

EU SUMMIT, REFUGEES AND TURKEY: A PROPOSAL

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Very rarely were so many summits squeezed in so short a time as in June 2021. Let us name a few: the G7 meeting in Cornwall, the NATO Summit in Brussels, Jo Biden’s meeting with Vladimir Putin in Geneva, the EU meetings with the leaders of United States and Canada and finally, the EU Summit under German Presidency and Angela Merkel’s last “high voltage” foray as Chancellor. A hyperactive period signaling the gradual return to diplomatic “normalcy” and the beginning of the end of the pandemic.

Such a news “storm” understandably overshadowed the publication of the United Nations High Commissioner’s Annual Report on June 18th, 2021. However, this Report correlates to the section on refugees in the Conclusions of the EU Summit. The UNHCR Report confirms what is already common knowledge: in the conflict between the rules of international law safeguarding the right of an examination of individual asylum applications of all those forced to leave their countries, with the restrictive legislation, unilaterally adopted by the destination countries during the pandemic, it is the latter that almost always prevails.

During the year 2020 the number of people forced to abandon their homes did not decrease: it went up 4% compared to 2019, approaching 83 million people with those under 18 making up 42% of the total number displaced. During the peak of the pandemic 160 countries shut down their borders and 99 among them allowed no exceptions for individuals seeking international protection. Two thirds of those seeking asylum originated from five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Turkey is at the top of the list of countries accepting refugees.

The Joint Statement of the EU Summit on forced migration summarizes the elaborate web of agreements and networks that the Union has established over time with the migrant countries of origin or transit finalized and bolstered during the pandemic. It calls upon its member states to further reinforce and expand it during 2021 so as to include key countries for the control of migrant routes. It concludes by condemning “any attempt by third countries to instrumentalise migrants for political purposes.” It is evident that this paragraph primarily targets Turkey, the country that organized, at the end of February 2020, a massive exodus of migrants to Europe through the Greek-Turkish border along the river Evros/Meric. But Morocco is also a target. A few weeks ago, the latter, reacting to the transfer and medical treatment that Spain gave to the leader of the Polisario Front, the organization fighting to free Western Saharan territory held by Morocco, relaxed surveillance over the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and the latter was overwhelmed by crowds of Africans seeking asylum in Europe.

Ankara’s annoyance with the Joint Statement does not arise only from that particular point. Items in that document referring to a future update of the Association Agreement, uninterrupted financial aid for the benefit of Syrian

refugees and the need for “high politics” exchanges with the Turkish leadership on issues like climate change, anti-terrorism and public health were overshadowed by the unusually critical references to the malfunctioning of democratic institutions in Turkey, disrespect for human rights and persecution of political parties and the Press as well as the unreserved denouncement of the Turkish plan for a two-state solution in Cyprus.

The decisions of the Summit, the “cornering of Erdogan” and the dominant perception of Turkey as a “gatekeeper” of the “refugee warehouse” (a warehouse occasionally replenished by Turkish activity in its southern borders) so that asylum seekers might not knock on the door of Europe, also shows lack of a clear future path in Euro - Turkish and consequently Greek - Turkish relations. Nevertheless, it is in the interest of all Europeans and of Greece in particular to attempt an opening to Turkish society. In 1991, thirty years ago, the Institute of International Relations (IIR) of Panteion University founded only two years before, took the initiative to organize a Greek-Turkish Conference in Athens the first with the participation of Turkish academics. ** The refugee question and the way Turkish political leadership and Turkish society handle it is an issue that concerns us all. Let us begin a public dialogue with those Turkish academics who treat the refugee question primarily as the humanitarian issue that it is. Let’s not wait for all initiatives and solutions to bilateral relations to come from the Ministries of External Affairs and Defense.

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** Conostas, D. (ed.) The Greek Turkish Conflict in the 1990s (London: MacMillan, 1991)