Turkey: The Coronavirus Emergency and its Impact on Refugees

Abstract
The coronavirus crisis hit Turkey at an already particularly difficult time. Even though rapid policy responses – notably, travel restrictions and a lockdown – kept the number of infections under control, the social impact has been severe, particularly for refugees. Most have lost their jobs and thus their income, whilst having only restricted access to social benefits too. Many no longer even have access to sufficient food, and therefore resort to negative coping strategies. This exacerbates already pre-existing disadvantages, raises concerns over the future of social cohesion, pushes refugees deeper into poverty and also undermines their international protection by the Turkish state. For the European Union’s Facility for Refugees in Turkey, this has resulted in a fundamentally new social context emerging.

Keywords: Turkey, refugees, coronavirus crisis, discrimination

Türkei: Die Coronavirus-Krise und ihre Auswirkungen auf Flüchtlinge

Zusammenfassung
Die Coronavirus-Krise trifft die Türkei in einer ohnehin schon besonders schweren Zeit. Obwohl schnelle politische Massnahmen, insbesondere Reisebeschränkungen und Ausgangsverbote, die Zahl der Infektionen unter Kontrolle hielten, sind die sozialen Auswirkungen insbesondere auf Flüchtlinge schwerwiegend. Die meisten verloren ihre Arbeit und damit ihr Einkommen; zugleich ist ihr Zugang zu Sozialleistungen eingeschränkt. Viele haben nicht länger Zugang zu ausreichend Nahrung und greifen deshalb auf negative Bewältigungssstrategien zurück. Dies verschlimmert bereits bestehende Benachteiligungen, verschärft Sorgen über den sozialen Zusammenhalt, treibt Flüchtlinge tiefer in die Armut und unterminiert ihren internationalen Schutz durch den türkischen Staat. Für das EU-Programm Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRITS) ergeben sich daraus fundamentale Veränderungen der sozialen Kontexte.

Schlagworte: Türkei, Flüchtlinge, Coronavirus-Krise, Diskriminierung
1. Introduction

«The COVID-19 crisis [...] could not have come at a worse time for Turkey», Ayca Tekin-Koru (2020) argued, continuing that: «It was a time of mounting economic and political tensions.» While the country was still struggling to overcome the adverse effects of the recession of 2018, in the early months of 2020 a major counteroffensive against the Syrian government was launched. This was followed by a stand-off with the European Union over matters of further support from the latter and of onward migration. Meanwhile, a ceasefire in Idlib province in north-west Syria was agreed in March and still held in July. Only a handful of Syrian refugees continued to cross into Turkey; on some days, there were only 30 arrivals recorded.

Already before the pandemic, Syrian and other refugees had been severely disadvantaged. Legally speaking, Turkey is a signatory to the United Nations’ 1951 Refugee Convention – though with the geographic limitation of only including refugees from Europe. Syrians are only granted «temporary protection», and thus have only a precarious status. Turkey has also not signed the relevant International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions on migrant workers, so that those in employment face additional discrimination. Of the 3 to 3.5 million Syrians and 440,000 other refugees living in Turkey, 1.7 million receive Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) assistance – with 71% living in poverty (earning less than TRY 284 per month (~EUR 45)) in September 2019 and 24% even in extreme poverty (earning TRY 165 (~EUR 26) or less in the same time period (for a recent overview see IOM 2018; Cuevas et al. 2019). Among ESSN recipients, 54% have no Turkish-speaking individual in their household, which exacerbates social exclusion (Cuevas et al. 2019). As a consequence, the country as a whole and refugees in particular have remained extremely vulnerable to sudden risks such as the outbreak of coronavirus and the socio-economic fallout stemming from the countermeasures to the pandemic.

By 29 June 2020, Turkey had reported 198,613 coronavirus cases and 5,115 related deaths – recently though, few new occurrences have been registered (Corona Tracker 2020). Because testing is limited, however, these numbers do not reflect the actual scope of infections. The Ankara-based Refugee Support Centre, Multeci Destek Dernegi (MDD 2020), reports that around 1% of the refugee population is infected with the coronavirus; this could be five times more than the

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total population, and suggests that refugees are disproportionally vulnerable. One explanation for this might be that, according to a survey by the Danish Refugee Council, «a large proportion of surveyed households [31%] present complex medical conditions [of] at least one family member with a chronic condition» (DRC 2020). This implies that, due to pre-existing health conditions, refugees are more susceptible to acute infections than other members of society.

This article analyses the impact of the coronavirus crisis itself and of subsequent policy responses on refugees in Turkey. It is based on a review of some recent surveys conducted by a range of organizations. First, I list the main underlying reports and surveys and highlight their limits; second, I sketch the policy framework. The third section then describes the impacts of the coronavirus and of subsequent policy responses, being followed by the conclusion.

2. Methodology

This contribution is mainly based on an analysis of reports on five recent surveys: the World Bank one (Cuevas et al. 2019) using the Pre-Assistance Baseline (PAB) survey of ESSN recipients in 2017; the Turkish Red Crescent one conducted in April (TRC 2020), based on a survey amongst 468 ESSN-recipient households; the DRC one also of April 2020, conducted as a survey of 290 households identified by snowball sampling in four provinces (Sanliurfa, Hatay, Kilis and Kahramanmaras); the CARE International (2020) survey of 436 households in southeast Turkey only; and, the MDD (2020) survey of 385 households in 18 cities across seven regions. The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan report (3RP 2020) is not based on a survey meanwhile, instead emerging from the gathering of evidence by its six partner organizations and their many field offices. The PAB and TRC surveys, because they sample from ESSN recipients, only cover populations eligible for social assistance; whilst they are representative of this cohort, they are not so for refugees as a whole because they omit non-ESSN recipients who are less needy, and who can thus be presumed to be mostly better off financially. The PAB, TRC and MDD surveys cover refugees or all nationalities, whereas the DRC and CARE ones – because of their narrow geographical focus – probably only include Syrians. Finally, the DRC, MDD and CARE surveys do not seem to be based on any sampling frames; it must be assumed, therefore, that they are not representative. However, because all surveys generate similar results they seem near the actual situation.
3. The Policy Framework

Turkey responded swiftly to the coronavirus outbreak. The government suspended travel from a number of countries from January, closed schools and universities, banned public gatherings and stopped international travel from 12 March – the day after the first case was reported – before introducing a curfew 10 days later (TRC 2020). Like other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the government announced a TRY 100 billion (~EUR 13.4 billion) fiscal package called the «Economic Stability Shield Programme» to diminish the economic fallout from the lockdown.

In response to the health emergency, the provincial directorates for migration management (PDMMs) have partially been suspended, limiting access to some of their services and documents (DRC 2020). For this and other reasons, it seems that also the registration of new arrivals as well as the renewal of existing registrations is affected, so that the group of unregistered refugees continues to expand (DRC 2020). Additionally, the processing and renewal of work permit applications has either come to a halt completely or at least slowed down (3RP 2020), further undermining already-restricted access to regular employment.

As a result of the coronavirus crisis, «many [other] public services that were already stretched due to the high-level of demand have now had to be paused or reduced […] or to adopt remote and reduced working modalities» (3RP 2020: 1). Further to this, financial aid provided by the Turkish government to households in need or to disadvantaged groups is not made available to people under temporary or international protection (DRC 2020). Schools have been suspended for all children and replaced with remote teaching (3RP 2020). Also, all social and protection services have been «put under severe pressure» (3RP 2020: 1). In addition, most activities in the field of integration are suspended, such as language courses or community-centre activities (MDD 2020).

However, assistance to refugees such as the EU-funded ESSN – currently standing at around EUR 18 per family member per month (European Commission 2019) – and the partly EU-funded Conditional Cash Transfers for Education – ranging from EUR 5 to EUR 10 per pupil attending school – have continued (3RP 2020; ECRE 2020a). But the agencies «in charge of processing social assistance are overstretched by the increased demand from the community» (3RP 2020: 4), as driven by increasing unemployment. Nevertheless, health services including Migrant Health Centres operated by the Ministry of Health and Migrant Health Training Centres «continue to operate» (3RP 2020: 1). Notably, «access of all individuals, regardless of whether they have social security or not, to personal
protective equipment, diagnostic tools and medication» (MDD 2020: 24) was secured through Presidential Decree No. 2399 of 13 April 2020. Therewith, the coronavirus emergency would officially be declared an «urgent situation» (MDD 2020: 24). There are even «mobile teams» reaching out to vulnerable households in rural areas it seems (MDD 2020: 4).

The German government, too, engages in Turkey to support displaced persons. Its development agency GIZ (2020) implements at least eight projects in the field, partly under the umbrella of its Support to Refugees and Host Communities (SRHC) Cluster, targeting refugees and host communities but also generally aiming at enhancing social cohesion (GIZ 2020). In June, the Federal Foreign Office and Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development initiated a two-day conference bringing together Turkish and German municipalities to exchange experiences in supporting refugees under conditions of the coronavirus crisis; another major conference is envisaged in autumn or winter, meanwhile.

However, the various policies implemented – such as the Turkish government’s aforementioned Economic Stability Shield Programme – have been criticised for being insufficient in nature (Tekin-Koru 2020). Also programmes such as the 3RP report that their «current underfunding […] is of even higher concern» (2020: 3). Indeed, as of the end of February 2020, the 3RP had secured only USD 250 million in backing (25% of the overall financial requirements), compared to a figure of USD 582 million in 2019. Further programmes by national governments – for example, those of the GIZ (2020) and the related «rapid interventions» – seem to only benefit 400 businesses and 2,550 employees, and thus have a rather limited reach.

Finally, the impact of the coronavirus crisis on refugees in Turkey is highly relevant to German authorities, agencies and non-governmental organizations because Turkey is: (a) still a candidate country for EU membership; and (b) also an immediate neighbour of the EU; (c) the German government continues to be concerned about onward migration to the EU and subsequently its own shores; and, (d) Germany remains the single most important supporter of Turkey, the EU aside (European Council 2016).

4. Severe Consequences for Employment, Businesses and Social Protection

Before the crisis, around one million Syrians plus several hundred thousand other refugees may have been in employment; because an estimated 97% were work-
ing irregularly, however, exact numbers are unknown (ILO 2020). The TRC survey concludes that

«the impact on the labour market is particularly severe in the informal employment sector where refugees are employed. […] Unemployment due to COVID-19 and economic needs/urgent problems are the two main issues reported by refugees» (2020: 4).

Skilled labour has been mostly available in Istanbul and the Aegean Region, whereas mostly only unskilled labour is to be found in Anatolia and the south (Cuevas et al. 2019). As irregular workers, these individuals are «unable to benefit from relief funds [TRY 1,200/month] introduced for those who lost their jobs, these people [refugees] are being left with no protection at all» (a lawyer on Al-Monitor 2020). In addition, «the majority of Syrian-run businesses expressed concern over having to shut down in the next few months» (3RP 2020: 2).

The World Bank survey amongst the 1.7 million recipients of ESSN cash payments shows that 82% of households no longer have a member generating income and only 1.5% receive additional remittances (Cuevas et al. 2019). According to the DRC survey meanwhile, «almost 80% indicated household finances being negatively impacted by government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions» (2020); in Kilis, this figure was as high as 93%. The MDD survey (2020), which found that 91% of households were affected financially, essentially confirms this. Further to these figures, 51% of households also report that «exploitative or hazardous work has been increasing as a result of the COVID-19 crisis» (CARE 2020: 5). Refugees come under further pressure due to issues with rent; notably, CARE (2020: 2) reports that 55% of the 426 households surveyed responded that rents were negatively affected (prices increased; threatened with eviction). In detail: 69% reported losing their job; 78% faced increasing expenses; 81% have increased debts; 19% were confronted with difficulties in accessing markets, mostly because of lack of a money (notably, single-parent households and the elderly); and, 4% have encountered problems in using their Kızılay [Red Crescent] debit cards (TRC 2020).

As a consequence, 90% of the MDD survey participants «do not have access to sufficient food» (2020: 34), and many are likely to endure hunger. The DRC consequently found that

«the majority of surveyed refugees live in a condition of economic vulnerability […]. As a result, a wide majority relied on negative coping strategies to ease financial burdens including selling assets, borrowing money from friends and relatives, spending savings when possible or reducing the quantity and quality of meals consumed per day» (2020: 1).
Other coping strategies include sending children to work (21.1 %), relocation (18.1 %) or even sending family members back to Syria (5.1 %) (Cuevas et al. 2019).

«The extensive reliance on such strategies represents an alarming indication that refugee households lack resources and social protections to sustain living expenses without a regular source of income. It is likely that reliance on harmful coping strategies will increase in the next months and limited resources available will become rapidly exhausted» (DRC 2020: 1).

Notably, the livelihoods of the most vulnerable households «will be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 government restrictions» (DRC 2020: 1). These include those with family members suffering from disabilities and/or chronic conditions – in MDD’s survey, between 25 % to 34 % of respondents –, women-headed households (up to 36 % as in Karamanmaras or 43 % in Hatay), unregistered families and households with large family units of six or more members (DRC 2020: 2) and generally households in remote and «under-served areas» (GIZ 2020: 16). These conditions will «push many vulnerable households deeper into poverty», the DRC (2020: 4) believes – especially those «not covered under any social safety net scheme» (3RP 2020: 4).

With regards to access to public services including hospitals, many refugees (52 %) report some very specific concerns about infections, not speaking Turkish and «fears of being deported (particularly in Sanliurfa)» (DRC 2020: 2). Notably, due to the

«partial suspension of the PDMMs as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, refugees are already being curtailed access to certain services and assistance as they are no longer able to renew documentation including TPIDs [Temporary Protection Identity cards] or ESSN cards» (DRC 2020: 4).

In particular, refugees are obliged to reside in a designated province and only there do they have access to public services; therefore, those who nevertheless moved to Istanbul and the Aegean Region due to better employment opportunities elsewhere – up to 10 % of those concerned – are excluded from public services and face forceful return if detected (ECRE 2020b). Presidential Decree No. 2399, mentioned earlier, was meant to address this issue with regards to the coronavirus.

Furthermore, 31 % of schoolchildren cannot access online teaching (TRC 2020: 5) due to a lack of television, Internet, smartphone, computer or tablet availability, per the MDD survey (2020: 30). Also, 61 % face limited access to hospitals – in particular, those with special health needs (TRC 2020); at 63 %, this figure is even higher in the CARE survey (2020). The MDD study found meanwhile that even 26 % of those who went to hospitals «did not have access to health services»
(2020). At least, it seems, refugees are generally well aware of the symptoms of the infection (up to 98% cognisance in Kilis), that mostly from the Internet – though few (only 15%) are well informed about available services (DRC 2020).

In addition, according to the DRC

«many humanitarian organizations were forced to downsize interventions or switch to remote modalities while many government services have also been partially suspended […] households risk being cut off from traditional support» (2020: 1).

As another consequence, 50% of men and 35% of women concluded that «there is an increase in protection risks faced by the community due to Covid-19» (CARE 2020: 7) – such as exploitation (30%), violence (80%) or early marriage (20%). 3RP partners have started to observe «a notable deterioration in individual mental health resulting from the impact of COVID-19» (2020). Finally, «interaction with host community members has almost come to an end due to social isolation» (MDD 2020: 35) – meaning that all policies with regards to enhancing social cohesion have effectively stalled.

5. Conclusion

Syrian refugees in Turkey face three-fold discrimination: (1) they are only granted a precarious protection status; (2) they are now disproportionately affected by the coronavirus crisis; and, (3) on top of this they (and other refugees) are largely excluded from regular employment and have been affected by the country’s economic downturn following the pandemic, too. So far, fortunately, infection levels seem low, but refugees have still been disproportionately hit by the policy responses and the subsequent economic and social crises. Women and female-headed households are even worse affected meanwhile, further deepening gender inequality (CARE 2020).

Notably, the economic downturn has pushed more refugees deeper into poverty, though there are important regional differences in that those in Istanbul and the Aegean Region seem to be less at risk hereof (Cuevas et al. 2019). The coronavirus crisis is also negatively affecting international protection regimes, as some find the doors of the authorities closed or are even having to return to Syria due to increasingly unviable living conditions in Turkey. Others have been forced to relocate within Turkey itself, thus being uprooted once again. The pandemic therefore «poses a serious challenge for refugees in particular because of their limited access to public services and formal employment» (TRC 2020: 4). Access to income opportunities and in particular «unemployment due to COVID-19 and
economic needs/urgent problems are the two main issues reported by refugees» (TRC 2020: 8).

The 3RP report warns that «the loss of jobs and income may lead to further competition over employment opportunities, while limited access to services could also contribute to rising social tensions» (3RP 2020: 2). One positive aspect so far, however, has been that this has not led to an increase in «intercommunity tensions»; only 13 % of respondents reported experiencing these (DRC 2020). Whereas socio-economic discrimination severely and structurally undermines social cohesion, this does not yet seem to have resulted in extensive interpersonal strife – though this certainly remains a risk.

Whilst German and European policy responses are framed and shaped by the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRITS) (European Commission 2020), Germany’s presidency of the EU will have to acknowledge the vulnerability and suffering of Syrian and other refugees there alongside contemplating how to alleviate the situation too. Finally, despite the implication in Der Spiegel (2020) that the situation could lead to more onward migration to the EU the opposite is, in fact, the more likely outcome. Because unemployment further diminishes the opportunities for Syrian and other refugees to work, earn and save money, they will not be in the position to afford the journey (or fees paid to irregular facilitators) any time soon. Therefore, the coronavirus crisis is likely to rather diminish the capability to migrate – so that those who find themselves deprived of their livelihoods also find themselves still stuck in highly challenging conditions.

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