilised the situation between Athens and Ankara. Subsequent Cyprian crises of 1963/1964 and 1967 increased the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The most serious crisis in the relations between Greece and Turkey took place in 1974 when the Greek junta attempted a coup d'état in Cyprus, to which Turkey responded by invading the northern part of the island. The Cypriot problem was undeniably the main cause of the deterioration of relations between the two neighbouring countries, but it also contributed to the rise of further antagonisms related to the delimitation of borders in the Aegean Sea.

The Aegean dispute comprises a number of elements, which concern: determining the boundaries of the continental shelf, delimiting the borders of territorial waters and airspace, as well as remilitarisation of Greek islands located off the Anatolian shore. In the recent years, Turkey also challenged the 'Greeknness' of some Aegean Islands at its shore. The Aegean issue had regularly been causing tensions in the relations between the two countries. In 1996 a war almost broke out over the issue of ownership of

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the history of Greek–Turkish relations see R. Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece*, Cambridge 2002.

<sup>3</sup> S.J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, New York 1977, p. 364 ff.

<sup>4</sup> T. Bahcheli, *Greek-Turkish Relations Since 1955*, London 1990, p. 40 ff.

the small island of Imia.<sup>5</sup> Owing to permanent efforts of NATO, especially of the United States, so far all crises have been dealt with peacefully. Since 1999, there has been a rapprochement in the relations between Athens and Ankara. Paradoxically, catastrophic earthquakes that both Turkey and Greece suffered in mid-1999 gave rise to intensive dialogue between the two countries, referred to as ‘seismic diplomacy’.<sup>6</sup> With Greece’s conciliatory attitude, in 1999 the European Union granted Turkey the status of official candidate for EU membership.

The honeymoon period in the relations between the two countries is, however, only illusory, as they are still shrouded in an aura of mistrust. The list of problems in bilateral relations keeps getting longer, and in the recent years yet another issue has arisen, which further complicates the situation in the Aegean Sea, namely the problem of migrants attempting to make their way from Turkey to Greece.

## 1. Greece’s policy towards the migration problem

Starting with 2010, we have been witnessing a clear, or even rapid, increase in the number of foreigners coming to Greece.<sup>7</sup> Most of the people detained for attempting to illegally enter the country were crossing the land border with Turkey. Because the Greek government was unable to handle the problem of migrant flows, the European Union chose to assist it by launching Operation Poseidon in 2010, a land and sea-based border control mission coordinated by the EU agency FRONTEX.<sup>8</sup> Greece’s ruling party, which at that time was the conservative New Democracy, rather negatively disposed to migrants, decided to definitively seal the land border with Turkey.<sup>9</sup> For this purpose, Athens asked the European Commission for financial assistance, to be spent on erecting a barbed wire fence

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<sup>5</sup> T. Veremis, *The Ongoing Aegean Crisis*, “Thesis. A Journal of Foreign Policy Issues”, No. 1/1997.

<sup>6</sup> A. Gundogdu, *Identities in Question: Greek-Turkish Relations in a Period of Transformation?*, “Meria. Middle East Review of International Affairs”, No. 1/2001, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> A. Triandafylidou, *Migration In Greece, Developments in 2013*, Report prepared for the OECD Network of International Migration Experts, Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, 13.11.2013, p. 7, [http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Migration-in-Greece-Recent-Developments-2013\\_2.pdf](http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Migration-in-Greece-Recent-Developments-2013_2.pdf) (last visited 3.12.2015).

<sup>8</sup> *FRONTEX Between Greece and Turkey: At the Border of Denial*, May 2014, <http://www.frontexit.org/fr/docs/49-frontexbetween-greece-and-turkey-the-border-of-denial/file> (last visited 1.02.2016).

<sup>9</sup> M. Martin, *The Rise of Xenophobia and the Migration Crisis In Greece. The Council of Europe’s Wake-up Call: “Europe cannot afford to look away”*, Statewatch Analysis, March 2013, p. 3.

and an anti-tank trench at the Greek–Turkish border in Thrace.<sup>10</sup> The Commission refused, arguing that this would not yield the results that Greeks were expecting.<sup>11</sup> Athens chose to finance the undertaking – Operation Aspida (Shield) – on their own and completed it in 2012.<sup>12</sup> Operation Shield was intended to show illegal migrants that it was impossible to enter Greece from Turkey, almost two thousand officers were therefore sent to the border in Thrace to patrol the area and apprehend suspects.

In the same year, police forces began Operation Xenios Zeus (Hospitable Zeus) within the country, consistently controlling documents of people suspected of staying in Greece illegally. Over the course of the operation, which lasted until 2014, hundreds of thousands of ‘suspects’ had been controlled; only in the second half of 2012, 65,000 people were held for verification, of which some four thousand proved to be illegal migrants and were therefore deported.<sup>13</sup>

The position of the Greek government towards refugees changed in January 2015, when the Syriza party formed a new cabinet. The party, composed of radical socialists, advocated a change of the migration policy, pointing out the need to observe human rights, close detention centres and allow for legalisation of migrants and refugees with no valid travel documents.<sup>14</sup> One of the first decisions of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’s government was to gradually shut down detention centres and turn them into open or semi-open ‘hosting facilities’, where conditions would meet the fundamental requirements of human dignity.<sup>15</sup> The government also ended Operation Xenios Zeus and instructed officials to use detention measures only in extreme cases. Greek officials were required to observe human rights when dealing with foreigners.<sup>16</sup> Deputy Minister of Immigration Policy Tasia Christodouloupoulou publically stated that the expression ‘illegal’ should not be used towards migrants because they are people who deserve help.<sup>17</sup> She also proposed that refugees be admitted to vari-

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<sup>10</sup> The anti-tank trench was much rather a manifestation of Greece’s eternal fear of a Turkish aggression than of the need to stop illegal migrants.

<sup>11</sup> M. Martin, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Tsipras under pressure to tear down Turkish border fence*, EuroActiv, 3.11.2015.

<sup>13</sup> *FRONTEX Between Greece and Turkey...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.syriza.gr/pdfs/politiki\\_apofasi\\_idrytikou\\_synedriou\\_syriza.pdf](http://www.syriza.gr/pdfs/politiki_apofasi_idrytikou_synedriou_syriza.pdf) (last visited 8.12.2016).

<sup>15</sup> A. Triandafyllidou, E. Gemi, *Irregular migration in Greece: What is at stake?*, “ELI-AMEP Policy Paper”, June 2015, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> C. Katsiaficas, *A New day for Greek Migration Policy? The New Government and Prospects for reform*, “BREF Commentary”, No. 33, 3.03.2015, pp. 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> A.A. Nestoras, *The Gatekeeper’s Gambit: SYRIZA, Left Populism and the European Migration Crisis*, Institute of European Democrats Working Paper, Brussels, 23.12.2015, pp. 12, 16.

ous local administration units throughout the country, but local officials protested against this idea.<sup>18</sup>

The policy of the new government was heavily criticised by the major opposition party, New Democracy, which had previously introduced the most restrictive measures against illegal migrants and refugees. New Democracy's leader, A. Samaras, particularly criticised the termination of Operation Xenios Zeus and the shutting down of detention centres, arguing that this would lead to more crime and threats to Greek citizens. Furthermore, he especially strongly opposed the proposals to remove the barriers erected on the land border with Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

When detention centres were shut down, large groups of migrants and refugees began occupying the main squares and parks of Athens. This angered both the capital's inhabitants and local authorities, which were critical of the government policy. At the same time, the situation on the islands was deteriorating because now, with detention centres closed, there was nowhere to send the new waves of refugees to, and they started to establish huge illegal camps in places where they arrived.<sup>20</sup> The foreigners coming to Greece did not, however, intend to stay there; their main goal was to leave as quickly as possible, going north along the Balkan Route towards the wealthier EU Member States.

The remaining members of the European Union initially underestimated and ignored the phenomenon of ever new waves of refugees arriving on Greek islands. Only in May 2015 the European Commission put forward a proposal of response to the mass migration in the form of the European Agenda On Migration.<sup>21</sup> In consequence of the Commission's initiative, in September 2015 the Council of the European Union adopted a decision aimed at stabilising the situation caused by the massive influx of refugees.<sup>22</sup> The decision provided for assistance to the front-line EU Member States, Italy and Greece, which the refugee crisis had affected the most, in the form of relocation of 160,000 refugees, increased funding and establishment of hotspots in areas most exposed to the crisis.

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<sup>18</sup> A. Triandafyllidou, E. Gemi, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Tsipras under pressure to tear down Turkish border fence*, EuroActiv, 3.11.2015.

<sup>20</sup> A.A. Nestoras, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A European Agenda On Migration, Brussels, 13.5.2015, COM(2015) 240 final, [http://ec.europa.eu/lietuva/documents/power\\_pointai/communication\\_on\\_the\\_european\\_agenda\\_on\\_migration\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/lietuva/documents/power_pointai/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf) (last visited 8.12.2016).

<sup>22</sup> Council Decision Establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece, (EU) 2015/1601, 22.09.2015.

The attention of Greek politicians remained focused on the economic crisis, while Prime Minister Tsipras tried to take advantage of the refugee crisis in negotiations on financial assistance for Greece. The Syriza government invoked European solidarity, indicating that Greece was first and foremost in need of additional funds. During the campaign preceding the early parliamentary elections in Greece in September 2015, the migration issue was one of the main topics of political debates. Prime Minister Tsipras did not change his rhetoric concerning the treatment of refugees.<sup>23</sup> In his speeches he blamed the migration crisis on Western countries, accusing them of pursuing a neo-colonialist policy and unwarranted interference with internal matters of the Middle East, causing one war after another – first in Afghanistan, then in Iraq, then in Libya, and now in Syria. Syriza politicians believed that this policy had led to the huge waves of refugees arriving in Europe and that Europe was to be blamed for this situation.<sup>24</sup> Inveterate in their populism, they accused European politicians of being responsible for the death of the thousands who lost their lives attempting to cross the Aegean Sea into Greece.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, the aim of this critical rhetoric voiced by leftist politicians was to link the two crises in Greece – the economic crisis and the financial crisis – with each other. When Syriza again won elections in September 2015, Prime Minister Tsipras did not hide that he was counting on EU financial assistance with regard to the refugee crisis.<sup>26</sup> His negotiation strategy essentially consisted in presenting the Union with the following alternative: either it provides financial assistance to Greece to address the economic crisis, which would mean remittance of a part of Greece's debt and reduction of debt servicing,<sup>27</sup> or it will have to deal with thousands of migrants who will travel through Greece to the wealthiest EU countries, mainly Germany and Scandinavian countries. The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Kotzias, supposedly spoke in a similar spirit: 'There will be millions of migrants and thou-

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<sup>23</sup> A. Evangelidis, *The Greek State's Response to the Refugee Crisis and the Solidarity Movement*, "Contemporary Southeastern Europe", No. 3/2016, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> *Χωρίς απαντήσεις ο Τσίπρας για το μείζον θέμα των προσφύγων*, <http://www.protothema.gr/politics/article/522524/sti-vouli-o-tsipras-gia-to-prosfugiko/> (last visited 8.12.2016).

<sup>25</sup> A.A. Nestoras, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> N. Stamouli, *Greek Minister Rejects Criticism Over Allowing Transit of Migrants*, "The Wall Street Journal", 25 October 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/greek-minister-rejects-criticism-over-allowing-transit-of-migrants-1445772236> (last visited 10.12.2016).

<sup>27</sup> *Greece's Tsipras to demand EU action on refugees*, 21.09.2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/europe-migrants-greece-tsipras-idUSL5N11R1DL20150921> (last visited 10.12.2016).

sands of jihadists who will come to Europe<sup>28</sup> – unless an agreement is reached with Greece.

The members of the European Commission and the Council of the European Union spoke with one voice, clearly stressing to Greek politicians that the country was responsible for controlling and registering all people applying for asylum in its territory. Increasing numbers of migrants arrived from Greece through Macedonia, Slovenia, Hungary and Croatia in Austria and Germany as well as further north, in Denmark and Sweden. On 25 October 2015, a mini-summit was held by the countries most affected by the influx of refugees. It was attended by the leaders of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania and Slovenia, as well as by the prime ministers of Macedonia, Serbia and Albania, the non-EU countries on the Balkan Route. The summit was not a success, however. Prime Minister Tsipras absolutely refused to expand refugee camps in Greece, but he officially agreed to EU countries' assistance to the Greek border guard.<sup>29</sup> He argued that the Dublin II Regulation was extremely prejudicial to his country given the ever deeper refugee crisis and that it should be renegotiated; he also requested greater relocation quotas and the establishment of a European Migration Policy, which would relieve the front-line countries of some of the burden.<sup>30</sup>

Brussels, however, saw through Syriza's attempts to use the fear of further refugee waves among Europeans to negotiate more lenient conditions of repaying the Greek debt. Individual EU Member States began accusing Greece of failing to observe the provisions of the Schengen Agreement. Criticism of Greece's policies became especially strong after the November terrorist attacks in Paris, when it turned out that two Jihadists who participated in these attacks came to Europe through Greece.<sup>31</sup> Some Member States proposed that Greece's membership in the Schengen Area be suspended for two years.<sup>32</sup> Given the lack of progress in Greece's policy towards refugees, other countries along the Balkan Route announced they would seal their borders. Hungary had done this even earlier – in September 2015; like in a domino effect, further steps were announced by Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia. Greece's situation was be-

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<sup>28</sup> V. Gaetan, *An Aegean Alliance. Greece, Turkey, and Migration Cooperation*, "Foreign Affairs", 29.09.2015.

<sup>29</sup> *Leaders Clash at migration mini-summit*, 26.10.2015, EuroActiv, <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/leaders-clash-migration-mini-summit-318840> (last visited 10.12.2016).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Tension grows between Brussels and Athens over Schengen rules*, EurActiv, 28.01.2016.

<sup>32</sup> *Greece told it could be kicked out of Schengen*, EurActiv, 3.12.2015.

coming increasingly complicated because it could turn out that unable to travel northward, hundreds of thousands of refugees would be trapped in Greece. This was the worst scenario for Greece, especially given its already very bad economic situation.

However, EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos stood up for Greece, stressing that the country had already taken steps to remedy the situation. The Council of the European Union also recommended remedial action to Greece. Criticism by the Member States put pressure on the government in Athens, and it asked the European Union for assistance. Greece also committed to opening five hotspots on the islands of Chios, Samos, Leros, Lesbos and Kos as well as two relocation camps: one in Sindos (Thessaloniki) and the second one in Schisto (Piraeus).<sup>33</sup> In February 2016 Greece once again tried to blackmail Europe by threatening to veto the agreement negotiated with the United Kingdom before the Brexit referendum, if other EU Member States close their borders to refugees. Brussels, however, did not let itself be pressured and reiterated the threats that it would exclude Greece from the Schengen Area.<sup>34</sup>

The argumentation used by Greek politicians increasingly involved playing the Turkey card, and Turkey was being blamed for the influx of migrants to the European Union (which, as a matter of fact, was justified to a certain extent).<sup>35</sup> Greece and Turkey had signed an agreement on readmission already in 2002, and in the document Turkey committed to accepting illegal migrants deported from Greece provided they had Turkish citizenship or had come to Greece through Turkey. Greek officials believed that Turkey should be the one to control its borders, verify migrants in its territory and provide them with necessary assistance.<sup>36</sup> Turkey, however, did not take such steps, and it was turning a blind eye to the activities of Turkish smugglers, who instructed the illegal migrants for whom they were organising transport to Greece that they should destroy their documents and pretend to be refugees, which made the process of identification difficult. Ankara, in turn, did not agree to accept people without

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<sup>33</sup> *EU Blackmail Worked: Greece to Rush for 5 Hot Spots & 2 Relocation Camps – But Many Question Still Open*, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/02/01/> (last visited 18.12.2016).

<sup>34</sup> R. Schabi, *Who Is 'Weaponising' the Syrian Refugees?*, "Al Jazeera", 15.03.2016.

<sup>35</sup> *Tsipras gears up refugee talks in Turkey*, "Ekathimerini", 4.11.2015, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/203121/article/ekathimerini/news/tsipras-gears-up-for-refugee-talks-in-turkey> (last visited 10.12.2016).

<sup>36</sup> *Turkey as a "Safe Third Country" for Greece*, European Stability Initiative, 17.10.2015, p. 2, <http://www.esiweb.org> (last visited 11.12.2016).



documents deported from Greece to Turkey, even if they had come to Greek islands from Turkey. Consequently, Greece was unable to conduct readmissions of illegal migrants to Turkey. The fact that Ankara essentially facilitated the movement of refugees into Greece was perceived by some Greek politicians as the implementation of the doctrine of former Turkish President Turgut Özal, who supposedly had once said that Turkey had no need to wage war against Greece – a couple million illegal migrants sent over from Turkey would be enough to finish them off.<sup>37</sup>

## 2. Turkey's position on the migration issue

From the very onset of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 its new authorities – especially President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – stressed that homogeneity was the basis of its functioning and identity. The inhabitants of the young state were to speak Turkish and profess Sunni Islam.<sup>38</sup> The application of this principle resulted in decisions that consolidated the uniformity of the country, such as exchanging population with Greece, when close to 1.5 million Orthodox Greeks were deported,<sup>39</sup> and the established practice of discriminating Kurds, who still have not been granted the status of an ethnic minority. The principle of national homogeneity still remains the foundation of Turkish policies – internal and foreign alike – which translates into Turkey's attitude to people attempting to cross the border.

Since 1961 Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, but it has adopted a protocol that limits its application to people from Europe, and specifically from Council of Europe member countries.<sup>40</sup> The decision on introducing geographic restrictions to the application of the Convention is related to Turkey's location in an extremely conflict-ridden region of the world, where various types of international crises keep emerging one after another, causing mass migrations.<sup>41</sup> In order to ensure national homogeneousness, Turkey sent a clear signal to the international community that non-European citizens would not receive proper care in

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<sup>37</sup> J.M. Nomikos, *Illegal Immigration and Organized Crime In Greece*, „Research Paper” no. 144/2010, Research Institute for European and American Studies, Athens, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> G. Seufert, *Turkey as Partner of the EU in the Refugee Crisis*, “SWP Comments”, January 2016, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> S.J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, New York 1977, p. 364 ff.

<sup>40</sup> One example of this is the fact that between 1995 and 2010, only approx. 20 people per year were granted refugee status, from: G. Seufert, op.cit.

<sup>41</sup> A. İÇduygu, *Turkey's Evolving Migration Policies: A Mediterranean Transit Stop at the Doors of the EU*, “IAI Working Papers” Istituto Affari Internazionali, September 2015, p. 7.

its territory, that they were not welcome. This does not mean, however, that no refugees arrived to Turkey. Located at the meeting point of three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa, and forming a natural corridor connecting the East with the West, the country has always seen refugees appearing at its borders, whenever there was a crisis in its neighbourhood. Some 1.5 million refugees came to Turkey from Iran after the 1979 Iranian Revolution; people from Iraq were coming during the Iran–Iraq War waged in the 1980s;<sup>42</sup> in 1991 almost 500,000 Iraqi Kurds fled to Turkey from Saddam Hussein's repressions; later in the 1990s, Bosniaks and Kosovars were looking for shelter at the Bosphorus, fleeing from the war-ridden Balkans.<sup>43</sup> The majority of these refugees either returned to their countries of origin when the situation settled down or went on to migrate to other countries, where they were hoping to be granted refugee status.

With growing numbers of refugees arriving at its doorstep, Turkey attempted to seal its borders. In early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Turkey decreased the permeability of the border with Iran by erecting observation towers. The other borders in the east (with former members of the Soviet Union) were well guarded as well. The 900 kilometres long border with Syria, in turn, had been mined and fenced off using barbed wire since the 1950s, when Turkey began fearing Syria's territorial revisionism concerning the Hatay Province.<sup>44</sup> What is more, military cooperation between Turkish and Syrian Kurds forced Turkish border guard to increase controls. These efforts, however, did not alleviate the problem of illegal entries to Turkey.<sup>45</sup>

The civil war that broke out in Syria in 2011 changed Turkey's policy towards refugees coming from the south. President Erdogan assumed that Syrian insurgents would quickly overthrow the Assad regime and that Turkey would gain political influence in that country by providing assistance to the opposition and accepting refugees. Therefore Turkey chose to pursue an 'open door' policy towards Syrian refugees. The Turkish government began setting up refugee camps at the border with Syria, initially refusing to accept international assistance for Syrians. This restriction was

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<sup>42</sup> N. Gokalp Aras, Z. Sahin Mencutek, *The International Migration and Foreign Policy Nexus: the Case of Syrian Refugee Crisis and Turkey*, "Migration letters", Vol. 12, No. 3/2015, p. 197.

<sup>43</sup> F. Düvell, *Turkey, the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Changing Dynamics of transit Migration*, "Mediterranean Yearbook", January 2013, p. 278.

<sup>44</sup> E. Lundgren Jorum, *Beyond Syria's Borders: A History of Territorial Disputes in the Middle East*, London 2014, p. 89 ff.

<sup>45</sup> B. Togral Koca, *Deconstructing Turkey's "Open Door" Policy towards refugees from Syria*, "Migration Letters", Vol. 12, No. 3, p. 215.

probably introduced due to the fact that Syrian insurgents were trained in these camps and encouraged to go back and continue fighting the Assad regime.<sup>46</sup> Turkey's policy towards Syria was an element of Ankara's bigger plans concerning the Middle East: to rebuild its major power position in the region and become the religious leader among Sunni Islamic countries. When these plans failed, and especially when relations with Egypt, Israel, Iraq and Iran deteriorated, Turkey's international position was considerably weakened. Erdogan's failure was especially clear with regard to Syria, where Assad received military support from Russia, which further intensified the exodus of Syrian people to neighbouring countries, Turkey in particular.<sup>47</sup> The situation in the region not only thwarted Ankara's political ambitions but also showed that Turkish politicians were unable to handle the refugee crisis.<sup>48</sup> Turkey began to cooperate with the UNHCR and allowed for UN presence in the country with the purpose of developing infrastructure covering the needs of the fleeing Syrians. Owing to cooperation with the UN agency and other non-government organisations, the Turkish government set up 25 camps along the border with Syria, with shelter for a total of 270,000 refugees.<sup>49</sup> This was, however, just a drop in the ocean, given that almost 2 million Syrians and Iraqis were fleeing from the civil war. The situation was spinning out of control beyond the Turkish government's capabilities to handle. In 2014 the government passed the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, introducing the 'temporary protection' status for Syrian refugees.<sup>50</sup> This status ensures access to medical care and, to a limited extent, to the Turkish labour market. However, the law does not work in practice. First of all, it does not provide for family reunification and forces refugees to deal with their situation on their own and work illegally. It does not offer any real prospects for settling down in Turkey because it can be repealed at anytime.

Syrians do not want to stay in Turkey. They are aware that they cannot return to their country because of the war, unlikely to end in the foreseeable future, and they choose to look for a place to start a new life. Turkey is not such a place, because it does not grant them refugee status, does

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<sup>46</sup> G. Seufert, op.cit., p. 6; N. Gokalp Aras, Z. Sahin Mencutek, op. cit., p. 203.

<sup>47</sup> *A Deal between Turkey and the European Union: Selling Syrian Refugees Short, Assessment Report*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, April 2016, pp. 2–3.

<sup>48</sup> N. Gokalp Aras, Z. Sahin Mencutek, op.cit., p. 202.

<sup>49</sup> N.A. Şirin Öner, D. Genç, *Vulnerability Leading to Mobility: Syrians' Exodus from Turkey*, "Migration Letters", Vol. 12, No. 3, p. 255.

<sup>50</sup> *No Safe Refuge. Asylum-Seekers and Refugees Denied Effective Protection in Turkey*, Amnesty International, London 2016, p. 13 ff.

not provide them with guarantees of accommodation, work, medical care; hence, they try to leave this country.<sup>51</sup>

The lack of real protection for refugees in Turkey contributed to mass-scale attempts to flee the country, reaching their peak in 2015. The Turkish government not only did not try to prevent this exodus but even turned a blind eye to the surge of human smuggling through the country's western border. This way it got rid of a problem it was unable to handle. The scale of human smuggling operations was increasing and turned into an entire industry. It is estimated that in 2015 profits of the Turkish smuggler mafia amounted to EUR 5 billion,<sup>52</sup> the cost per person being approximately EUR 2,500.<sup>53</sup>

The migration crisis of 2015 forced EU Member States to engage in talks with Turkey on border control and on limiting migration. The EU accused Ankara of failing to guard its borders and admitting to its territory illegal migrants from third countries, who try to enter Europe with the waves of refugees.<sup>54</sup> Under an agreement concluded with the EU, Turkey took steps to limit the influx of foreigners to its territory. In April 2016, Ankara ratified an agreement on readmission with Pakistan, which made it possible to even send Pakistanis from refugee camps in Greece back to Pakistan provided that they came to Greek islands from Turkey. Pakistan was also deemed a safe country by the EU.<sup>55</sup> The Turkish government is planning to sign similar readmission agreements with Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Morocco, Eritrea and Bangladesh.<sup>56</sup>

### 3. The EU–Turkey agreement

The EU recognised the problem pointed out by Greece that Turkey's border was insufficiently sealed. Already in 2012 the Union and Turkey signed an agreement on border cooperation providing for the exchange of information, joint operations and border guard personnel training (Memorandum of Understanding with FRONTEX), but the agreement did not

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<sup>51</sup> Z. Kutlu-Tonak, *Endless Escape: From Syria to Turkey, Then to Europe*, "Studies on Ethnicity and Nationalism", Vol. 16, No. 1/2016, p. 122.

<sup>52</sup> *No Safe Refuge. Asylum-Seekers and Refugees Denied Effective Protection in Turkey*, Amnesty International, London 2016, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> S.R. Powell, *EU/Turkey Refugee Agreement Benefits EU, Not Stranded Refugees*, "Washington Report on the Middle East Affairs", Vol. 35, Issue 4, Jun/July 2016.

<sup>54</sup> A. İÇduygu, op.cit., p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> S.R. Powell, op.cit., p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Summary of Regional Migration Trends. Middle East*, Danish Refugee Council, April 2016.

yield the expected results.<sup>57</sup> In December 2013 the EU and Turkey signed a readmission agreement, which entered into force only in June 2016. In order to pressure the government in Ankara into sealing its borders in the Aegean Sea, a special EU–Turkey summit on the migration crisis was held on 29 November 2015. The main goal European politicians wanted to achieve was to reach an agreement with Turkey that would ensure that refugees stay in Turkey and do not attempt to cross into the European Union. Brussels agreed to provide assistance to Turkey in the amount of EUR 3 billion to help Ankara finance the stay of refugees in Turkey.<sup>58</sup> In a show of good faith, in December 2015 the EU decided to open a new chapter in the accession negotiations with Turkey (the Economic and Monetary Policy – Chapter 17).<sup>59</sup> However, the expected results were not recorded – neither in December 2015, nor in January 2016, with thousands of refugees still arriving to Greek islands. The Greek President Prokopios Pavlopoulos<sup>60</sup> and Minister Jannis Muzalas<sup>61</sup> both accused Turkish authorities of turning a blind eye to smugglers who were openly organising transport to Greek islands. Both politicians were adamant that all illegal migrants needed to go back to Turkey, which is where they had come from. Greek politicians believed that Turkey was playing the key role in the migration crisis and that it depended on Turkey whether the flow of migrants would be stopped.<sup>62</sup> European politicians joined Greece in criticising Turkey as they were also disappointed with Ankara’s actions regarding the migration crisis and its failure to fulfil the promises made at the November EU–Turkey summit.<sup>63</sup>

But Ankara deliberately tried to play the migration card to its advantage in the relations with the European Union. Well aware that refugees were destabilising the political situation in many European countries, President Erdogan chose to use this fact to force Brussels to make concessions concerning accession negotiations and visa liberalisation.<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>57</sup> *FRONTEX Between Greece and Turkey: At the Border of Denial*, op.cit., pp. 19–21.

<sup>58</sup> *Thousands Reach Greece Despite Turkey-EU Refugee Deal*, “Aljazeera”, 16.12.2015.

<sup>59</sup> Ch. De Marcilly, A. Garde, *The EU-Turkey Agreement and Its Implications. An Unavoidable but Conditional Agreement*, “European Issues”, No. 396, 14.06.2016, p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> *Greek president accuses Turkish authorities of smuggling refugees*, “Deutsche Welle”, 18.01.2016.

<sup>61</sup> *Greece says Turkey turning blind eye to refugee smugglers*, “Ekathimerini”, 13.01.2016.

<sup>62</sup> A. Stangos, *Beware the refugee talks*, “Ekathimerini”, 1.12.2015.

<sup>63</sup> *Athens given deadline as EU looks to send more refugees back to Greece*, “The Guradian”, 10.02.2016.

<sup>64</sup> K.M. Greenhill, *Open Arms Behind Barred Doors: Fear, Hypocrisy and Policy Schizophrenia in the European Migration Crisis*, “European Law Journal”, Vol. 22, No. 3, May 2016, p. 325.

Turkish leader repeatedly blackmailed the EU; at some point, for example, he said the following words to European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker: 'Sorry, we will open the doors and say goodbye to the migrants'.<sup>65</sup> Turkey's attempts yielded the desired results.<sup>66</sup> The agreement signed on 18 March 2016 following negotiations between Brussels and Ankara gives some hope for an effective resolution of the refugee crisis. Turkey committed to sealing its borders and cracking down on human smuggling to Greek islands. All illegal migrants who had come to Greece (Greek islands) from Turkey after 20 March 2016 were to be sent back to Turkey. In return, the European Union declared, among others, that for each Syrian sent back to Turkey it would accept one Syrian whose status has been confirmed and regulated in Turkey (the 1:1 scheme),<sup>67</sup> but the number of Syrians accepted by the EU could not exceed 72,000.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the EU committed to speeding up the process of visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens after requirements set out by the European Commission are met. Initially, the liberalisation was set to take place at the end of June 2016 but this has not happened so far, given that Turkey failed to meet the required criteria. Apart from that, Brussels also committed to providing Turkey with financial assistance in the amount of EUR 3 billion by the end of 2017 to be allocated to creating suitable living conditions for refugees. Another EUR 3 billion was to be allocated to refugee assistance in Turkey in 2018. Additionally, the agreement provided for intensification of Turkey's accession process, including the opening of Chapter 33 of the negotiations (financial and budgetary provisions)<sup>69</sup> and in the near future other chapters as well (e.g., energy – 15, education and culture – 26, foreign, security and defence policy – 31). It should be noted, however, that while agreeing to Turkey's demands, the European Union kept stressing that at the same time Ankara needs to implement and observe the fundamental principles of European law. The agreement with Turkey, which came into

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<sup>65</sup> *Turkish President Threatens to Send Millions of Syrians Refugees to EU*, "The Guardian", 11.12.2016.

<sup>66</sup> Initially Cyprus attempted to block the concessions to Turkey, but it withdrew its demands to help its ally – Greece. Cyprus had demanded that Turkey recognise the Republic of Cyprus as an entity in the international arena in return for opening new chapters of accession negotiations.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/meetings/european-council/2016/03/17-18> (last visited 2.04.2016).

<sup>68</sup> Ch. De Marcilly, A. Garde, *op.cit.*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>69</sup> A. Di Bartolomeo, *EU Migration Crisis Actions with a Focus on the EU-Turkey Agreement*, "Policy Brief", Issue 4/2016, European University Institute Migration Policy Centre, pp. 4–5.

force on 20 March 2016, contributed to a considerable decrease in the influx of foreigners to Greek islands.

#### **4. Greek-Turkish relations after the conclusion of the EU–Turkey agreement on the refugee crisis**

The responsibility for implementing the agreement between the European Union and Turkey rested with the governments of Greece and Turkey. Of course, in the name of the EU the European Commission committed to providing financial, advisory and expert assistance, but it were officials from the two Aegean countries who had to make the effort to solve the refugee problem. The European Commission declared financial assistance for the Greek government in the amount of EUR 700 million by the end of 2018 to be spent on infrastructure maintenance and support for refugees.<sup>70</sup> Greece was to build infrastructure for 30,000 foreigners, and the UNHCR was to provide it for another 20,000 in Greece.<sup>71</sup> Hotspots were to act as closed centres, so that Greek officials are fully able to control the presence of foreigners on the islands.<sup>72</sup>

Alongside the EU–Turkey agreement, Brussels also negotiated closing of the border with Macedonia for refugees. Athens therefore found itself under pressure to solve the problem in its own territory.<sup>73</sup> The Balkan Route was closed and Greece was no longer able to offload the problem on other countries. The closing of the Balkan Route was also a clear sign to migrants that was impossible to go further north from Greece, and given that the country was deep in a crisis, it was not an attractive target for refugees.<sup>74</sup> There were, however, still some migrants in Greece (more than 45,500) who had not managed to leave the country by 20 March 2016 and therefore were neither subject to the EU–Turkey agreement nor able to leave the country northward along the Balkan Route; they could apply for asylum in Greece and be covered with the relocation procedure within the EU.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> There were plans to open another reception centre on Crete, among others. *Greece: Refugee Reception Could Break Down in October*, Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service, 12.09.2016.

<sup>71</sup> *Greece Reaches EU Cap: 50,411 Refugees, New Arrivals with Fast-Track Asylum*, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/03/21/> (last visited 18.12.2016).

<sup>72</sup> *The Situation of Refugees and Migrants under the EU–Turkey Agreement of 18 March 2016*, Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe, Doc 14028, 19.04.2016, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> *EU-Turkey Refugee Deal Hinges on Greece*, “Deutsche Welle”, 3.08.2016.

<sup>75</sup> *EU-Turkey Deal: What Will Happen with Refugees Trapped in Greece?*, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/03/20/> (last visited 18.12.2016).

In order to implement the EU–Turkey agreement, Greece had to adjust its asylum law. This concerned accelerating the processing of applications of those refugees who had come to Greece after 20 March 2016 and sending them back to Turkey. There was a problem, however: so far Greece had not considered Turkey a safe country. Since by the EU–Turkey agreement Brussels recognised Turkey as safe country subject to the implementation of the EU Asylum Procedures Directive, Greece also had grounds to consider it a safe country and return refugees there.<sup>76</sup> The European Commission argued that Turkey’s migration law, amended in 2014 and establishing the status of temporary protection for foreigners, met the criteria specified by the EU as sufficient guarantees for refugees coming to Turkey.<sup>77</sup> The Greek parliament, which met in early April 2016 to adopt the new asylum law (Law 4375/2016) did not explicitly state that Turkey was a safe country; it merely stated that refugees could be sent to the ‘first country of asylum’ or to a ‘safe third country’.<sup>78</sup> The parliament left the decision on whether a person should be sent back or not to the asylum committees that examined the applications.<sup>79</sup> It turned out that the members of these commissions, composed partially from state officials and partially from representatives of international organisations (e.g., the UNHCR), did not decide to send migrants back to Turkey, as they believed that Turkey could not be considered safe for refugees since it did not give them proper protection.<sup>80</sup> Only after the composition of these commissions was changed – under pressure from Brussels – they started issuing decisions on sending refugees back to Turkey.<sup>81</sup>

In the operational dimension, initially the Greek–Turkish cooperation concerning readmission of refugees was going smoothly. Officers of the Turkish border guard were sent to the Greek islands with reception centres (previously referred to as hotspots) in order to participate in joint verification of refugees. It should be noted in this context that Greece failed to negotiate the presence of Greek police officers in control centres in

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<sup>76</sup> *No Safe Refugee. Asylum-Seekers and Refugees Denied Effective Protection in Turkey*, Amnesty International 2016, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> *European Union: Implementing the EU-Turkey Statement – Questions and Answers*, “Asia News Monitor”, 29.09.2016.

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.asylumineurope.org/news/04-04-2016/greece-asylum-reform-wake-eu-turkey-deal> (last visited 18.12.2016).

<sup>79</sup> A. Dimitriadi, *Deals Without Borders: Europe’s Foreign Policy on Migration*, European Council on Foreign Relations Brief Policy, April 2016, p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> M. Karnitschnig, J. Delcker, *Europe’s refugee Time Bomb*, <http://www.politico.eu/article/europes-refugee-time-bomb-merkel-turkey-deal-news/> (last visited 18.12.2016).

<sup>81</sup> *EU Presses Greece to Change Asylum Appeal Committees that Consider “Turkey Is Not a Safe Country”*, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/06/11/> (last visited 18.12.2016).



Turkey.<sup>82</sup> The cooperation between the two countries resulted in readmission of a couple hundred people over the first months after the agreement came into force; these were mostly people from Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, India, Congo, Sri Lanka, Morocco, Nepal, Somalia, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine.<sup>83</sup>

Local social groups in Turkey were very critical of the agreement itself as well as of the first transports of refugees sent back. The opposition was particularly strong in the town of Dikili, where Turks set up a reception centre. The inhabitants of the town held protests caused by, on the one hand, concern for financial losses due the presence of refugees in the region, as it is a popular tourist destination, and on the other hand, the losses resulting from the end of the smuggling business.<sup>84</sup>

The positive effects of the cooperation between Greece and Turkey in refugee matters were undermined in consequence of a change of the Turkish policy after the failed coup of 15 July 2016. Startled by the coup attempt in Turkey, European politicians failed to quickly react to these events, focusing on observing rather than supporting Erdogan's government.<sup>85</sup> The EU first condemned the coup only three days after the attempt, and President Erdogan criticised European leaders for failing to immediately condemn the attack and support his government. In his opinion, the West showed disloyalty towards Ankara.<sup>86</sup> His outrage at the European leaders' attitude became even greater when they criticised the steps the Turkish government was taking against the opposition – Erdogan chose to use the failed coup as a pretext to deal with his political opponents and launched repressions against people opposing the governance of the Justice and Development Party, mass arrests of policemen, military men, teachers and university lecturers. The government also started suggesting that the moratorium on the death penalty could be repealed. In response to this, EU officials and European politicians made it clear that these actions were distancing Turkey from the EU and hampering further accession negotiations as well as making it impossible for the EU to abolish visas for Turkish citizens. The main reason against the abolishment

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<sup>82</sup> *Greece Reaches EU Cap: 50,411 Refugees, New Arrivals with Fast-Track Asylum*, op.cit.

<sup>83</sup> *European Union: Implementing the EU-Turkey Statement – Questions and Answers*, "Asia News Monitor", 29.09.2016.

<sup>84</sup> *Protests in Greece and Turkey over Refugee Deal*, "Al. Jazeera", 3.04.2016.

<sup>85</sup> It should to be stressed that over the last decades, the military staged a number of coups in Turkey (e.g., in 1960, 1980 and 1997), and they were always successful.

<sup>86</sup> *EU Migrant Deal Not Possible If Turkey's Demands Not Met, Erdogan Says*, "Ekathimerini", 8.08.2016.

of visas quoted by the European Commission was Turkey's failure to fully meet the requirements in this regard,<sup>87</sup> especially concerning liberalisation of its very restrictive anti-terrorism law, which the government used against the opposition, among others.

In response to the EU's position, Erdogan claimed that some 3 million refugees were staying in Turkey and that he did not have to keep them there; he warned that yet another exodus of foreigners to Europe might take place.<sup>88</sup> Turkey's blackmail worked on the EU, and in September 2016 High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini and Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn visited Turkey.<sup>89</sup> However, the visit had little impact on Erdogan's position.

Meanwhile, the number of refugees arriving on Greek islands increased after the coup. Turkish police officers were withdrawn from Greek islands, the official reason being the need to reinforce those who fought the coup supporters.<sup>90</sup> The readmission procedure was *de facto* temporarily suspended as Turkey was not ready to take in refugees,<sup>91</sup> and it was resumed only on 17 August.<sup>92</sup> The number of people attempting to make it to Greece fell significantly by September 2016, mainly because of worse weather conditions.

The relations between Brussels and Ankara deteriorated even further after the European Parliament's resolution of November 2016, in which it called on the EU to suspend the accession negotiations with Turkey.<sup>93</sup> The position adopted by the European Council at the summit of 15 December 2016 had a much gentler overtone. The leaders of EU Member States declared the desire to continue talks with Turkey and scheduled another summit with Turkey devoted to cooperation in the sphere of migration policy, to be held in January 2017.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> The EU made a total of 72 conditions, of which Turkey fulfilled 68.

<sup>88</sup> *Refugee Flows to Greece Increase after Turkish Coup Attempt, as Erdogan Plays the Migrant Card Again*, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/07/29/> (last visited 16.12.2016).

<sup>89</sup> T. Arango, K. Shoumali, *Refugees Pour Out of Turkey Once More as Deal with Europe Falters*, "The New York Times", 15.09.2016.

<sup>90</sup> *Refugee Flows to Greece Increase...*, op.cit.

<sup>91</sup> *Withdrawal of Turkish Officers from Greece Has Hit EU-Turkey Refugee Pact*, UNHCR Officials Says, "Ekathimerini", 1.09.2016.

<sup>92</sup> *Greece returns two batches of migrants to Turkey in 24 hours*, <http://www.efes.com/> (last visited 16.12.2016).

<sup>93</sup> European Parliament resolutions are not binding from the point of view of the EU decision-making process, it is only a form of political declaration.

<sup>94</sup> <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/meetings/european-council/2016/12/15/> (last visited 16.12.2016).

However, relations between Turkey and the EU remain tense. Erdogan keeps threatening Brussels with unleashing a wave of refugees unless the EU meets the conditions of the agreement of March 2016. Greece remains the main aggrieved party in this scenario because, as a front-line EU country, it will be the one most affected by the effects of that decision. It seems that Turkey is treating migrants as a form of weapon<sup>95</sup> against the European Union carries a great risk of escalating the tensions between Athens and Ankara. Greece is getting increasingly concerned about losing sovereign control over the Aegean islands.<sup>96</sup> These concerns are fuelled by rightist politicians, who warn that establishing huge refugee camps on the islands could cause a crisis between the Greek population and the foreigners, who have a different culture and do not respect local customs. The islands are constantly plagued by crime, theft and robbery. What scares Greeks the most, however, is the scale of this migration. For example, in 2015 the island of Samos, inhabited by some 33,000 Greeks, saw the arrival of 445,000 migrants (which means there were more than 10 ‘foreigners’ per one original inhabitant), and in 2016 – approximately 100,000.<sup>97</sup> Had they stayed on the island longer, it would have lost its Greek character; moreover, the local Greeks, having become a minority in their own territory, would perhaps not have been able to stand such pressure and would have simply left the island, which would in fact have cost Greece sovereign control over Aegean islands. Such concerns emerged in the Greek society already at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, when President Turgut Özal for the first time threatened that Greece could be flooded by illegal migrants from Turkey, used as the most effective weapon against Greeks. His vision was continued by Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, who envisioned the establishment of a ‘Turkish World stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China’.<sup>98</sup>

The rhetoric used by present-day Turkish politicians remains largely in line with Özal’s doctrine. Both the former president of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoglu, and the current one have publicly mentioned on many occasions that they were planning to increase Turkey’s influence in Eu-

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<sup>95</sup> K.M. Greenhill, op.cit., pp. 325–327.

<sup>96</sup> E. Papataxiarchis, *Being There. At the Front Line of the European Refugee Crisis*, “Anthropology Today”, No. 3/2016, pp. 3–7.

<sup>97</sup> Data from Greek police, [http://www.astynomia.gr/images/stories//2016/statistics16/allodapwn/11\\_statistics\\_all\\_2016\\_methorio.png](http://www.astynomia.gr/images/stories//2016/statistics16/allodapwn/11_statistics_all_2016_methorio.png) (last visited 16.12.2016).

<sup>98</sup> G. Tüysüzoglu, *Strategic Depth: A Neo-Ottomanist Interpretation of Turkish Eurasianism*, “Mediterranean Quarterly”, Spring 2014, p. 90.

rope by exporting Islamic religious institutions<sup>99</sup> and, of course, through migration.<sup>100</sup> In one of his speeches, Erdogan declared: 'Creating a new, big Turkey is accomplished by helping to resettle a large, sympathetic community of Syrian brothers and sisters'.<sup>101</sup> Erdogan also envisions his country as playing the key role of the religious centre of Sunni Islam for the nations inhabiting the Middle East and the Balkans.<sup>102</sup> Such statements cause particular alarm among Greeks as they are concerned about being surrounded by Islam – all the more so as the Muslim population in the Balkans is constantly growing. The situation in the relations between Greece and Turkey was further exacerbated by a statement of Erdogan's, who supposedly demanded a referendum in Western Thrace on whether it should remain a part of Greece.<sup>103</sup> While the Turkish government denied to have made such a statement, mistrust in the relations between the two countries is growing.<sup>104</sup>

However, Turkish politicians not only promote neo-Muslim attitudes but also start calling for a revision of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which regulates the external borders of Turkey. Of course, the promotion of dangerous revisionist ideas was initially aimed at supporting Turkey's ambitions of using the civil war in Syria and Iraq to expand in the Middle East, especially as regards annexation of the oil-rich Mosul. But now Turkish politicians began increasingly challenging the borders in the Aegean Sea, claiming that the Aegean Islands should not have been given to Greece in the first place. This rhetoric appeared in the Turkish political debate already in 1974, but it disappeared again when the relations between the two countries improved in 1999, only to resurface quite recently. At the moment, the narration challenging the Greekness of the Aegean Islands is present in the statements of both Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and President Erdogan himself.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, Greek

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<sup>99</sup> I.A. Lamb, *The Gates of Greece: Refugees and Policy Choices*, "Mediterranean Quarterly", June 2016, p. 83.

<sup>100</sup> V. Gaetan, *An Aegean Alliance. Greece, Turkey, and Migration Cooperation*, op.cit.

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>102</sup> B. Park, *Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence?*, "International Affairs", No. 3/2015, p. 595.

<sup>103</sup> *Erdogan's Expansionism Claims "From Thessaloniki to Mosul, from Gaza to Siberia"*, 17.10.2016, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/10/17/> (last visited 16.12.2016).

<sup>104</sup> *Athens News Agency Fires Turkey Correspondent over Erdogan's 'Referendum in Thrace'*, 17.10.2016, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/10/17/> (last visited 16.12.2016).

<sup>105</sup> *Imia are 'Turkish Soil' Says Turkish FM, Prompting Greek Reaction*, "Ekathimerini", 1.12.2016, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/214212/article/ekathimerini/news/> (last visited 16.12.2016); *Erdogan Criticizes Lausanne Treaty, Says 'We Gave Away The Islands' to Greece*, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/09/29/> (last visited 16.12.2016).

politicians do not ignore the Turkish provocations; Greek Minister of Defence Panos Kammenos responded defiantly: ‘If Erdogan wants to abolish the Treaty of Lausanne then we’ll return to the Treaty of Sevres’,<sup>106</sup> the latter providing for the occupation of Turkey by the Allied Powers after World War I.

The tensions between Greece and Turkey keep escalating, Turkish aircraft keep violating Greek airspace, and Turkish warships keep sailing close to Greek islands.<sup>107</sup> The present situation starts resembling the events of 1996, when the two countries came to the brink of war. With the addition of the ‘migration bomb’, the situation could easily spin out of control, leading not only to a confrontation in the Aegean Sea but also spilling over to the still unstable Balkans, causing direct threat not only to Greece but to other EU countries as well.

## Conclusions

Stabilisation of the situation in the region is in the interest of all the actors involved in the political events taking place in the Aegean Sea. This is especially true of the tensions caused by the exodus of migrants attempting to make it through Turkey to the European Union as well as of the bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey. Until recently, Turkey remained a predictable country, with close ties to the West, aspiring to EU membership; it was also seen as a stable partner within NATO. The political changes that have taken place on the Turkish internal arena as well as the international challenges in the region have weakened the ties between Turkey and the European Union and those between Turkey and the United States. Turkey strives to improve its international position by working on several fronts. It shows that it is not anchored in Europe but open to cooperation with Russia and the countries of the Middle East. It is governed by politicians who have started using a strong nationalist rhetoric for internal reasons, causing strong international repercussions and antagonising its partners in the West. It is a country that has begun using the migration problem as a weapon in its relations with Europe in general, but with Greece in particular.

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<sup>106</sup> *Kammenos Sends Stern Message to Ankara from Grek Army Border Outpost*, “Ekathimerini”, 5.12.2016, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/214231/article/ekathimerini/news/> (last visited 16.12.2016).

<sup>107</sup> *Turkish F35 Order Underlines Greek Constraints*, “Ekathimerini”, 5.12.2016, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/213451/article/> (last visited 16.12.2016); *Greece Complains to NATO over Turkish Submarines in Aegean*, “Ekathimerini”, 8.10.2016, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/212680/article/ekathimerini/news/> (last visited 16.12.2016).

Since the 1970s, we have been witnessing a local arms race between Turkey and Greece as well as repeatedly resurfacing conflicts. If the 'demographic bomb' is added to the list of the problems already present, such as the unresolved dispute about the division of the Aegean Sea and repeated violations of Greek borders by Turkey, the situation could soon get out of control and disaster could ensue. Greece is very susceptible to provocation. Under the 'protectorate' of the European troika, the society is particularly sensitive about its independence, the economic crisis has damaged Greek national pride, and in its long history Greece had often felt humiliated and threatened by Turkey. The Greek culture, language, religion survived several hundred years of Turkish occupation and prevailed in the unstable region of the Middle East. Greece is a country that considers itself the bulwark of Christendom that has long defended Europe from Islam encroaching from the east. It is a country that is extremely focused on maintaining homogeneity and very suspicious of 'strangers'.

Given these attitudes of the two countries and the heated internal and international situation, tragedy could ensue and spill over beyond the Aegean Sea into the Balkans, and this is something Europe had already experienced many times. It is therefore in the interest of both the European Union and Greece itself to maintain dialogue with Turkey. But Turkey cannot go about just blackmailing Europe, threatening it with a demographic weapon. The European Union has a weapon as well, an economic weapon, in the form of the EU–Turkey customs union, which provides Ankara with a wealthy recipient of goods, thus contributing significantly to Turkey's economic success. Losing a partner like this would cause irreparable losses to the Turkish economy. Turkey has no alternative for exports of its products in its regional neighbourhood. Turkey needs Europe – a Europe that is stable and wealthy. With its international neighbourhood unstable, it needs predictable long-term allies, and these can mainly be found in European countries. It certainly cannot be Russia, with which Turkey will sooner or later enter into a dispute over the influence in the Caucasus, and it cannot be any of the unstable countries of the Middle East.

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