

Visa liberalisation and Turkey - What progress?

Policy Dialogue – 1 February 2013

Summary

Visa liberalisation is fast becoming the most sensitive issue in EU-Turkey relations, with lack of mutual trust a major stumbling block preventing progress on the issue, heard participants in this Policy Dialogue.

Full Report

Visa liberalisation could become the most important and most sensitive issue in EU-Turkey relations in 2013. The issue is fundamentally about trust, but it is also about process, said **Gerald Knaus**, Chairman of the **European Stability Initiative**.

He described lack of trust as a major stumbling block, both in terms of whether the Turks trusted the process, and whether EU member states trusted Turkey. For trust to be built, the formal process must begin: there is only so much you can do outside of the process, he said.

Knaus said that 2012 had seen a surprisingly huge rise in the number of asylum applications to the EU from the Balkans, which led some member states to call for visa restrictions to be imposed again.

In Germany, Sweden and Luxembourg, although the success rate is very low, the application process is very long – and during this time, asylum seekers live in and receive benefits from the destination country, he explained. Meanwhile in Austria, the process is very quick, and more people are granted asylum – this shows that long procedures are not necessarily more just, he argued.

Human rights are central to the approval process, but being considered by the EU as a 'safe' country of origin is very important too, Knaus said.

He said that between 1991 and 2008, the Balkan countries had tried to argue that the EU was being unfair and had insisted that they deserved visa liberalisation. But in 2008, they changed their approach by embracing the EU's conditions and pushing the security partnership argument – with great success, he added.

Turkey's attempts to try something similar got off to a bad start in 2011, when the Justice and Home Affairs Council conclusions made no mention of 'visa liberalisation' and Cyprus added a line stating that a readmission agreement would not automatically lead to visa liberalisation, Knaus said.

He claimed that the EU was being discriminatory in that Turkey was not receiving equal treatment to the Balkans. But a breakthrough came in 2012 when the European Commission started drafting a roadmap to visa liberalisation, which is now ready, he said.

The next steps will be the official handover of the roadmap, once Turkey and the EU have signed a readmission agreement – so the ball is now in Turkey's court for the first time in several years, said Knaus, arguing that if the Balkans could implement a roadmap, then surely Turkey could too.

Key conditions that must be met to allow progress to be made include a reduction in the number of illegal migrants crossing the Turkey-Greece border, said Knaus, describing the border as the single biggest entry point into the EU for illegal migrants.

He called on Turkey to invest greater resources and carry out more checks at the border.

Knaus claimed that it would not be as difficult or expensive as Ankara was claiming for Turkey to accept the readmission agreement – nor would it be all that hard to implement. With cooperation and some effort, the border should be perfectly possible to control, he argued, claiming that Turkey's fears of having to readmit tens of thousands of migrants were in fact an implicit admission that it was failing to control the border.

He said that it would be in Turkey's own interests to reform its asylum system and pointed out that in any case the issue was already on the domestic agenda, given the complete failure of the current system to provide asylum seekers with adequate protection.

Meanwhile, he said that 16% of Turkish asylum claimants were granted asylum in the EU. He argued that the figure ought to be more like 2%, putting it on a par with the Balkan countries, and called on the Turkish government to make more progress on issues like freedom of expression and Roma rights.

Doing so would advance Turkey's own interests too, because it must make progress on these areas in order to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession, Knaus argued.

Admitting that the readmission agreement and visa liberalisation were inextricably linked, he advised Turkey to make economic and legal arguments in favour of visa liberalisation. At decision time, no one member state will have a veto, he said, advising Turkey to concentrate on attracting the 229 votes it needs in the Council, rather than worrying about winning over the more reluctant countries like Cyprus, Austria and the Netherlands.

There is a trustworthy intention on the part of the Council to move towards visa liberalisation – and this decision was made unanimously, said **Henrik Ankerstjerne**, Deputy Permanent Secretary in the **Danish Ministry of Justice**.

Member-state diplomats would like to get started with greater cooperation on justice and home affairs issues with Turkey, said Ankerstjerne, insisting that there was great desire to make progress at operational level, which would help to boost trust between the two sides.

He stressed that there would be no formal introduction of the visa liberalisation process before the readmission agreement had been signed. EU member states cannot understand why Turkey won't sign it, he added.

Turkey seemed to view the issue as reciprocal. But EU-Turkey relations cannot be seen in that way, because they are different from bilateral relations and Turkey should behave in the manner of a candidate member, the Danish official argued.

Turkey has an enormous self-interest in cooperating on these issues, which would improve justice and human rights in the country itself, said Ankerstjerne, expressing surprise that Turkey did not seem to see it like that.

He argued that transmigration poses a security challenge and therefore it would be in Turkey's own self-interest to reduce the amount of transmigration taking place. He insisted that member states were not asking Turkey to apply higher standards than those already in place in the EU or other candidate countries, and stated clearly that nothing more was being asked of Turkey than other candidates.

Ankerstjerne expressed his belief that as soon as Turkey came to be seen as a 'dead end' on the route to the EU, transmigration would end, which would benefit Turkey itself. The same had already happened in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, he argued.

He concluded by repeating that member states were keen to move ahead on these issues, and said the EU was waiting for Turkey to make the next move.

Turkey is experiencing strong growth and strong demographic trends, but its demographics will start to decline in the decades to come, according to **Elizabeth Collett**, Director of the **Migration Policy Institute Europe**.

Collett pointed out that contrary to common perceptions in Europe, Turkey was no longer just a country that sent migrants to the EU. She said its strong economic performance meant that it was now attractive to migrants in its own right.

Collett described Turkey as an historic regional crossroads, and called on the country – for its own good – to develop immigration, integration and border management systems that were fit for purpose.

She argued that signing the readmission agreement would not pose such a threat to Turkey if the above systems were already in place.

Europe is experiencing demographic decline, but its areas of economic growth are still attracting migrants, said Collett, describing the politics of immigration as a complex business in which numbers ruled.

She said that a combination of the dynamics of the immigration debate, negotiations over extending the Schengen area and diminishing mutual trust had paralysed member states, leading to the total absence of long-term policy or thinking. She spoke of a 'Buyer's Remorse' at EU level, in the sense that policies did not seem to be satisfying member states' needs.

Collett said that the political priority had for too long been 'to stop the flow' rather than how to actually deal with asylum seekers' arrival.

According to her, this sense of short-termism is preventing long-term planning regarding the future demographic needs of the EU in order to maintain economic growth. She admitted that long-term net migration of Turks into the EU in the region of 1-4.4m was likely, but argued that this would be beneficial and had to be seen in those terms.

Meanwhile, the readmission agreement would reduce the flow of illegal migration, she argued.

Collett concluded by saying that the notion that the EU wanted Turkey to be a buffer zone was *de facto* true given Turkey's geographical position, and admitted that Ankara would have to accept that.

Discussion

Turkey is the only candidate country negotiating membership with the EU not to have visa liberalisation. Even some countries with no prospect of membership have it. However, Turkey must sign a readmission agreement with the EU before the visa liberalisation process can start, said **Amanda Paul**, policy analyst at the **European Policy Centre**.

Responding to claims that democracy, human rights and freedom of expression in Turkey had not really improved since the opening of EU accession negotiations in 2005, **Gerald Knaus** of the **European Stability Initiative** admitted that some areas were obviously problematic, but stressed that progress had been made in others.

Asked about the roadmap to visa liberalisation, Knaus said that Turkey's roadmap should be no different to that extended to the Balkan countries, and argued that the EU was right not to pack all the outstanding human rights issues into the roadmap. Otherwise, Turkey would have accused the EU of failing to treat it in the same way as Serbia, he suggested.

He stressed the importance of explaining to Turkey that the EU was not imposing extra conditions, and argued that freedom of expression should not be seen as a concession in any case.

Henrik Ankerstjerne of the **Danish Ministry of Justice** said Turkey had to make progress on women's minority and migrants' rights at the same time as becoming an economic powerhouse. He warned that its immigration and integration systems were outdated and unfit for purpose and would have to be updated. Should Turkey do so, it can become a source of inspiration for other countries undergoing transformations from countries of migration to countries of immigration, like India.

Asked what the consequences would be should Turkey fail to sign the readmission agreement, **Gerald Knaus** said the immediate consequence would be a huge loss of time, because the EU had gone out of its way to produce a visa liberalisation roadmap for Turkey, and was now expecting to see results from the Turks.

European friends of Turkey's membership bid would be very disappointed if Turkey were to fail to sign the readmission agreement, he said, stressing the importance of making progress soon in order to ensure that the 50th anniversary of the Association Agreement between the EU and Turkey in September does not take place against the sourest possible background.