Visa policy is an inherent component of migration management systems and visas are tools for controlling and facilitating entry and admission. However, within the context of modern migration management systems, the blatant emphasis on “control or prevention” sometimes shades over other functions of visa policies such as promoting human mobility especially for the countries where the visa is solely used for short term mobility. In this article, the author argues that traditionally Turkey’s visa policies have been determined mainly by positive incentives rather than concerns related to undesired migration. While Turkey’s visa policy is considered liberal in favor of increasing mobility and may serve ongoing discussions of the (adverse) effects of strict border regimes, it needs to further build upon the universal principles of non-discrimination, consistency, and transparency.
Turkey’s migration policies are in the spotlight today due to the fact the country is hosting the largest number of refugees in the world. As of 30 June 2015, Turkey hosts an estimated two million refugees, mostly Syrian and Iraqi, according to data from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).\(^1\) This is coupled with increasing irregular migratory flows through Turkey to reach the EU. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 2,700 people have died trying to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe, and more than 300,000 people have reached Italy, Malta, Greece, and Spain this year alone.\(^2\)

This migration crisis has led to intense debates surrounding the questions of how to overcome the challenges of these irregular flows to the EU and what the effects of border control regimes inherent to migration management systems and managed through strict visa policies of the EU are. There are more and more voices calling for alternatives given the observed limitations of current, strict-mobility migration regimes.\(^3\)

Turkey has traditionally been prone to implementing visa restrictions based on foreign policy or economic interests rather than concerns or risks related to flows of undesired people or migration of all forms of migrants. This article analyzes Turkey’s visa policy as a showcase of mobility and migration nexus which can be also relevant to today’s discussions. By reviewing Turkey’s current outlook on visa policy in light of its historical legacies, EU-Turkey relations, recent migration management reform, the article demonstrates that Turkey’s policies continue to be reinforcing mobility in its region despite the fact that the country is home to the biggest refugee population in the world.

The Current Outlook of Turkey’s Visa Regime

To date, Turkey has concluded over 70 “visa exemption/liberalization agreements” stipulating that no visa is required for all or certain groups of citizens from these countries.\(^4\) According to the information on Turkey’s visa regime table\(^5\) ordinary passport holders from 80 out of 199 countries are exempted from needing a visa to

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2 This is based on data from IOM’s project on Missing Migrants, beginning with the October 2013 tragedies, when over 400 migrants died in two shipwrecks near the Italian island of Lampedusa.


4 Interview with the MFA official conducted in March 2014. It should be noted that while some agreements grant visa exemptions for all passport types, others may limit the scope to diplomatic/official passports.

enter Turkey, with periods of stay varying from one month to three months. It is not only the high numbers of visa exemption agreements that make Turkey’s visa policy liberal. The e-visa system, which is gradually replacing the old sticker visa system, also gave way to more flexibility. According to the list of countries eligible for e-visas, 45 countries’ ordinary passport holders can benefit from the sticker visa/e-visa system without meeting almost any condition.

In return for paying a fee, visas at the border are issued automatically. Therefore, based on a basic calculation, the nationals of 125 out of 199 countries are benefiting from Turkey’s liberal visa policy.

A geographical perspective may help to better interpret Turkey’s so-called liberal visa system. Turkey now has either a visa-free regime or simple visa procedures with countries in Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East (except Iraq and Palestine), North Africa (except Algeria and Egypt), and the Arabian peninsula (except Yemen), as well as the Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, visa exemptions regulations/agreements for countries in destinations as far as South America and Asia are also increasing. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) official that was interviewed by the author explained: “We would like to conclude even more bilateral visa exemption agreements. This, however, apparently is a long process due to the requirement of high-level visits and the negotiation process. In addition to that there are a few countries like China who deliberately favor the continuation of visa restrictions for both sides.”

An important incentive for a more liberal visa system is Turkey’s expanding tourism industry. Major tourist destinations are less likely to impose visa requirements despite their profitability. In order to encourage tourism travel, Turkey seems less prone to establishing visa restrictions. The Minister of Tourism and Culture Ömer

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6 The analysis is based on waiving visas for “ordinary passport holders” of these countries as an indication of free mobility. Other passport holders (official, service, special, etc.) generally have freer mobility.


8 The citizens of 10 out of 28 EU member states are subject to visa requirements, but they are issued e-visa or sticker visas only in return for paying a fee, which varies from country to country.

9 The citizens of Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar are subject to visa requirements, but they are issued e-visa or sticker visas only in return for paying a fee, which varies from country to country.

10 Interview with the MFA official conducted in March 2014.

Çelik explained in one of his statements that Turkey’s current visa policies positively impacted tourism revenues in 2013; an increase by 20 percent was recorded in comparison to the previous year. Yet, in 2015, Turkey’s tourism income decreased by 13.8 percent in the second quarter of the year, compared to the same period of the previous year, according to data from the Turkish Statistics Institute (TÜİK), mainly due to rising security concerns. Despite this decrease, tourism remains an important motivation for maintaining a liberal visa policy.

When it comes to why states impose visa restrictions, deterring potential immigration from certain groups of people and preselecting low risk visitors are main drivers. In line with these drivers, Turkey also conducts ad-hoc risk profiling with regard to issues such as public security, terror, and irregular migration. Visa restrictions against certain countries based on these profilings are applied or existing restrictive regulations are enforced. However, irregular migration is not as high of a priority for Turkey as it is for the EU or other Western countries. As an MFA official interviewed by the author argues, “the regulations of Turkey for a more liberal visa policy should not be of concern to the EU as people attempting to reach the EU do not come to Turkey with visas or visa exemptions and the statistics of apprehended irregular migrants could confirm this.”

For instance, apprehension statistics since 2000 reveal that citizens from Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Bangladesh are the five top nationalities that are caught trying to irregularly migrate. Except for Iran, there are still strict visa regulations in place for these countries. Since the Syrian crisis, the nationalities of arrest are subject to change as in 2014, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Eritrea, and Pakistan were the top five nationalities detected irregularly crossing borders but again these countries, except Syria, are required to get visas in order to enter Turkey.

14 Interview conducted with MFA official in March 2014.
The Historical Legacy of Turkey’s Visa Policy

The historical context in relation to Turkey’s visa policies also helps shed light on the country’s current motivations for enhancing the conditions for cross-border mobility. Turkey’s visa policies have evolved since the early years of the Republic in accordance with the country’s diverse responses to foreign policy requirements or economic interests. For example, in the mid-1960s questioning the Western orientation of the country in the midst of the Cold War was the main motivation for lifting visa obligations for the countries of Yugoslavia, Romania, Portugal, and Iran; in the 1980s, the driving force for lifting visas for some countries was economic concerns in the aftermath of the global economic crisis and the country’s transition to neoliberalism, which required drawing in investment and tourism. Yet, the turning point for Turkey’s visa policies was the end of the Cold War, when Turkey’s so-called liberal visa policy took off.

During the course of the 1990s, the visa restrictions for former Soviet countries were lifted, cultural and political relations – especially with the countries having linguistic and cultural ties to Turkey – were revived, and economic relations expanded. In the 1990s, liberalization of the visa system was combined with the introduction of the sticker visa system, which refers to the issuance of visas at borders for nationals of certain countries without any detailed processing of pre-entry applications for just a visa fee. This liberalization led to the development of an informal import and export activity known as “suitcase trade,” in which nationals of Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Romania, Moldova, and the Central Asian Republics took part. This became an important source of foreign currency for Turkey, and eased the economic difficulties of these countries after the collapse of the communist system. Furthermore, the increasing income from tourism and the emergence of close relations with neighboring countries in the region all contributed to a more liberal visa policy.

Kemal Kirişci, Director of the Center on the United States and Europe’s Turkey Project at the Brookings Institute and an expert in Turkish foreign policy and migration studies, argues that this was further facilitated by the absence of concerns over undesired migration movements or security threats related to migration originating from these countries. Further, he argues there was a conviction that most of the nationals from these countries will and do return home, as in the case of the return of Bosnians and Albanians who sought refuge in Turkey during the Bosnian War.


Turkey’s liberal visa policy reached its peak in the mid-2000s, mainly due to a process spearheaded by the MFA and driven by Turkey’s so called new foreign policy and its re-orientation in global politics. This was done in particular with the explicit aim of (1) intensifying trade and investment opportunities and (2) the implicit aim of pledging to take on a greater role in regional and international affairs with growing attention to non-Western powers. During the peak of the liberal visa policy discussion, there was also rhetoric among the politicians and bureaucrats reaffirming the direction of visa policies and criticizing the traditional visa policies of Western countries. Then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu’s speech for the launch of the e-visa process gives significant hints about this:

The visa application is something revolutionary and there is not any other country applying it in that wider scope. The e-visa which will replace sticker visas issued at the borders is a modern application suitable to human dignity and is also reflection of the state’s self-confidence and represents an approach which does not perceive everyone coming from outside threat or risk element.17

His reference to “human dignity” implies that other countries violate this whereas Turkey does not perceive migrants per se as threats. Referring to this statement, the approach can be welcomed especially “in the era of supposedly unprecedented mobility but on the contrary the era of continued and enforced inequality in access to foreign spaces based on the principle of nationality.”18 Yet, the rhetoric of human dignity cannot correspond to the reality where flexible visa policies are mostly driven by the motivations explained above. Turkey’s visa policy towards sub-Saharan African countries reflects this reality as only the privileged citizens of those countries holding a valid visa or residence permit from Schengen or OECD countries can travel to Turkey without lodging visa applications at the consular offices. Furthermore, the e-visa being promoted is something fairer, easier, and more accessible for cross-border mobility. Davutoğlu makes it clear in the rest of his speech:

[E-visa] will also lessen the burden of our consular offices in many countries and boost the turnover of Turkish Airlines. Since it will facilitate the business-related travel to Turkey, the efficiency of Turkish businessman will also increase. Instead of pursuing an approach that everyone coming from Africa or Asia is a risk, we make it possible for the people having some qualities such as prominent scientists, businessman, and leading figures to obtain visas easily.19

18 Neumayer (2006), pp 72-84.
EU Effects on Visa Policy

After 1999 when Turkey was recognized as a candidate country for the EU, the EU Accession Process became the center of Turkey’s visa policy discussions around alignment with the EU’s common visa policy. In line with this policy, Turkey, as a country eager to join the EU, implemented changes to its visa policies. Thus, after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, it initially made efforts to harmonize Turkey’s visa policies with the EU acquis and Turkey imposed visas for countries such as Kazakhstan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Azerbaijan – which were on the EU’s negative list. Nonetheless, in the second half of the 2000s, Turkey began increasingly to divert from the much stricter EU visa policy, and instead moved back towards the liberal approach. For example, the visa obligations for Azerbaijan, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which are on EU’s negative list, were lifted by Turkey in 2006. Thus, Turkey’s divergence from or lack of compliance with the EU’s common visa policy has raised concerns and questions in European circles. However, the lifting of visa requirements for countries on the EU’s blacklist cannot be assessed as drifting away from EU norms solely in relation to visa policies. It was the AKP government’s changing attitude towards the EU accession process and its foreign policy with regard to neighboring countries in particular, that impacted its visa policies.

In the past couple of years, however, Turkey seems to have pivoted again in favor of adopting EU visa policies. The signing of the readmission agreement with the EU in December 2013 in parallel with the launching of a visa liberalization process has breathed new life into bilateral relations as well as put pressure on Turkey to

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20 First, there is a regularly updated common list of countries whose citizens require a visa (the so-called Schengen visa, for short stays up to three months within a six-month period) when crossing the external borders (Schengen area). Second, there is a list of countries whose citizens are exempt from that requirement. Third, there is an “EU Visa Code,” which sets out the procedures and conditions for issuing visas for the purpose of short stays and airport transit. Finally, since 2007, EU has started to implement another tool to regulate its visa restrictions; so far, the EU has concluded visa facilitation agreements with 12 non-EU countries in return for readmission agreements. These agreements create facilitated procedures for issuing visas for citizens of the agreement’s parties. Currently, only 42 country nationals do not face visa obligations to enter the Schengen area. “Visa Policy,” European Commission Migration and Home Affairs, http://www.ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy/index_en.htm

21 For a comprehensive analysis, please see the table extracted from the Progress Reports’ visa-related parts and compiled by: Cenk Aygül, “Visa Regimes as Power: The Cases of the EU and Turkey,” Alternatives: Global, Local, Political, Vol. 38, No. 4 (November 2013), pp. 331-333.

revisit some of its more liberal visa policies. As Kirişci argues, “after the long-standing grievance on both sides in the EU-Turkey relations, the negotiations around alignment requirements with the EU acquis have shifted towards visa liberalization talks.”  

“The signing of the readmission agreement with the EU in parallel with the launching of a visa liberalization process has breathed new life into bilateral relations as well as put pressure on Turkey to revisit some of its more liberal visa policies.”

The ultimate goal of lifting visa requirements for Turkish citizens’ travel to Schengen countries depends on Turkey meeting the requirements set out by the “Roadmap towards Visa-Free Regime with Turkey.” This package deal is criticized because the Roadmap does not set a specific timeline to provide visa liberalization and also includes the requirement of full and effective implementation of the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement. However, implementation will be increasingly challenging given Turkey is fast becoming a country of asylum. Monitoring Turkey’s progress in the Roadmap by the EU Commission also raises concerns due to possible difficulties in measuring impartiality in the process. Lastly, the Roadmap includes a broad range of requirements which cover almost all issues dealt with under Chapters 23 and 24 of the EU acquis while these chapters are still closed for negotiation.

Thus, it is difficult to foresee Turkey’s ability to address the requirements set in the Roadmap in the short-term. Yet, some of the specific visa policy requirements for Turkey can be smoothly undertaken due to their more technical aspects such as visa stickers’ security features, as long as Turkey’s visa regime is not subject to substantial revision that will hamper its liberal policy.

Against this background, it can be said that progress in the visa liberalization process very much depends on the credibility of the technical process, as a political approach may dominate the process given the stalemate in EU-Turkey relations and rising concerns regarding the possible burdens that the readmission agreement may

23 Kemal Kirişci, “Will the Readmission Agreement bring the EU and Turkey together or pull them part?” Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) Commentary, 4 February 2014.

24 It sets out the legislation and all other measures that Turkey needs to implement under four blocks, namely (1) Document Security; (2) Migration and border management; (3) Public order and security; and (4) Fundamental Rights in order to achieve visa liberalization.

25 This concern was echoed by an official of the Ministry of European Affairs that was interviewed by the author.
create for Turkey. It goes without saying that the current refugee crisis may also have a substantial impact on these talks.

**Migration Nexus**

When Turkey’s visa policy is discussed, the so-called liberal visa regime elaborated above becomes the center of debate. However, it is indeed a reality that state sovereignty and territorial control remain important and there will be always be some countries that will be subject to visa obligations due to the reciprocity principle or specific bilateral state relations. Thus, the management of visa regulations remains important to the extent regulations of cross-border movements are guided by universal principles such as uniformity, transparency, and impartiality. Additionally, avenues for appeal against visa refusals and revocations should exist.

The recent migration reform through the adoption of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) brings some opportunities for better adherence to mentioned principles such as transparent rules and avenues for appeal. With the LFIP, the requirements for the issuance of visas and processing a visa application were better stipulated. Although the new system is not fully functional yet, the visa is designed as a tool for only short-term mobility (tourism, business, family visit etc.) and needs to be delineated better from migration related movements, even if it regulates entry and admission to the country.

The key actors and inter-institutional coordination are also important aspects to take into account in the management of visa regulations. With the adoption of the LFIP, the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) became a competent authority together with the MFA to ensure the provisions of the LFIP are implemented in a consistent way.

Given this background, it will not be misleading to state that despite the significance of the MFA’s role on the direction of visa policies in Turkey, the newly established DGMM will also play a crucial role in the near future, especially once the institutionalization of the directorate is completed including its consular activities abroad. In addition, since the DGMM has also a clear mandate of guiding migration policies, the concerns related to migration or other security issues related to cross-border mobility of foreigners may enter more blatantly into the agenda.

26 The new system introduces two main types of visas which are entry visa for the purposes of tourism, business, family visits etc., for stays exceeding no more than three months within a six month period and transit visas including airport transit visa. The types of visas will be regulated in detailed by the secondary legislation under preparation. Please find more detailed analysis on Turkey’s new visa system: Meral Açikgöz and Hakki Onur Arıner, “Turkey’s new law on foreigners and international protection: An introduction,” *Turkish Migration Studies Group at Oxford*, [https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/Publications/Briefings/TurkMiS/Brief_2_Ariner_Acikgoz_2014.pdf](https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/Publications/Briefings/TurkMiS/Brief_2_Ariner_Acikgoz_2014.pdf)
of Turkey once the DGMM completes its institutionalization process within the country and in abroad.

These concerns were elaborated on in an interview the author conducted with a senior migrant expert from the UK:

We do not have major problems with Turkey’s liberal visa policy except Iranians who are exempted from Turkish visas and come to the UK through Turkey; we are rather concerned about the quality of visas as they are issued without detailed and proper checks when the visa applications are lodged in the consular missions of Turkey. We see, for example, Algerian nationals unemployed in their countries holding Turkish visas and apprehended in Bulgaria while crossing the Turkish-Bulgarian border. Furthermore, we have difficulties understanding the system as there is no uniformity and transparency of the visa processing system; we hope that the DGMM will take necessary actions since the LFIP introduces a unified system in visa processing and that we will be able to access visa related statistics such as visa refusal, issuance percentages, and visas issued in accordance with different purposes.  

This concern has partially been taken into consideration and as the MFA official stated, they have recently informed their consular mission through a circular to ensure consistency for visa application in each mission.

However, there are still indications about the MFA’s influential authority for the continuation of more flexible visa policies. Firstly, the e-visa system introduced in April 2013 as a massive project of the MFA will be at the core of visa policy of Turkey. Furthermore, based on the author’s discussions with newly established migration administration bureaucrats and pioneers of migration reform, it can also be asserted that the DGMM would like to handle visa issues separately from migration related movements and do not opt for very restrictive visa policies, which they perceive as against human dignity. As stated by the DGMM official, smooth solutions are being sought as not to disrupt the handiness of e-visa and flexibility of visa policy as the DGMM has a mandate to make the e-visa consistent with the requirements listed in the new law (conditions for issuing a visa.).  

Furthermore, under Article 18 of the LFIP, the Council of Ministers is given massive power over visa politics; this includes the power to lift visas requirements (determining which nationalities require a visa and which are exempted) as well as to determine the time limits of visas for specific countries.

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27 Interview conducted with UK Embassy official in June 2014.
28 Interview with DGMM official conducted in June 2014.
Conclusion

Turkey has formed a visa policy over the years guided by incentives rather than concerns. However, migration issues have the potential to make it more difficult for Turkey to continue this policy given the EU’s role on migration discussions with Turkey in relation to the visa liberalization dialogue and the increasing irregular migratory flows to the EU through Turkey. Yet, Turkey’s main visa policy actors – namely the MFA and the DGMM – seem to still be in favor of a liberal visa policy. Turkey needs to undertake a comprehensive analysis of its current visa policy in order to better evaluate its ability to address the salient migration issues occupying the world’s agenda. DGMM and MFA also need to cooperate better in the policy making process to reflect both sides’ incentives and concerns into emerging/changing policies without hampering the country’s so-called liberal visa policy. Lastly, with regard to better adherence to universal principles of consistency and non-discrimination in visa policies, Turkey also needs to reassess its policy toward sub-Saharan African countries since Turkey’s visa policy cannot be genuinely considered liberal as long as all of these countries are subject to a strict visa regime.

“Turkey has formed a visa policy over the years guided by incentives rather than concerns.”