

# What a new refugee crisis would mean for Turkish politics

*The fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban has raised tensions between the EU and Turkey over how refugees from the conflict should be accommodated. **Toygar Sinan Baykan** assesses what large numbers of Afghan refugees travelling into Turkey may mean for Turkish politics and the country's relations with the EU.*

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has become one of the most important host countries of refugees in the world. According to official figures, the country currently hosts [almost four million](#) Syrian refugees. The real number [may be much higher](#) than this.

Many refugees have ended up working in Turkey's informal economic sector in [grim conditions and for extremely low wages](#). In addition, as the number of refugees has increased and their stay in Turkey has been extended by the continuing conflict in Syria, refugees have increasingly started to face [social discrimination](#) and [mistreatment](#). In some cases, the tension between Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens has [turned violent](#).

It goes without saying that these developments have constituted a substantial challenge for a country of some 80 million people that lacks economic innovation, productivity and stability, and which has a political system that is far from institutionalised and democratically consolidated.

Adding fuel to the fire, the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban after the sudden withdrawal of international forces has triggered a new influx of refugees. While Turkey still represents a more hospitable destination than other states such as Iran or Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours, [the arrival of Afghan refugees in Turkey](#) may have a further destabilising effect on Turkish politics.

## Turkey's refugee crisis

One of the most puzzling aspects of the situation in Turkey is that despite some unpleasant incidents, the country has managed to absorb such a huge number of refugees surprisingly well. This is particularly surprising as Turkish politics exhibits some [deep-rooted nationalist sentiments](#) with both secular and religious overtones.

The Turkish experience is also notable in light of [the rise of the radical right across the world](#) and the [tremendous impact](#) radical right parties have had on mainstream political parties. Moreover, Turkey's success cannot simply be attributed to [good governance](#) as there have been some clear deficiencies in how the government has approached the issue. So, what does explain the remarkable durability that Turkey has shown in the face of the refugee crisis and the significant demographic changes that have occurred within its population?

There are three interrelated factors that may have helped to limit the economic, political and social costs stemming from the influx of refugees into Turkey. One of these factors is that, unlike many conservative and Christian democratic parties in Europe, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has long kept its distance from exclusionary nationalism, mainly due to the Islamist ideological traditions that underly the party's roots. Refugees from Muslim countries have been seen through a prism of religious solidarity by the AKP elite and presented as such to the party's base.

A second factor that may have rendered Turkey's AKP successful in absorbing discontent against refugees is the party's level of organisation. The AKP's [powerful party organisation](#) has successfully penetrated the capillaries of Turkish society using a variety of [populist](#) and [clientelistic](#) strategies. The pro-refugee ideology of some of the party's leading figures has therefore been effectively disseminated to citizens.

Third, [widespread informal social and political relations](#) based on patronage and clientelism and [a broad informal economic sector](#) may have helped Turkey perform better in absorbing the economic and social costs of the refugee crisis so far. This is despite official figures indicating that the country remains economically vulnerable and hindered by substantial inefficiencies in its bureaucratic capacity.

However, none of this means that Turkey is immune to extremism and exclusionary nationalism. In the last few years, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP has increasingly become dependent on a radical right party, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP – *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*), to protect its hegemonic position in the Turkish political system. While the AKP's senior figures are still trying to articulate their pro-refugee stance, this minor radical right party's leadership recently asserted that [some refugees should leave Turkey](#).

It would not be surprising to see Erdoğan, a ruthless pragmatist when it comes to holding on to power, pursue a radical shift in policy regarding the refugee issue if he deems it necessary for success in future elections. It should also be noted that there are strong [nationalistic tendencies in parts of the AKP's electoral base](#) which could put the party leadership under further pressure.

The more worrying trend in Turkey is, however, the widespread and systematic anti-immigration and anti-refugee discourses and policies now being articulated by almost all of the opposition parties on both the left and right. Recently, a provincial mayor affiliated to the Republican People's Party (CHP – *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), a party built on secular nationalist and social democratic principles, received widespread criticism after trying to implement [a tenfold increase in the cost of water for refugees](#).

## Turkey and the EU

Given the fragile situation that refugees in Turkey find themselves in, Europe's stance on the issue is deeply concerning. Left-wing movements in Europe, who have traditionally taken pro-refugee positions, have been [undermined](#) by the [crisis of social democracy](#) and a long process of [party system cartelisation](#). Meanwhile, conservative and Christian democratic parties – with the partial exception of [Angela Merkel's CDU in Germany](#) – have increasingly attempted to secure electoral gains by [abandoning moderate views toward refugees](#) and emulating the policies of smaller radical right parties.

It is this context, combined with a lack of political imagination and transformative leadership among the mainstream right in Europe, that has led EU leaders to pursue [humiliating bargains](#) with Turkey over the refugee issue. The result is that the EU has now ceased to be the democratic anchor that it used to be within Turkish political discourse.

Now, regardless of partisan positions, the average Turkish citizen [views EU membership](#) as a distant or entirely unlikely prospect. This is unsurprising given the largely hardline stances of European states regarding immigration and refugees, coupled with Turkey's own political, economic and social problems stemming from the deficiencies of AKP rule. As such, Europe's radical right is not only winning in Europe, but appears to be having success in Turkey as well.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)*

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