



CHAPTER 21

**PRESSURES THROUGH INFLOWS:  
AN OVERVIEW OF TÜRKİYE'S  
MIGRATION GOVERNANCE**

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**Deena SALEH**

# PRESSURES THROUGH INFLOWS: AN OVERVIEW OF TÜRKİYE'S MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

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## **Abstract**

The migration landscape in Türkiye has undergone significant transformations, as of increasing inflows and outflows throughout the years. Through adopting a theoretical framework, this review study discusses the evolution of Türkiye's migration governance policy, and how local and international events influenced its development. We briefly examine the features of the migration pattern in Türkiye and the main periods during which the country received a high influx of immigrants. This helps us understand how migration governance changed during each period and what integration mechanisms Türkiye employed to manage the migration flows, particularly after the Syrian Civil War. Irregular immigration is also a pressing concern that Türkiye must address, through a selective approach. Also, a multifaceted approach through dispersed migration departments distinguishing migrant profiles and diverse needs can enhance coordination efforts and policy coherence. This review study contributes to a better understanding of Türkiye's migration governance and offers recommendations for better migration governance.

## **Keywords**

*Migration Governance, Türkiye, Immigrants, Migrant Integration*

## **Introduction**

Population movements have been a main feature of human history. Economic crises, political turmoil, and social conflicts have driven migration waves and associated pressures, signaling a challenge of the 21st century. This, in turn, led states and governments to formulate multidimensional migration governance frameworks, which refer to the combined set of legal norms, laws, policies, and traditions as well as organizational structures (subnational, national, regional, and international) and the relevant processes that shape and regulate states' approaches about migration in all its forms, addressing rights and responsibilities and promoting international cooperation (IOM, 2019). Türkiye represents an example of a country with a complex migration history. Türkiye currently represents a destination, transit, and origin country for mixed migration flows. The recent rise in both regular and irregular migration poses a range of challenges, including social conflict, economic pressures, and criminal activity.

Through labor programs, several Turkish migrants moved to Europe and Germany, between the 1960s and 1980s. However, the country became a destination and transit country by the 1970s, which continued onward. Türkiye receives irregular migrants from other parts of the Middle East, such as African countries, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. After the Syrian Civil War, the country transformed into a major recipient of immigrants, particularly, refugees. A migrant is defined as a person moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from their habitual place of residence, irrespective of whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary. Refugees are one subgroup of more vulnerable individuals who are forced to flee their countries due to violence, wars, or persecution (Wolff, 2021, pp. 7-8; Damaschke-Deitrick & Wiseman, 2021, p. 96).

The Syrian refugee crisis marked a turning point, by transforming Türkiye into a host nation. This influx, however, presents both challenges and opportunities, depending on the way the country manages such inflows. Starting with inflows as a challenge, Wang, and Kim (2020) mention some social and economic costs of immigration, such as increased crime, job losses, intergroup conflicts, and burdens on the welfare system. Morgül and Savaşkan (2021) argue similarly that domestic resources can be restrained when the host country attempts to integrate many immigrants by providing education, employment, and healthcare services. An inflow of immigrants, however, can also be considered an opportunity. For Hooghe et al. (2006), migration is a dynamic phenomenon that increases diversity and generates large economic benefits. Similarly, Clemens (2011) argues that immigration barriers increase efficiency losses due to the global wage differences that exist between workers with identical skills, globally.

Despite the long history of migration experience, Türkiye has faced challenges in developing a comprehensive migration policy, particularly in the integration of immigrants. In 2014, Türkiye had a low ranking on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), indicating a relative failure of Türkiye's approach to immigration, which MIPEX described as 'immigration without Integration.' (MIPEX, 2020). To understand Türkiye's current migration policy and evaluate its effectiveness, this theoretical study adopts an explorative approach to examine Türkiye's migration governance through its dynamic migration inflows and outflows. By examining the history of migration patterns, and the development of migration governance in Türkiye, we aim to highlight the main challenges and opportunities related to migration governance in Türkiye and provide some recommendations for future migration policies.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Overview of Migration Governance**

Migration governance includes combined frameworks of legal norms, laws and regulations, policies, and the relevant processes that shape and regulate states' approaches to migration in all its forms, addressing rights and responsibilities and promoting international cooperation. (IOM, 2019, p. 16). The goal is to help countries manage migration flows.

The Migration Governance Indicators (MGI) initiative launched in 2015 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has three principles to help states set systematic requirements for good migration governance. Compliance with international law and fulfillment of migrants' rights. Countries should implement a 'whole-of-government' approach. Also, collaboration with partners to address migration-related issues.

Moving to the Turkish context, we can see the relevance of the MGI framework through its emphasis on complying with international law, adopting whole-of-government approaches, and making evidence-based policy decisions. As the country is currently a host to a large population of migrants, it must consider diverse ways to manage such influxes. To understand how Türkiye has applied the principles of migration governance under the MGI framework, it is important to examine the country's migration patterns.

## **History of Migration in Türkiye**

Türkiye's migration history has distinct periods, each shaping the subsequent migration policies adopted by the country. Türkiye's history as a host to displaced populations, dates to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with the arrival of around 100,000 Sephardi Jews fleeing Spain. This tradition continued throughout the 20th century, with substantial migration flows from the Caucasus and the Balkans between 1877 and 1914, following the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1978). Between 1922 and 1945, Türkiye received about 1.1850.000 individuals from the Balkans and Greece, and approximately 900,000 individuals from Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Bosnia (1988-2000) (Meşe, 2019).

These inflows to the late Ottoman Empire reflected the early experience Türkiye had with migration before the establishment of the Republic. They also played a role in shaping subsequent migration patterns, specifically during the early years of the Republic. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, migration and settlement policies aimed at increasing the country's then-scarce population. Migration was the most significant vehicle for building a nation-state and a homogenous society. As Kirişçi (2003) argues, the new elite wanted to build a pure new Turkish ethnic identity. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Law of Settlement in 1934 encouraged immigration of people of Turkish culture and descent.

The 1934 Settlement Law provided a general framework for migration management in Türkiye. Immigrants were defined as 'individuals of Turkish origin and culture who came to settle in Türkiye' (Üstübici, 2019). Therefore, the law prioritized immigrants who either officially belong to ethnic groups that can be easily assimilated into the Turkish identity such as Bosnian, Balkan, and Bulgarian, or those who were Muslim Turkish speakers. The major mass movements include 384,000 individuals from Greece (1922-1938), and 800,000 individuals from the Balkans (1923-1945) (Türkiye's Presidency of Migration Management, 2023).

Migration movements to Türkiye can be divided into four historical periods: fertilization (1979-1987), maturation (1988-1993), saturation (1994-2000/2001), and degeneration (2001 onwards) (İçduygu & Aksel, 2012; İçduygu & Sert, 2012).

### **The Fertilization (Initial) Period (1979-1987)**

During the 1950s and 1960s, Türkiye's development strategy prioritized industrialization through import substitution industrialization (ISI), leading to increased migration from rural to urban areas. To address unemployment, Türkiye signed labor agreements with European countries, allowing Turkish labor emigration through a guest worker system. The first National Development Plan (NDP) (1963-1967) considered migration to address the economic pressures of population and poverty (Abadan-Unat, 1995). Sending Turkish labor to Europe was sought as a solution to the problem of excess labor. It was also a means to generate foreign currency, which the country needed for its economic and social projects at the time. In the 1970s, Turkish guest workers in Europe began to settle more permanently (Brewer & Yüksek, 2006), while the Iranian Revolution in 1979 resulted in approximately 1.5 million Iranians entering Türkiye. Some settled in Türkiye and eventually became Turkish citizens (Tolay, 2015; Üstübici, 2019; İçduygu & Sert, 2012).

### **The Maturation (Growth) Period (1988-1993)**

During the maturation period (1988-1993), Türkiye received large inflows of more than half a million people from neighboring countries. These included asylum seekers from Bulgaria and Kurds from Iraq, fleeing political turmoil. Another group was represented by 'shuttle migrants' from the Soviet Republics who came for economic activities. Notably, between 1980-1990, Türkiye received about 300,000 ethnic Turks after the 'Revival Process' campaign against the Turkish minority in Bulgaria by the communist regime. The Gulf War (1990-1991) resulted in an inflow of Iraqi refugees to Türkiye, which continued until 2003 (Tolay, 2015; Üstübcü, 2019; Kirişçi, 2003).

The military coup in 1980 had a significant effect on emigration patterns in Türkiye. In the early 1980s, the largest group of non-EU university graduates living in Germany was represented by highly qualified Turkish migrants (Kılıç & Biffl, 2021; Brewer & Yüksek, 2006).

### **The Saturation (Aging) Period (1994-2000/2001)**

In the 1990s, Türkiye witnessed a rise in irregular immigration from former Soviet Bloc countries. The country had to adopt more robust legal regulations to address the increasing numbers of migrants and to harmonize regulations with the European Union (İçduygu & Aksel, 2012). In 1994, the Regulation on Asylum was motivated by the escalated migration flows that were previously transit migrants but either overstayed or illegally remained in Türkiye. It aimed to provide a national framework to manage asylum seekers by international legal principles (İçduygu & Aksel, 2012).

The 1994 Regulation stated that through collaborative efforts with the UNHCR, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) would be the responsible body for making decisions on refugee status determination (RSD) (Tolay, 2015; Üstübcü, 2019). Under the 1994 Regulation, Türkiye granted temporary asylum to non-European asylum seekers and took part in the process of resettlement of those who received refugee status in third countries (İçduygu *et al.*, 2009). A significant obstacle to effective migration policy formulation, however, was the lack of sufficient statistical data on incoming migrants (İçduygu, 2004).

In 1999, negotiations for Türkiye's joining the EU highlighted the importance of social, economic, and political stability of Türkiye's alongside issues such as migration policy and immigration legislation. The existing migration policy asylum system adopted by the Turkish government received criticism, which led the country to introduce changes in its migration policy. In 2002, Türkiye introduced a law that criminalized human trafficking and smuggling, imposing stricter penalties on perpetrators. In 2003, the Law on Work Permits of Foreigners introduced stricter sentences for smuggling and human trafficking (Üstübcü, 2019; Kirişçi, 2003).

### **The Degeneration Period (2001-present)**

Until the 2000s, Türkiye did not have a comprehensive migration policy framework. By the early 2000s, the country developed the regulation of immigration that incorporated capacity-building projects and new legislation to complement the existing institutional and administrative infrastructure. In 2001, the Turkish government collaborated on several initiatives with the European Union (EU) countries on border-management projects (İçduygu & Aksel, 2012).

In 2013, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu) was implemented to establish a comprehensive framework for addressing both regular and irregular migration flows, including those related to humanitarian emergencies. By 2014, the migration policy in Türkiye was more coherent.

The Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2014-2018) stated the favorable effect that economic developments and open-door policy had on Türkiye's migration policy. The plan addressed concerns such as illegal migrants, transit migration, and efforts to monitor and track foreigners arriving in Türkiye. In addition, the plan highlighted the problem of population uneven distribution and accumulation in cities, owing to internal and external migration. Recommendations were proposed to renew urban areas and propose new regulations on urban transformation. Also, the plan emphasized the importance of considering different social groups and their needs, not only the migrants (Polat, 2021).

## **Türkiye's Migration Policy and The Future**

Türkiye's migration governance has evolved in response to domestic and international conditions. Throughout history, the country served as a host nation for displaced populations. This experience shaped the way its migration policy developed. Applying the MGI framework principles reveals attempts by Türkiye to align with international considerations and adopt a more comprehensive migration policy.

Türkiye's migration policy often changed to balance national concerns with its international responsibility. The second principle of the MGI framework of a whole-government approach can also be noticed in Türkiye's migration policy's improvement over time. For example, in 2018, three policy councils under the Turkish Presidency have been assigned to the migration field. These councils are the Local Governance Policies Council, the Security and Foreign Policy Council, determining Migration Policies, and the Social Policies Council (Salihoğlu, 2021).

Finally, Türkiye collaborated with international organizations throughout the years on migration issues, particularly with the European Union. For example, Türkiye signed an agreement with the EU in 2016, under which it pledged to support efforts to prevent irregular migration into the EU (Kaya, 2023). Türkiye's role as a buffer for the EU was highlighted by the European migration and refugee crisis in 2015-2016.

### **Access to Labor Markets**

Securing the right to work remains a major problem that migrants and refugees in Türkiye. While Türkiye introduced the Law on International Labor Force No. 6735 in 2016 to define and employ policies on labor migration and integration, there are still inconsistencies. For example, the Turkish government introduced the Turquoise Card to facilitate foreign employment. However, regulations under Article 60 of the Constitution, work permits are restricted for some temporary protection holders.

### **Healthcare and Education**

Türkiye adopted a successful migration policy, in terms of health services and education to ensure the essential healthcare and security needs of migrants and refugees (Meşe, 2019). The General Health Insurance covers all health services for migrants given that they hold a valid residence permit with a condition of one year of stay in Türkiye as a minimum in addition to a legal address (IOM, 2018). Additionally, under Article 42 of the Turkish Constitution, it is stated that no one can be deprived of their right to education. Foreigners, regardless of their legal status, enjoy rights the same as Turkish citizens (IOM, 2018).

Secondly, the Turkish government should keep track of updated statistics on migrants, regular and irregular. Further coordination might be suggested between the General Directorate of Civil Registration and Nationality in both the Ministry of Interior and the DGMM. Said differently, the Turkish immigration policy should analyze immigrants well. For example, immigrants who voluntarily come to Türkiye and those displaced due to war would need a diverse set of education packages tailored to their needs. Therefore, a one-for-all strategy should not be available for all immigrants and refugees.

Thirdly, Türkiye offers education services to migrants and migrants. However, the education provided should target more than academic schooling or job opportunities. Refugees and migrants would need more orientational programs and cultural awareness campaigns to help them adapt to the host community's sociocultural environment. Türkiye's migration policy should ensure that education systems and instructors are well-prepared for the diverse backgrounds and humanitarian needs of migrants. In addition to policies and institutional agreements, future research should include the internal and domestic communities as major actors in the migration governance structure., Individuals in host countries might exhibit hostility toward migrants if they are conceived as an economic threat to the community's welfare.

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education systems and instructors are well-prepared for the diverse backgrounds and humanitarian needs of migrants. İçduygu et al. (2004) suggested that the Turkish immigration policy should analyze immigrants well. For example, immigrants who voluntarily come to Türkiye and those displaced due to war would need a diverse set of education packages tailored to their needs. Therefore, a one-for-all strategy should not be available for all immigrants and refugees. This can be facilitated by further coordination between the General Directorate of Civil Registration and Nationality in both the Ministry of Interior and the DGMM.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

Migration movements in Türkiye show four historical periods that were marked by significant migration inflows and sometimes outflows. It might be the case that the geographical location has positioned Türkiye as a destination country, welcoming different displaced populations from neighboring countries. The country received an influx of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees due to global events such as the Iranian Revolution, the Gulf War, the Cold War, and the Syrian Civil War. These influxes, however, were accompanied by periods of outflows, including skilled Turkish labor migration to Europe and Germany starting from the 1960s.

The continuous change in Turkish migration patterns at different times necessitated corresponding changes in the migration policy and governance. The Turkish government committed to international agreements and adopted domestic laws to manage migration movements. However, it took decades to formulate a comprehensive migration policy. Notably, the concern for 'integration' seems to have been signified only after the Syrian refugee crisis. The European Union's generous financial and administrative support for Türkiye to develop migration governance started in the 1990s but has grown significantly after 2012.

Wolff (2021) recommends that countries receiving in-migration integrate any migration policy into the domestic policy cycle, by focusing on policy instruments, processes, and actors incorporated in migration management. Any public policy should be evaluated in terms of its migration-related objectives, through an evidence-based policy approach. This suggests that Türkiye should adopt an institutional framework that combines different sub-ministerial migration departments. Appropriate measures are needed to enable the active participation of migrants in social and cultural life, alongside equal opportunities in the labor market.

Despite the current humanitarian approach, especially toward the Syrian refugees, a more selective migration policy might be necessary for Türkiye in the future to avoid further social conflicts and manage its economy. Future research should also include the internal and domestic stakeholders in migration governance. Individuals in host countries might exhibit hostility toward migrants and refugees if they are conceived as an economic threat to the community's welfare.

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