

Policy perspectives of Turkey towards return migration: From permissive indifference to selective difference

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Abstract

This is the first paper of its kind to look at policy perspectives on return migration in Turkey, based on an analysis of official documents and a series of interviews with Turkish authorities, government officials and academics. We identify several perspectives which range from the absence of a specific legislation to control return migration, to the concrete attempts to regulate the return of a selected group of migrants, namely the highly skilled. Subsequently, we show that these perspectives are built on a series of sometimes paradoxical arguments regarding economic development, past experiences about development initiatives and the country's international objectives.

Keywords: Return migration, temporary migration, economic development, Turkey, European Union.

Introduction

Return migration has been high on the agenda of the development community as a way to promote development in origin countries (Olesen 2002, Cassarino 2004, Vertovec 2007). The potential of return migration for the economic growth of the origin countries as well as human capital accumulation of the migrants themselves has been put forward as an important tool for development (de Haas 2005, Ghosh 2006). Many countries—both developed and developing—currently try to attract their nationals back to contribute to growth and development in their countries of origin through the transfer of knowledge, skills and investment (World Bank 2005, UNDP 2009, IOM 2006).

In this context, it is of great importance to bring in the perspective of origin countries to understand how they perceive return migration. In this paper, we focus on the perspective of an important migrant source country

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for the European Union: Turkey. Namely, we discuss Turkish policy perspectives toward return migration, as it is a country with prior immigration experience to Western European countries initiated by the so-called “guest worker” programs. As this is the first attempt to compile key resources and information to investigate the Turkish perspective, we argue that it is important to use the term “policy” in the general sense as it allows us to discuss both the absence and implementation of specific policies (Zolberg 1978). We accordingly show that the policy perspectives on return migration in Turkey include, on the one hand, the absence of a specific legislation to control return migration, and the concrete attempts to regulate the return of a selected group of migrants on the other hand.

We summarize these policy perspectives based on desk research and in-depth interviews conducted with academics, policy makers and government officials in Turkey in May 2010. Data collection and analysis included interviewing representatives from the Department of Foreign Relations and Abroad Worker Services General Directorate of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the Department of Turks Abroad and Relative Communities (under the office of the Prime Ministry), a former Turkish attaché to the Netherlands, an academic expert on Turkish government policy and an academic expert on international relations and migration. In addition, we conducted a literature review and online analysis of government websites and documentation to support this paper. We start the paper with a brief history of Turkish immigration to Europe and other destination countries since the early 1960s. Then, we continue with the analysis of Turkey’s policy perspectives, and discuss the different and sometimes paradoxical arguments used in the justification of these perspectives.

Contextualizing return migration in the Turkish case: History and geography of Turkish migration

Gmelch (1992) refers to return migration as a “natural completion of the migration cycle”. The Turkish case, wrought by decades of migration, has seen both this “natural completion of the migration cycle” as well as the permanent settlement of migrants in the destination country. Initially, emigration from Turkey was seen as part of a migration and development strategy in the post-WWII period. Turkey’s First Five-year Development Plan (1962-1967) had the explicit aim to “export surplus labour power” and to encourage the transfer of migrants’ earned capital for new investments in the origin communities as part of the development strategy (Penninx 1982, Abadan-Unat 2002).

With the combination of flourishing economies in Germany, the Netherlands and France and post-WWII labour shortages, Turkey looked to immigration as a way of reducing demographic and labour market pressure (Castles & Kosack 1973, Paine 1974, Gitmez 1983). Before any official labour agreements were signed, the labour market of Western Europe was already starting to draw workers mainly through worker recruitment by firms and general job

availability (İçduygu 2008). The first official labour agreement was signed with Germany in 1961, and other agreements followed shortly after with Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands in 1964, and France in 1965 (Franz 1994).¹ The outflow of workers reached its height in the 1970s and by the end of 1973, the Turkish Employment Services had sent more than 780,000 workers to Western Europe—80 per cent of which were sent to Germany (Sayari 1986).²

By 1974, labour recruitment had ceased, due in large part to the oil crisis and its resulting economic downturn, but labour migrants in Europe were generally granted permanent residence permits and the right to family reunification. Labour migrants numbers declined sharply—from around 790,000 between 1961 and 1974 to 13,000 between 1975 and 1980—which indicates the severity of the situation (İçduygu & Sirkeci 1998). After this period,³ a new type of migration to these countries emerged, namely family reunification and formation (Ayhan 2000, Unver 2010). Since many migrants had gained permanent residence and the right to family reunification in their new European homes, many began to send for their families in Turkey, which characterized the main wave of Turkish migration to Europe in the 80s and 90s (Hecker 2006).⁴ In the 1980s, migration to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) stayed strong but declined in the 1990s due to increased unskilled labour competition from Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkish emigration also expanded to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Within this history of migration, return migration followed related patterns with specific peaks after the 1973 oil shock, due to the economic downturn in Europe (Abadan-Unat 1988). The estimates of return migration are limited (Akgunduz 2008), yet Gitmez (1983) approximates that there were 190,000 returnees between 1974 and 1977, and 200,000 between 1978 and 1983. In comparison, Sirkeci, Cohen and Yazgan (2012) argue that there have been almost 3 million returnees only from Germany in the past five decades, while Martin (1991) estimates the return of 1 million migrants between 1960 and 1990. It is also important to note that in the 1980s, Germany gave incentives (mainly cash) for Turks to return to Turkey (Ayhan 2000, Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugiland & Polit 2005). However, returnees from MENA countries have always been high due to stipulations in labour contracts that often did not provide an opportunity for rehire and did not give the right to remain after contracts were finished.

İçduygu (2009) explains that the return of the 1970s and 80s is different than the return of the 1990s and 2000s. The latter return is more circular or

¹ Other agreements were signed with the United Kingdom in 1961, Sweden and Australia in 1967, with Switzerland in 1971, with Denmark in 1973, and Norway in 1981 (Franz 1994).

² Although the bulk of migration during this period was to Western Europe, Turkish migration to Australia, the Middle East and North Africa also took place (İçduygu and Sirkeci 1998).

³ This “guest worker” period of migration was characterized mainly by the emigration of low skilled rural population mainly for economic development (Penninx 1982).

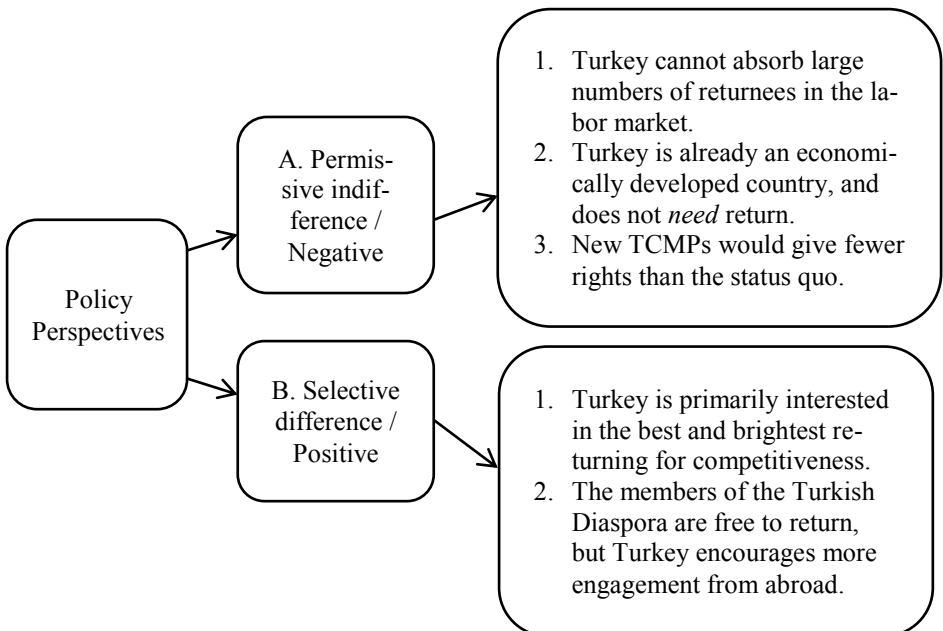
⁴ This period is characterized by the migration of women and children who joined the mainly male workers, and this has changed the demographic makeup of migration from Turkey.

transnational in nature; people often return to Turkey, but often times the return is not permanent. Instead, people tend to go home for visits or for a few years and then travel back to Europe again. Many retirees, for instance, live half of the year in Europe and half of the year in Turkey. There are some instances of the children of migrants who grew up in Europe returning to Turkey to ‘get back to their roots’ or because their foreign education has a higher payoff in the Turkish labour market. Since the 1980s, the development of private universities has also been valuable in attracting Turkish scholars, scientists and foreign graduates back to the country. Despite these ‘natural’ flows initiated by individuals, the attitude of the Turkish State towards return is not as positive as one may expect. In the following sections, this view is discussed in more detail.

Perspectives regarding permanent and temporary return migration in Turkey

Although return migration—temporary and circular migration, in particular—has been part of the international migration history of Turkey, little has been said with regard to the current policy perspective of the country in connection with return migration. The research question of this paper is motivated by our curiosity to understand the attitude of the Turkish State pertaining to different types of return migration, especially in times when the positive influence of temporary (and circular) migration initiatives have been reintroduced (Martin 2003, Castles 2006).

Figure 1. Framework of Turkish policy perspectives on return migration



Therefore, we specifically looked at the framework for policy perspectives, differentiating them by: A) indifferent or negative, or B) selective or positive to permanent return, or temporary and circular migration (programs) (see Figure 1). Within the framework of indifferent or negative perspectives, we specifically discuss three justifications for this view: 1) Turkey cannot support or absorb large numbers of returnees in its labour market; 2) Turkey is already an economically developed country and does not need return for development; 3) If new temporary and circular migration programs (TCMPs) were to be put in place, they would give Turks fewer rights than those they currently enjoy in Europe. Within selective or positive policy perspectives, we examine two specific justifications: 1) Turkey is interested in only attracting the best and brightest back to increase innovation and competitiveness; and 2) Turkey is interested in more general diaspora engagement from abroad with some possible return.

Indifferent or negative policy perspectives

No Need nor Place for Permanent and Temporary Return Migrants

We first looked at the perspective of Turkish authorities regarding permanent and temporary return migration in relation to the country's economic development. Interestingly, several arguments against the necessity of permanent or temporary return migration are put forward based on sometimes conflicting evaluations regarding the country's current economic situation. An important aspect of temporary migration is remittances, or money that is often sent by migrants to their families in the home country. Before discussing Turkey's current expectations in regards to remittances, it is important to mention past expectations during the "guest worker" programs. Previously, labour migration was seen as a development strategy whereby Turkish citizens living abroad, especially those living within the EU, were expected to provide economic support to Turkey through financial remittances and investments. In other words, migrant remittances were seen as important revenue, in addition to foreign aid and loans (Martin 1991, Penninx 1982).

Today, however, there is a decline in the importance of remittances, mainly due to the fact that Turkey has become well-integrated within the global economy. Hence, receiving remittances from Turkish citizens living abroad is no longer a top priority (Bilgili and Siegel *forthcoming*). This idea is also reflected in the statements of our respondent from the Department of Turks Abroad and Relative Communities, which is a good example of the state's discourse on economic develop and migration: "*We do not see our migrants living abroad as a 'currency exchange point,' since Turkey is one of the biggest countries in the*

world. We have become the 17th biggest economy.⁵ Turkey is not a country which is in need of remittances to survive.”

From this quote, it is safe to assume that state officials no longer define Turkey as a “developing” country. This is also demonstrated by the fact that Turkey has a thriving development cooperation unit which was established in 1985 and has grown into a key development aid donor with a focus on least-developed countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). Moreover, an allusion is frequently made to the self-definition of the country in terms of development levels. For example, when respondents were asked about temporary return migration programs and the potential added value of such initiatives for the country, our respondent from the Department of Turks Abroad and Relative Communities reacted: *“Turkey should not be compared with third world countries. Our citizens have the right to live where ever they want. There are Turks living in 155 different countries. We will not demand Turks to return to Turkey for development reasons.”* In a sense, our respondent argued that being dependent upon the country’s migrants for economic development and the transfer of knowledge and investments is in contradiction with the definition of an economically more established country, and consequently there is an indifference towards return migration.

Conversely, in spite of the economic growth (GDP growth of 9.2% in 2010 and 8.5% in 2011⁶) the country has witnessed in the last years, Turkey is still challenged with unemployment (10.3% in 2011) and inflation (7.8% in 2011). According to the academic expert on Turkish migration interviewed, Turkey remains reserved when attracting current migrants back to Turkey: *“It is more advantageous for Turkey that migrants who go abroad stay there. Everybody knows this. There is not much that they can bring back here. Because we are concerned with unemployment... Think about all the migrants currently living abroad. Almost half of the 5 million Turks living abroad are working. How could Turkey employ these people if they would return to Turkey? No country could deal with this easily. So, Turkey is not encouraging return migration.”* This suggests that although Turkey defines itself as an economically developed country, it still has economic challenges, especially in regards to unemployment, and is not in a situation to absorb the return of current migrants in the labour market. The permissive indifference of the country towards return migration can be explained by this concern regarding the economic challenges.

Free Mobility between Turkey and Europe instead of Return Migration

Turkey’s standpoint differs significantly from many other origin countries that are interested in return migration due Turkey’s relationship with Europe, which dates back to the 1960s. In the first section of this paper it was mentioned that Turkey has signed bilateral agreements with many European coun-

⁵ The interviewee is referring to the IMF database evaluations on GDP in 2009.

⁶ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>

tries regarding labour mobility, and it is important to interpret the Turkish perspective towards TCMPs within the framework of these agreements. The complex question in this context is whether TCMPs are compatible with the rights that are provided to migrants by the existing agreements. Our interviewee from the Foreign Relations and Abroad Worker Services General Directorate put emphasis on the *Ankara Agreement (1963)*⁷ and the *Additional Protocol (Article 41)*, suggesting that the contracting parties must refrain from introducing new restrictions on the freedom of establishment and right to receive services. Moreover, according to *Association Council, the Decision of 1/80 and Article 7*, legal employees have the right to renew their permission to work, as well as have their residence renewed in line with their right to work.

Thus, there is a negative attitude toward temporary return programs, since the introduction of such initiatives could restrict the current rights of migrants. As a candidate country, Turkey's objective is to expand the rights of Turkish migrants even more in Europe rather than committing to programs that hinder Turkey's complete integration into the European Union.

Selective or positive policy perspectives

Reverse Brain Drain: Return of the Best and Brightest for Competitiveness

When it comes to the return of highly skilled migrants, there are concrete programs that have been recently introduced to encourage young graduates who have studied abroad to come back to Turkey. These initiatives are indicative of Turkey's selective attitude toward return migration. While a lack of concrete plans for the temporary return of low and medium skilled labour migrants back to Turkey is explained away with a myriad of reasons, various programs attracting highly skilled migrants have already been put in place. For instance, the International Postdoctoral Research Scholarships Program initiated by The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK) encourages young scientists who have successfully completed their doctoral studies abroad on natural sciences, medical sciences, social sciences and humanities, and engineering and technological sciences to return to Turkey for research. The program offers a relatively high salary for a research project lasting up to 2 years.

"Brain drain" has been a subject of debate for several decades in Turkey, yet there was not much attention paid to the issue in practice. In the last a few years, however, we observe that activities to reverse brain drain have gained speed. For example, in collaboration with TUBITAK and Turkish universities, the government has been actively tracking successful academics and researchers living abroad in order to cooperate with them to apply for the European Union funds for research. Moreover, in 2011, TUBITAK organized workshops abroad (Washington, New York and Chicago) on the theme of reverse brain drain. During these workshops TUBITAK established contact

⁷ <http://www.abgs.gov.tr/index.php?p=117&l=2>

with more than 200 researchers and academics to discuss new ways through which the return of highly skilled Turkish citizens can be realized.⁸

Voluntary Return Opportunity and the Blue Card

Many Turkish migrants living abroad are naturalized in their country of residence. In cases where double nationality acquisition is not allowed, Turkish migrants must make a choice in terms of citizenship. In 1995, law No. 4112⁹ was passed to extend additional rights for those Turkish migrants who chose to become citizens of their country of residence in order for them to maintain more contact with Turkey. Several amendments were made to the law in 2004 and 2009, as various problems were faced by those who have applied for the Blue Card (previously called the Pink Card). With the most recent changes made in May 2012, those who have resigned from Turkish citizenship previously as well as their minor children can apply for the “Blue Card,” which grants Turks living abroad extensive rights that exempt them from restrictions that apply to foreigners. Some of these rights include the right to reside in Turkey, to practice a profession or to purchase real estate. Blue Card owners therefore have rights similar to Turkish citizens, although certain restrictions remain, such as not having the right to vote or to hold public office. Blue Card owners are also exempt from military service.

The director of Turks Abroad and Relative Communities Department states that a database will be developed in order to track all Blue Card applicants who have resigned from Turkish citizenship (Law No. 5490). Over the years, the Blue Card scheme has expanded to incorporate more individuals and gives access to more services and rights to those living abroad. It is seen as an integral part of the country’s Diaspora Engagement Policies. Consequently, although we have not observed any concrete measures regarding permanent return, such initiatives allow for the diaspora to be involved in their home country while abroad, or to return if/when they wish. It is worthwhile to mention that the official discourse of the government encourages Turkish migrants to integrate successfully in the destination countries while maintaining contact with their homeland¹⁰, and thus return migration is left to the choice of individuals rather than being an objective of the state.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to discuss the case of Turkey, an origin country that has an enduring labour migration history with Europe and has aimed in the past to benefit from migration for development purposes. We specifically focused on the policy perspectives of Turkey in regard to return into selective/positive

⁸ <http://www.tubitak.gov.tr/tr/haber/tersine-beyin-gocuyle-248-arastirmaci-turkiyeye-geri-dondu>

⁹ <http://www.ytb.gov.tr/index.php/mavi-kart.html>

¹⁰ http://www.mfa.gov.tr/yurtdisinda-yasayan-turkler_.tr.mfa

and indifferent/negative, as well as explained the rationale for these differing perspectives. What is particularly interesting is that Turkey's attitude toward return migration and development discussion has changed over time, and there are often conflicting arguments about the economic situation of Turkey (e.g. economic development, unemployment levels). It can be concluded that Turkey is not interested in new labour agreements because these programs would put their citizens in a worse position—in regard to the accession to the EU—than what they currently experience. At the same time, Turkey has begun to court its diaspora to a greater extent in hopes of creating greater engagement without necessarily returning. Where return is of interest, it is only with required to the highly qualified or highly skilled, and these programs have been put in place to attempt to attract these selected few back to Turkey. In conclusion, we find that Turkey only wants migrant return under very specific, selective conditions. For the rest, they approach the subject in a *laissez-faire* manner.

In this paper, we have examined return migration policy in its own right. However, return policies are generally part of larger diaspora engagement policies (Agunias & Newland 2012). As this paper is the first case study of a country in economic transition with a significant migration history, key areas for future research would be to look at other countries going through a similar transition, and analyse how they see return and their diaspora's contributions to the country. An interesting question in this regard is: where does return stand within new thinking on diaspora engagement more generally?

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