



MAGYC

Migration Governance and Asylum Crises

# Perceiving Migration Crises: A view from the European neighbourhood

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**MAGYC:** The MAGYC (**Migr**Ation **G**overnance and **AsYlum C**risis) project seeks to assess how migration governance has responded to the recent “refugee crises” and has since been influenced by it, and how crises at large shape policy responses to migration. This four-year research project (2018–2022) brings together twelve international partners: the Hugo Observatory from the University of Liège (Coordinator), Sciences Po, the University of Economics in Bratislava, the GIGA institute of Global and Area Studies, Lund University, the IDMC, SOAS University of London, the University of Milan, the Lebanese American University, the University of Macedonia, Sabanci University, IfPO/CNRS.

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2	31 May 2020	A new article, which takes into account the feedback from the first annual review meeting is submitted to the European Commission. This article addresses more closely the perceptions of Northern migration crisis discourses in the Global South than v1.

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## **Perceiving Migration Crises: A view from the European neighbourhood<sup>1</sup>**

### Abstract

European discourses on migration have been dominated by a crisis narrative in recent years. In particular, so-called 'mixed' migration has led to the perception that the immigration of large numbers of non-EU citizens needs to be perceived as 'critical'. Yet, knowledge on perceptions of these crises in the Global South itself is comparatively scarce, revealing stark Eurocentrism as the vast majority of migrants and refugees never reach the Global North. How do non-EU states perceive European 'migration crises'? Taking two major migration deals as case studies – the EU-Turkey Deal 2016 and the EU-Migration Deal 2018 –, we analyse how these events were perceived in countries of first asylum which neighbour conflict countries such as Libya and Syria. This policy report offers an analysis of Tunisian and Turkish print media to uncover elite discourses about migration. It demonstrates that European crisis perceptions differ considerably from those in other world regions. Non-EU states are acutely aware of European perceptions of crisis and their role in negotiations about cooperation in the field of migration governance. At the same time, as regimes strategically choose to silence the issue of migration, many refugees in the European neighbourhood live in a context characterised by massive protection gaps.

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<sup>1</sup> This policy report is a slightly longer version of a GIGA Focus, which will be published in June 2020. In the different versions of the GIGA Focus, the GIGA publishes its research findings and concise analyses of current events including their policy implications for a broad audience. A more elaborate version of this paper will be part of a special issue coordinated by Chloé Gaboriaux to be submitted to the French journal *Mots. Les langages du politique*.

### Introduction

European discourses on (im)migration have been dominated by a 'crisis narrative' in recent years. In particular, so-called 'mixed' migration – migrants who are not necessarily or exclusively migrating for reasons specified in the Geneva Convention, but who can nonetheless be categorised as forced migrants – has led to the wide-spread perception that the immigration of large numbers of non-EU citizens needs to be perceived as 'critical'. Notions of crisis are often contrasted with notions of 'normality': A crisis is commonly portrayed as an extraordinary event leading to instability and danger and affecting a pre-existing normality (Cantat, Thiollet, and Pécoud 2020, 4). Given that the vast majority of such migration movements stays within the Global South, this perception is extremely Eurocentric; a fact which is illustrated by a large number of academic studies that focus on Northern perceptions of migration and migration policies. Knowledge of non-European perceptions of crisis, in contrast, is comparatively scarce. How do non-EU states, which are often bound to the EU through EU neighbourhood policies and agreements, see European migration deals which try to prevent migration movements perceived as 'critical' within the EU? Where and in which form does the notion of 'crisis' enter the discussion, if at all?

When the number of people moving in the direction of Europe started to increase in 2015, one of the EU's responses was a move towards securitisation, declaring a war on 'criminal gangs' of smugglers and traffickers, reportedly responsible for the surge in refugee deaths (Hintjens 2019). The power of discourse is an important aspect of securitisation. According to Balzacq (2005, 184), the success of securitisation is highly contingent upon a securitizing actor's ability to identify with the audience's feelings, needs and interest. In 2015 and its aftermaths, the dominant narrative in Europe was that of a 'migration crisis' (Allen et al. 2018; Carastathis, Spathopoulou, and Tsilimpounidi 2018; Dines, Montagna, and Vacchelli 2018; Lucassen 2018; Niemann and Zaun 2018; Sigona 2018). The state was located as the victim of 'unmanageable flows' and a hierarchy of suffering was created, differentiating between those who deserve protection and those who do not (Carastathis, Spathopoulou, and Tsilimpounidi 2018, 35).

This sort of crisis vocabulary has to a certain degree helped to legitimise policies of the European Union (EU) which would have been considered as more problematic otherwise – such as the cooperation with fragile, often undemocratic regimes in the European Neighbourhood, and the subsequently progressing externalisation of the European border. The 'EU-Turkey Deal' in March 2016 and the 'EU-Migration Deal' in June 2018 are emblematic in this regard. Both follow the same logic: establishing funds to contribute to 'better migration management' outside the EU, and soliciting non-European actors to

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protect and uphold European borders. The EU-Migration Deal 2018, for example, includes the attempt to establish so-called 'regional disembarkation platforms' in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia. These platforms have been presented as the way to "manage the migration crisis" and the "mixed migratory flows placing disproportionate migratory pressure at the external borders of frontline member states" (European Commission 2015). In the EU-Turkey statement, which has become known as the 'EU-Turkey Deal', the EU committed to paying Ankara 6 billion Euros to accept back every "irregular migrant" crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands starting on March 20, 2016, and to curb all future "illegal migration" from Turkey to the EU (press release European Council, 18 March 2016). In turn, the EU agreed to resettle one Syrian refugee from Turkey for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greece. The agreement also includes clauses to accelerate the visa liberalisation roadmap, to upgrade the Customs Union, and to re-energise Turkey's accession process.

How have these policy developments been perceived in the Maghreb and the Middle East, especially in countries of first asylum which neighbour conflict countries such as Libya and Syria? And why should the European public and political actors take non-European perceptions of European migration crises into consideration? Analysing two major European migration deals of the past years as case studies – first, the discussions around the establishment of 'disembarkation platforms' in North Africa and the Sahel and, second, the negotiations about and implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement –, we outline how elite actors in Tunisia and Turkey give meaning to European migration deals (or not). The analysis demonstrates that European crisis perceptions can differ considerably from those in other world regions, which may impact negotiations between European and non-European actors in the field of migration governance. Non-EU states are acutely aware of European perceptions of crisis and their role in negotiations about cooperation in migration governance efforts. However, while regimes often strategically choose to silence the issue of safeguarding refugee rights, many refugees in the European neighbourhood live in a context characterised by massive protection gaps.

The paper offers a media analysis of key moments of European migration deals in leading newspapers of different ideological orientations in Turkey and Tunisia. As in other countries of the world, print media – including its online versions – is surely not the most widely consumed media format in Tunisia and Turkey today. However, it still provides important insights into elite discourses: Print media reflects prevalent political discourse to a certain extent, especially in a Middle Eastern and North African context where many governments have had a heavy hand in controlling print and broadcast media (Wheeler 2017), and where – as in the context of Turkey and Tunisia with their respective change towards either authoritarianism or a democratic opening in past years

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– media can be understood as a semiautonomous field (Yavçan & Ongur 2016). In Tunisia, for example, media outlets have become the main stage for fierce political battles between the country's opposing camps – Islamists and secular elitists – after 2011, with national mainstream media being viewed as a spearhead in the battle to preserve the secular state against the grassroots Islamization of the country (el-Issawi 2012, 15). In Turkey, print media outlets which are or have been considered critical of the AKP government have experienced heavy state interference, for instance when government-friendly shareholders have been installed and more critical ones ousted, or when journalists have been jailed as accused 'terrorists' (Weise 2018). Furthermore, print media remains a major reference and source for TV and radio reporting in both states, with morning news, for example, often referring to newspaper headlines.

The analysis of Tunisian print media comprised four papers, trying to mirror Tunisia's recent media transformation: two daily newspapers, *Al Chourouk*, the first daily in Arabic, and *La Presse de Tunisie*, the first daily in French, as well as *La Jeune Afrique*, a French pan-African weekly magazine, and *Inkyfada*, an online bilingual webzine in French and Arabic, founded after 2011 with the objective to establish slow and critical journalism in Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> *La Presse de Tunisie* was state-owned before 2011 and experienced an opening post-2011. *Al Chourouk*, a daily in tabloid format, was privately owned but retained firm ties with the former regime and followed a pro-government and Panarab line during Ben Ali's presidency. Post-2011, it has had a stronger focus on Tunisian domestic politics trying to give space to all political parties, including Ennahdha. *La Jeune Afrique* was founded in 1960 in Tunis with a focus on the Maghreb and francophone Africa. It was later published in Paris due to censorship during Bourguiba's presidency and was banned several times in Tunisia. For the Turkish media analysis, three newspapers were analysed: *Cumhuriyet*, *Milliyet* and *Sabah*.<sup>3</sup> *Cumhuriyet* is one of the oldest daily newspapers in the country, established in 1924, and was arguably the most prominent opposition voice in the Turkish mediascape until September 2018, when its leadership changed. Several of its journalists have been jailed as 'terrorists' in the course of its existence. *Milliyet*, which has been published in its current form since 1950, developed from a liberal leftist voice to one which is considered regime-friendly after a leadership change in 2011. It occupies the middle ground between quality press and boulevard. *Sabah* is regime-

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<sup>2</sup> For the analysis, the first pages of the two dailies were studied during two time periods (11-14 November 2015 and 28 June-12 July 2018) and in total, 32 articles from four media outlets were analysed in detail.

<sup>3</sup> For the analysis, the first pages of the three dailies were studied for 15-18 October 2015, 24 November 2015, and 8 February-18 March 2016 and articles on *Inkyfada*'s website were looked through in the same time period. In addition, 55 articles from the four outlets were studied in detail.

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conform and the most widely circulated newspaper in Turkey published in Turkish, English and German. In its current form it has been published since 1985.

While this paper aims at providing a deeper understanding of Northern migration crisis discourses in the Global South (D4.1.1), thereby speaking to the work done in work packages 2, 3 and 8 of the Migration Governance and Asylum Crises (MAGYC) project, the remaining papers written in Work Package 4 “Comparing Crises” will focus on drivers of forced migration governance in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa through cross-regional and intraregional comparison, including historical case studies.

### **Tunisian perceptions of ‘disembarkation platforms’: “*The Maghreb says no to Europe*”**

Tunisia has been a prototypical emigration country with more than a million Tunisians living abroad. However, it has also witnessed a substantial growth in immigration over the past years, especially with Sub-Saharan immigrants, a large number of Libyan citizens but also tens of thousands of Tunisian labour migrants returning from neighbouring Libya due to the conflict. The number of registered refugees is low: The refugee population in Tunisia is anticipated to increase from some 2,490 in 2019 to 5,000 by the end of 2020 (UNHCR 2020). Migration policies have been shaped by repeated interactions with the European Union and its Member States, where the vast majority of Tunisian migrants live. These interactions have been characterised by a focus on security and operability in dealing with border controls and on the swift and ‘cost-effective’ removal of undesirable migrants and denied asylum-seekers (Cassarino 2014). EU member states, in particular Italy, want the Tunisian security forces to intercept boats with irregular migrants who embarked on their journey from Libyan territory (Badalič 2019). Yet, the consecutive Tunisian governments have never passively adhered to this script. Rather, Tunisia’s positioning towards migration has been driven by a strategic alignment on which the regime could capitalize for its own political survival when needed. The former Ben Ali administration, for example, responded to the norms and principles set by the EU by boasting its own credentials at the international level (Cassarino 2014, 98).

Immigration policy in Tunisia today is thus mostly security-driven. At the same time, immigration has remained silenced in the public sphere, with the state refusing to admit the existence of foreigners on its territory. While Tunisia ratified the 1951 Convention and the 1969 Protocol, it has no national refugee status determination procedure: The country cooperates with UNHCR on refugee matters, but there is no legal reference to a residence permit for refugees. The immigration law of 2004 cemented the criminalisation of ‘illegal’ migration,



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even if it was applied inconsistently over the years and across Tunisian territory (Meddeb 2012, 380-392). Domestically, the official discourse has rarely presented 'illegal migration' as a key security issue because emigration, whether authorized or not, is viewed as a safety valve to relieve pressure on youth unemployment and social discontent. According to Natter (2019, 181–97), securitisation also remains the main paradigm in Tunisia after the Arab uprisings without any fundamental policy change after 2011. With the tone generally hardening towards foreigners, Libyans, at the same time, continue to be tolerated by Tunisian authorities regardless of their status. However, since the democratic opening in 2011, the Tunisian government(s) can no longer react to external pressures on migration issues without facing civil society's empowered advocacy (Cassarini 2020).

The Valletta Summit on Migration 2015 and the EU-Migration Deal 2018 are both examples of these logics of securitisation and externalisation. The Valletta Summit brought together European and African Heads of State and Government in Malta in November 2015 in an effort "to strengthen cooperation in migration management" across the major African migration routes to Europe, especially in countries in the Sahel, the Lake Chad region, North Africa and the Horn of Africa. The resulting political declaration mirrors the securitising logic of the action plan, its objectives, including the prevention of irregular migration, migrant smuggling and trafficking, and a close cooperation on return and readmission, besides cooperation on legal migration. The summit also established the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa of 1.8 billion Euros to "help foster stability in the regions and to contribute to better migration management". Tunisia has been one of the main beneficiaries of the funds released since 2015 (Cassarini 2020, 51). The EU-Migration Deal 2018 has a similar logic. Following the European Council meeting on 28 June 2018, EU leaders agreed on strengthening external border controls with more funding to Turkey and countries in North Africa and the Sahel to help prevent migrants leaving for Europe, exploring the possibility of 'regional disembarkation platforms' in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia to process migrants outside the EU, and to boost investment in Africa to help achieve a 'socio-economic transformation', so that people no longer want to leave in pursuit of a better life elsewhere. 500 million euros were planned to be transferred to the EU Trust Fund for Africa. Regional disembarkation platforms were vaguely defined as centres which "should operate distinguishing individual situations, in full respect of international law and without creating a pull factor" (Conclusion of the European Council meeting, 28 June 2018). The idea of these centres was subsequently clearly refused in the Maghreb, including Tunisia.

The media analysis of the time periods of the two summits in local print media reveals three overall aspects – the dominance of local domestic crises which were unrelated to migration, the Libyan conflict and bilateral relations, and

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the framing of the migration crisis as a European political crisis including its attempts of externalising its borders. First, sports events and local political crises dominated the headlines much more than migration. On the one hand, the World Cup 2018 was one of the major issues in summer 2018. On the other hand, crises narratives were extremely present. However, these were mostly linked to domestic politics and political reforms in a still post-revolutionary Tunisia. They included the ongoing tensions between secularists and Islamists and the two major political parties Nidaa Tounès and Ennahdha (*the political crisis*), the victory of Souad Abderrahim from Ennahdha in the municipal elections in Tunis on 3 July 2018 as the first female mayor of Tunis, discussions about transitional justice and the reform of the judicial sector, the alarming situation of the economy (*the unemployment crisis*) and a major strike of the Tunisian General Labour Union, the increase of food prices (*the milk crisis*) and the reform of the media (*the media crisis*).

Second, the 'Libyan Crisis' and the conflict in the neighbouring country was equally present. Yet, the overall narrative about Libya was not so much linked to migration as such, but rather emphasised Tunisia's mediating role in the conflict and its strong will to find a political solution. Media voices highlighted in particular that it was paramount for Tunisia to continue its economic ties and agreements with Libya. Equally, the increase of the oil price as a result of the conflict and oil smuggling between Libya and Tunisia were repeatedly addressed. If migration and displacement were mentioned, media articles focused on the living conditions of Sub-Saharan Africans in Libya and migrants leaving Libya to Europe rather than Libyan refugees on Tunisian soil. This is striking as Tunisia became a host of Libyans who came to Tunisia shortly after the fall of al-Qaddafi because they feared reprisal for the role that their families or tribes played in supporting the former regime; Libyans without a particular political affiliation who fled throughout the 2012-2015 period because of insecurities and human rights violations; and a large group of people considered to be revolutionaries, including lawyers, activists, and media persons, who left because of the deteriorating security situation and the growth of armed groups (Jaidi and Tashani 2015).

Third, the coverage of the two migration summits was framed around the narrative that the migration crisis was a European political crisis rather than a Tunisian one. Authors pointed out that African migration to Europe was not high in numbers – why waste so much energy on African migrants if there are not many? Some voices also suspected racism – '*Why does Europe accept Syrians but not Africans?*' (*La Jeune Afrique*, 13 November 2015). Migration was described as a political priority in Europe used by populist and right-wing political parties having an interest to deepen the crisis to gain votes. What was happening was not described as a migration crisis as such, but as a 'crisis of migration management', with Frontex and European policies creating the phenomenon of smuggling in the first place ("une politique de laisser-mourir",

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*La Presse de Tunisie*, 30 June 2018). However, some terms were also taken over from European political discourse, such as the 'crisis of irregular migration' (*La Presse de Tunisie*, 15 November 2015).

The discussions around the migration summits focused on the fact that European leaders could only agree on a minimal consensus – the disembarkation platforms – as they were not able to create a common European asylum law. Yet, from a Tunisian perspective, the idea of these reception centres was vague, counter-productive and not compatible with 'Tunisian principles'. Tunisia positioned itself against any military solution to address migration. In some articles, migration was described as an integral part of being human (*Al Chourouk*, 2 July 2018). The Emergency Trust Fund for Africa was clearly interpreted as Europe's attempt to curb migration in exchange for financial aid. One author, however, also raised the question of how long Tunisia would be able to resist Europe given the financial aid which Europe could use to exert pressure (*La Jeune Afrique*, 27 July 2018). Europe was described as having always hoped to send migrants back to the Maghreb, but now barricading itself and obsessing over its fear of foreigners (*La Jeune Afrique*, 13 November 2015). Some authors suggested alternative policy options. These include a 'new order', which would truly address structural inequalities between North and South since Western countries only host a small minority of refugees despite their wealth (*Inkyfada*, 20 August 2015), and which would facilitate, organise and manage migration rather than restrict it (*Al Chourouk*, 2 July 2018). Another article mentioned that new regional migration solutions should be imagined given the current dynamics of South-South migration flows, including regional integration (*La Presse de Tunisie*, 7 July 2018).

Media articles also made a clear distinction between Tunisian migrants (especially *harraga* – Tunisians migrating irregularly to Europe) and migrants on Tunisian soil, with articles being generally empathic with Tunisian migrants and their reasons for leaving. In one article, the causes for migration were linked to high unemployment, poverty, and inflation in Tunisia, as well as a development model in crisis, for which all governments post-2011 carry a responsibility (*La Presse de Tunisie*, 30 June 2018). Some few articles also addressed the situation of migrants on Tunisian soil, emphasising simultaneously that the number of refugees in Tunisia was very low. Two articles pushed for a policy change with regard to the national asylum law – "not to attract refugees but to regularize their situation" (*La Presse de Tunisie*, 2 July 2018). No article mentioned Libyan refugees or their rights in Tunisia. Differences in editorial lines between the outlets did not affect these three major topics to a large extent. The coverage of *La Presse de Tunisie* and *Jeune Afrique* reported slightly more frequently on migration-related topics and focused stronger on the international dimension, while articles in *Al Chourouk* highlighted the domestic context more prominently, including Tunisian *harraga*. *Inkyfada*'s distinguished itself through

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several in-depth analyses on migration, including a critical discussion around a national asylum law.

### **The EU-Turkey Deal from a Turkish perspective: “No readmission without Schengen”**

Turkey has developed from a country of origin and transit to a host state only quite recently, resulting in major political, social and cultural challenges. According to the UNHCR (2020), Turkey currently hosts the largest number of refugees worldwide, including 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees as well as almost 330.000 refugees and asylum seekers from other nationalities, especially Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians. In its legal framework governing forced migration, the degree of protection granted to forced migrants differs based on their nationality: Turkey maintains a geographical limitation to the 1951 Refugee Convention and only applies it to refugees originating from European countries. While Syrians can apply for temporary protection (TP) in Turkey since 2014 under the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), asylum seekers from all other countries can apply to UNHCR to seek protection as conditional refugees. The provisions of the TP regime entail basic rights such as the right to legal stay and the right to education and health services, but fall short of providing an explicit right to work (Toğral Koca 2016). Conditional refugees, on the other hand, are allowed to reside in Turkey temporarily until they are resettled to a third country (Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management 2020).

Turkey follows a ‘policy of ambivalence’ (Norman 2016) with regard to its Syrian inhabitants. For the first few years of the Syrian crisis, Turkey applied an open-door policy, often invoking the Islamic *umma* to justify this course of action. Having said that, Turkey does not have a coherent strategy towards refugees; on the contrary, there is a major implementation gap between national policies and actions on the ground. This is due to complex demographics, deep political polarisation and perceived security threats connected to the issue of (irregular) immigration. The European Union’s attempts to control migration through externalisation, Turkish security concerns with regard to immigration and the growing number of irregular migrants on Turkish territory have been identified as the main drivers of Turkey’s irregular migration governance (Gökalp and Mencütek 2018).

Turkey has strong ties to different individual EU Member States, most notably Germany, which hosts the largest Turkish community outside of Turkey. It has also been in accession negotiations with the EU since October 2005, after being recognised as a candidate for full EU membership in December 1999.

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Combined with its role as key host state for Syrian refugees, it is not surprising that Turkey became a target of EU migration management efforts when 'irregular' immigration to the EU began to increase considerably in 2015. The 'EU-Turkey Deal' of March 2016 needs to be understood within this context. In fact, the legal framework governing forced migration in Turkey (i.e. LFIP and geographical limitation) are closely linked to the accession negotiations: Turkey did not want to lift the geographical limitation of the Geneva Convention before becoming a member of the European Union, and the resulting compromise was the LFIP.

The media analysis of the time period around the EU-Turkey Statement in national print media is characterised by three aspects. First, domestic political events dominated the headlines much more than migration, and while crisis narratives were quite prevalent, they focused mainly on other issues. By far the most attention was paid to domestic political division (*the political crisis*), with terrorist attacks on Turkish soil by Kurdish actors and the Islamic State taking most of the spotlight (often mentioning Turkish "martyrs"). Inter-party conflicts were also covered extensively. Another topic which was presented as critical was the continuously deteriorating Turkish economy, including rising unemployment (*the economic crisis*). In this context, it was mentioned repeatedly that Turkey had already spent 8 billion USD on Syrian refugees, while the international community only pledged 410 million USD (*Sabah*, 18 October 2015; the numbers vary in other outlets). The importance of burden-sharing was frequently underlined (*Sabah*, 19 October 2015; *Cumhuriyet*, 18 October 2015). Opposition voices also reported critically on media repression, nepotism and bribery by and within the AKP government (*the authoritarian crisis*), with a focus on the detention of journalists (*Cumhuriyet*, 8 February 2016 and 19 March 2016). Other domestic events, like the general election of November 1, 2015, and the newly formed government, also received more reporting than migration issues.

Second, the violent conflict in neighbouring Syria received a lot of attention. However, similarly to Tunisia, rather than on migration as such, reporting focused on Turkey's role in the conflict, on actions of other involved actors like Russia and the US, and on Turkey's strong will to find a political solution together with external actors like the EU. When migration was mentioned, media voices highlighted that a solution to the conflict in Syria is a prerequisite for solving the issue (*Sabah*, 18 October and 19 November 2015); a task which in turn requires international cooperation to be achieved (*Milliyet*, 18 October 2015). Media articles also focused on the 'sensitivity' with regard to the issue of migration and displacement in the EU and the world (*Sabah*, 18 October 2015, citing then prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu), and on migrants leaving Turkey to

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Europe (*Sabah*, 21 March 2016; *Cumhuriyet*, 7 June 2015), rather than on refugees in Turkey. When they were mentioned, Syrian refugees in Turkey were referred to as “Syrian guests” or “Syrian brothers” (*Milliyet*, 9 February and 4 March 2016). Compared to the stark politicisation of the issue of Syrian refugees during the elections in summer 2018, there was in fact a surprising lack of politicisation present during the time period of the EU-Turkey Statement.

Finally, articles covering the process leading up to the EU-Turkey Statement, while sometimes using the term ‘migration crisis’ or ‘refugee crisis’, make a strong case for the crisis being located in Europe, not in Turkey. In consequence, authors pointed out that a refugee agreement was the EU’s priority, not Turkey’s (*Sabah*, 9 May 2016), and therefore the responsibility to act lay with the EU. Several articles also underlined that the European crisis was being used by populist and right-wing actors for their political gain (*Sabah*, 10 May 2016). One author asked critically, “How can you perceive people who escaped from war as economic?” (*Milliyet*, 1 February 2016), and Ahmet Davutoğlu is quoted saying that “These innocent people (...) are just like us” (*Milliyet*, 8 March 2016). The EU was severely criticised for not letting refugees choose freely where they want to live, thereby creating problems for the states where they are forced to stay, both in Europe and elsewhere (*Cumhuriyet*, 25 September and 4 October 2015; *Milliyet*, 23 April 2016).

Of the three reasons why Turkey agreed to the EU-Turkey Deal – reopening the EU accession negotiations, financial aid of 6 billion EUR, and visa liberalisations –, the prospect of visa liberalisations for Turkish citizens travelling to the EU clearly got the most attention, both as a prospect and as part of threats to terminate the agreement (*Cumhuriyet*, 15 October 2015, *Sabah*, 3 March 2016). The most frequently discussed issue was the obstacle to visa liberalisations, hence the EU’s insistence on Turkey adjusting its terrorism laws (*Cumhuriyet*, 15 June 2016; *Milliyet*, 19 October 2015). In this context, one author critically asked whether the refugees or the PKK were causing more trouble for the EU (*Sabah*, 9 May 2016), thus questioning the EU discourse of the migration-refugee crisis. Some articles were openly critical of the EU-Turkey Deal, calling it “shameful” (*Cumhuriyet*, 18 March 2016), a “sugar-coated cyanide pill” (*Cumhuriyet*, 19 March 2016), or stating that Turkey “cannot become Europe’s concentration camps” (*Milliyet*, 26 October 2015). Also, some fears were voiced that the agreement could lead to a faster naturalisation of refugees (*mültecilerin vatandaşlığa geçişi*) in Turkey, which could give them new political weight. One author feared that in this case, the voting balance in Turkey could be affected; especially the approach of the government to settle refugees in areas with a large Alevi population was highlighted in this context (*Cumhuriyet*, 19 March 2016). While parallels were

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pointed out between the Greek and the Turkish approach to Syrian refugees, with both “opening their door to innocent Syrians who fled the barbaric regime in Syria” (*Sabah*, 3 March 2016), overall, the EU’s approach was heavily criticized, with some authors pointing out that only the refugee crisis made the EU remember Turkey (*Milliyet*, 30 November 2015), and that the EU was paying Turkey to “relieve its own conscience” (*Milliyet*, 4 March 2016).

The critical view of European migration governance was somewhat echoed in the reporting of the events of late February/early March 2020, when Turkey decided to stop adhering to the EU-Turkey Deal and opened its borders for transit migration towards Europe. Between February 28 and March 7, 2020, all three news outlets reserved a lot of space on their frontpages for this issue, with headlines like “Humanity died” (*Cumhuriyet*, 3 March 2020), “The World only watches this drama” (*Cumhuriyet*, 5 March 2020), “Limits of humanity” (*Milliyet*, 5 March 2020), or even drawing comparisons between “Nazi camps” and the treatment of refugees on the borders of the EU (*Sabah*, 7 March 2020).

Overall, the editorial lines of the different newspapers did not significantly affect their coverage of these three topics. Mentions of Turkish ‘martyrs’ were more frequent in *Sabah* and *Milliyet*, while mentions of the authoritarian crisis was more frequent in *Cumhuriyet*. With regard to migration, *Cumhuriyet* and *Milliyet* had a slightly more pronounced interest in the international dimension, while *Sabah* focused more on domestic efforts to integrate and accommodate Syrian refugees in particular.

### **Conclusions and implications for European migration governance**

The media analysis reveals striking similarities across media narratives in Tunisia and Turkey: First, domestic political crises, such as inter-party conflicts and unemployment, tended to overshadow the migration issue. Second, while both countries host large numbers of refugees from their neighbouring countries, Syria and Libya, the focus of media narratives was on the – diplomatic or strategic – role of Turkey and Tunisia in the conflict, rather than displacement. Third, our analysis points to the fact that media narratives made a strong case for the crisis being located in Europe, not in the European neighbourhood, and underlined that refugees were being instrumentalised by populist and right-wing actors in Europe for their political gain.

There are important differences between Tunisia and Turkey in the degree of cooperation with the EU, however, despite media narratives being rather similar. While Turkey decided to agree to the deal with the EU in return for visa liberalisations, financial aid and the opening of new chapters in the EU accession negotiations, Tunisia, together with other countries in the Maghreb,

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refused to cooperate with the EU when it comes to establishing 'debarkation centres', arguing that they were not compatible with 'Tunisian principles'. The Turkish cooperation may partly be explained by the ruling AKP having suffered several political shocks prior to the agreement, including both the loss and the recovery of its parliamentary majority in 2015 and a progressively deteriorating Turkish economy. The deal may have seemed as a way to pacify a growing opposition.

Tunisia's (partial) rejection has to be understood in a regional and long-term perspective. First, in its rejection of the disembarkation platforms, Tunisia's approach is not dissimilar to other Maghrebi countries. Second, Tunisia did not experience a major change in its immigration policy post-2011. Natter (2019, 245) has argued in this respect that 'state thinking' (Sayad 1999) provides the foundation for immigration governance as immigration policies reflect the nature and transformations of the polity. This includes regime strategies to ensure political legitimation as well as territorial and institutional stability but also the history of state formation and official national identity narratives. She argues, however, that while the role of the executive, societal and legal actors is subject to a 'regime effect', bureaucratic and international politics dynamics are to a large extent comparable across polities. On the domestic level, potential bargains were presumably not profitable enough for Tunisia in a context where it was strategically more useful for Tunisia to silence the migration matter than to question Tunisia's neutrality in the Libyan conflict. Some voices have also argued that Libyan refugees have massively contributed to the Tunisian economy in a context of economic crisis, which might also explain why Tunisian political actors have kept rather silent on the issue.

What does that mean for European migration governance? For one, the EU needs to reflect carefully about the fact that a crisis only becomes one if it is narrated as such (Munck 2007, 139), and that the European crisis perception may diverge considerably from those in the European neighbourhood, with serious consequences for attempts to cooperate with the states of this region. This raises important questions about who narrates a crisis and why, and who responds to it in what way. The EU thus needs to have a thorough understanding of local and national discourses and narratives of potential cooperation partners. Secondly, our analysis shows that European perceptions of crisis are carefully received and critically evaluated in states outside of the EU, highlighting the need to better understand how the EU is perceived in potential partner states, especially the EU's lack of credibility when it comes to commitments in the field of migration governance, but also in other areas of (potential) cooperation. The media analysis has shown that a discrepancy



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between a rhetorical commitment to humanitarian values which is not matched in real-life actions will be noticed and criticized by potential cooperation partners. Finally, regimes' strategic silencing or playing the 'refugee card' should not blind political observers to the fact that many refugees in the European neighbourhood live in a context characterised by massive protection gaps when it comes to safeguarding refugee rights. The use of rhetorical 'shields', for instance by calling refugees "guests" or "brothers and sisters", should not preclude a thorough and honest inquiry into the lived realities of refugees in this countries, including a fact-based answer to the question whether a state is a 'third safe country' or not.

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