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Symbolic Rewards as Migration Diplomacy: Crisis and Containment in EU–Turkey Migration Cooperation

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Abstract

This article aims to understand why the Turkish state actors participated in the 2016 European Union (EU)–Turkey agreement in the name of managing the so-called migration crisis. At first glance, this move may seem contrary to its interests in a context where Turkey’s accession to the EU was no longer a probable political project. In explaining Turkish state actors’ enthusiasm for the 2016 agreement which led to the containment of migrants and refugees in Turkey, the literature often highlights the question of material gains, both economic and strategic. In this article, I argue that the symbolic dimension is critical for understanding why Turkish actors participated in migration containment away from EU borders. I offer the notion of symbolic rewards to make sense of this process. These rewards brought Turkey into a “good” migration governance in-group. This article argues that there was incremental consolidation of Turkey’s active role in European migration governance well before the crisis. My findings are based on ethnographic data comprising interviews as well as participant observation at the head office of an international migration organization.

Keywords

EU–Turkey cooperation, migration crisis, migration control, externalization

Introduction: Crisis and EU–Turkey Migration Cooperation

Within the field of migration governance, a narrative is in circulation about the presumed opportunist Turkish government’s exploitation of the so-called Mediterranean migration crisis (Greenhill, 2016a; İrdem & Raychev, 2021; Kotoulas & Pusztai,

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2020). This is held to be particularly evident in 2016 when Turkey and the European Union (EU) signed a controversial declaration according to which Syrian migrants who had reached European shores were to be deported to Turkey (European Council, 2016). According to this narrative, Turkish actors were able to exploit the European migration crisis and fear of a migration invasion. In the light of reluctance on the part of EU member states to handle the supposed crisis on their soil, the Turkish government stepped in, chiefly motivated by a significant income source this would entail. This reading saw Turkey's willingness to contain refugees on its territory to receive large amounts of money and a free pass to do as they please in the Syrian conflict. Critics adhering to this narrative referred to Erdogan's "weaponization of migration" (Greenhill, 2016b; İrdem & Raychev, 2021; Kotoulas & Pusztai, 2020) argued that he instrumentalized the migration crisis for financial and political gain. The migration crisis, it was further argued, gives so-called transit and sending countries like Turkey more leverage in international negotiations, for instance with respect to trade agreements and development aid (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). Migrants were considered to be pawns for the Turkish government's instrumental manipulation of a crisis to pressure the EU for political gain.

The projected image is of chaos and supposed excessive numbers of migrants for European stability. This imagery does not envision Turkish state's response beyond the immediacy of crisis and opportunist economic gain. My argument is that an approach centered on rational, ahistorical, utilitarian interest (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Pouliot, 2008) provides a limited understanding of where we look and what we see in terms of making sense of the Turkish government's decision to intensify its cooperation with EU actors in their externalization agenda in the context of the declared migration crisis.

In particular, this crisis imagery (Cantat et al., 2023; Fraser, 1993; Steger, 2008) integral to the dominant analysis of Turkey's migration diplomacy focuses on the realm of high politics and political leaders. It conceals from view the critical role played by mid- and high-level national and international civil servants, and their part in drawing Turkish actors into a community of those who practice "good" migration governance. To understand why Turkish migration diplomacy seemed to accommodate with fervor the EU's externalization agenda, we need to go beyond positioning states as rational, interest-driven actors. Political actors do not act merely for material motives as the crisis lens suggests; they also want to be recognized as valued actors and as active contributors to the so-called international community (Epstein et al., 2018). An analysis of only the material level and of the present "crisis moment" would miss this. Instead, we must pay attention to the symbolic realm of cooperation between Turkish, EU, and international migration actors which preceded the so-called crisis. We can observe that the identity and status offered to "Turkey" in the context of the so-called crisis has been critical in understanding Turkish actors' active participation in migration diplomacy to support European externalization. Jeandesbosz and Pallister-Wilkins (2016) rightly argue, although "crisis" seemingly evokes discontinuity from the past and the "exceptional," for the large part it seems that the EU response to the declared migration crisis builds on preexisting, routine practices. This emphasis on

practice generates a more complex understanding of Turkish alignment with European externalization, surfacing an aspect that is often neglected in the migration diplomacy and externalization literature, namely the place of symbolic rewards. By symbolic reward, I mean any offer likely to enhance the image that the other person has of themselves by bringing them closer to, or even identifying with, the dominant group (Fine, 2020).

The attribution of a valued identity assigned to Turkey for its role in migration governance did not appear with the crisis but is embedded in past practices of migration cooperation between actors from the EU, Turkey, and two International Organizations (IOs). I draw primarily on an examination of two IOs, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the International Centre for Migration and Policy Development (ICMPD) which took the lead in “European-Turkey migration cooperation” since the early 2000s (Fine, 2018). We need to consider the specific role of IOs in externalizing European migration policies (Andrijasevic & Walters, 2010; Geiger & Pécout, 2010) in Turkey. These organizations strive to facilitate cooperation between EU and non-European countries through so-called technical projects, which aspire to take a neutral posture toward European interests. The “good migration governance” mantra espoused by these organizations is based on first, the premise of possible and necessary containment of migration (Chimni, 2002), seen as a factor of political destabilization. Second, it is held to be possible to control migration through the creation and enforcement of both security and humanitarian interventions, such as the anti-smuggler protocol or the Geneva Convention. Third, migration and borders are a technical problem which require the intervention of experts (Boswell, 2009). IOs, then, assert their authority as apolitical experts which provide rational, universally applicable assistance to states in the name of shared interests and technical know-how. A practice-based research framework is suited to research these characteristics.

A practice-based approach (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014) is attentive to the everyday routines of migration diplomacy. The appeal of a focus on practice lays in the view that much of what happens at the political and policy levels is made through everyday practice. Adler and Pouliot (2011, 6/7) define practice as “first and foremost” a performance in the form of patterned and competent behavior informed by background knowledge. Explanations that are reliant on the explanatory power of crisis tend to be abstracted from what happens on the ground. That is, the lens of crisis risks interpreting what is going on from a level of abstraction that loses contact with what actors actually do. Practice theory does not expect to find a correspondence between the grand, espoused claims of migration agencies and what actually happens in the day-to-day realities of those invested in their existence. Categories like “migration diplomacy” or “border regime” are only meaningful if we can identify how they are shaped and given meaning through daily, collective activities. The counterpoint to a totalizing, unilinear explanation can only be secured by treating the realm of daily practice as a site of analysis. The practice approach involves an ethnographic lens which places emphasis then on connections between what people do as a matter of routine and the knowledge framing this constitutes and sustains.

The context for my exploration is that of intergovernmental dialogues on migration, led by the IO, the ICMPD. I do not want to convey a reductive narrative in which there is no tension between these IOs and the Turkish actors, not least because “Turkish” positionality is heterogeneous, complex, and shifting. That said, I saw how Turkish migration actors were drawn into a transnational professional community with shared problematizations of “good” migration governance. As is evident from the ethnographic research, Goffman’s concept of impression management (1956) proved useful in making sense of the development of a professional community. Impression management is seen to be a process of interactivity in which one party to an encounter manages to persuade the other party to accept their version of what is going on. As we shall see, this process was a kind of courtship with the IOM and the ICMPD taking the lead.

In support of my argument, I draw on fieldwork conducted in Turkey and global governance capitals in Austria, Belgium, and Switzerland as part of my doctoral research. I conducted participant observation at the headquarters of ICMPD in Vienna and participated in “expert meetings” in Istanbul and Ankara took place in 2014. This was complemented by semi-structured interviews ($n = 72$) with Turkish and European actors in 2014 as well as in follow-up trips in 2015, 2016, and 2018 for further interviews with actors engaged in migration governance in Turkey. The interviews with Turkish professionals and migrants were an iterative part of an ethnographic investigation into how Turkish migration actors constructed their role in mobility governance in a context that was held to be characterized by crisis. I generated interview prompts connected to the participant observation stage of the ethnography. These framed the interviews (many of which were virtual). Analysis of all the ethnographic data—largely observation field notes—resonated strongly with Goffman’s (1956) impression management which in this case reflected a play of symbolic rewards within the performance of “good” migration governance.

I will first detail ways in which symbolic rewards from the ICMPD toward Turkish actors have brought them into this shared transnational community, namely, by attributing to Turkey a valued status and agency. I further argue that it is through the enculturation of Turkish actors into this transnational expert community that shaped the active participation of the Turkish government in containing migrants on its soil to “protect” EU member states from a supposed migrant invasion in the context of the 2015/2016 “migration crisis.” This was encouraged by a combination of co-opting Turkish actors to positions of leadership, assigning to Turkey the role of natural mediator between North and South, East and West, and providing opportunities to participate in professional community activities, formal or informal.

As we will see, the dialogue groups can be construed as a stage for the play of impression management (Goffman, 1956) by the ICMPD on the one hand and actors from the Turkish delegation on the other. All actors are, consciously or not, concerned to project an image of themselves that conveys how they want others to see them. Impression management provides the framework that people follow to influence how others see them. In the dialogue groups, the currency of exchange is status and positionality which I conceptualize as symbolic rewards (Fine, 2020).

Symbolic Rewards in Migration Diplomacy: Staging Expertise

Through their so-called technical cooperation programs, capacity building activities, training, and intergovernmental dialogues, the IOM and ICMPD drew Turkish actors close to their “club”—a valued transnational professional community. The important point here is that the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement was not the product of a sudden opportunist response to the so-called Syrian refugee crisis but the continuation of preexisting, routine practices which have integrated Turkish migration actors into an international expert community, valued for its modernizing practices. Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) operate in this context as “experts” without recognizing the Western provenance of their standards and explanatory framework (Mitchell, 2002). This expert community equates externalization and migration containment away from Europe as good governance (Agier, 2011; Chimni, 2002) and the explanatory notion of crisis as a taken for granted premise (Lindley, 2014). In this respect, a close look at the routine practices of migration diplomacy concerning the IOM and the ICMPD is revealing.

Even a cursory glance at the websites of these two IOs exposes audience sensitivity in their presentation of Turkey’s migration governance. Not only do they refrain from criticism, but the webpages are characterized by praise, framing the Turkish migration apparatus as competent and even exemplary. It would seem that this was in part exchange for a symbolic reward in the form of heightened status, the attribution of the valued labels of “European” and “modern” and that this attribution is enacted and reinforced by their involvement in everyday expert practices. A key attraction to this symbolic reward is the desire of Turkish actors to belong to an exclusive club associated with modernizing practices. IOM and ICMPD implicitly offered the recognition of a shared identity as a symbolic reward to Turkish actors as part of a modern club. Indeed, Zarakol (2010) argues that stigmatized states like Turkey are more sensitive to status concerns and are likely to shape their foreign policy accordingly. Historically, Turkey has often been categorized as “Not being of the ‘West’, being behind the ‘West’, not being ‘modern’ enough, not being developed or industrialized or secular or civilized or Christian or democratic enough” (Zarakol, 2010, p. 4). Repeatedly praised by the IOM and ICMPD actors in their everyday interactions with Turkish officials, representations of Turkey as a “privileged partner,” as a “neighbor,” “safe country,” “European,” and (almost) member of the club, are part of the seduction techniques that European and IO actors deployed toward Turkish actors, to gain their support in externalizing migration governance in Turkey. The repetition of messages was an important move from IOM and ICMPD. It would appear that its aim was to convince Turkish delegates that they occupied a privileged positionality. This assigned virtue was eventually deployed by the Turkish delegates in the game of impression management.

The politics of expertise does not simply concern the function of the epistemic community, but also the construction of the epistemic community. Creating an “expert” language and categorizations for migration governance is not only a way of understanding, framing, codifying, or legitimizing what is held to be an objective external

reality, it is also a source of professional status and pride based on membership of an authoritative milieu capable of conferring a sense of belonging to a dominant group. Those who see the influence of expertise as limited to organizational legitimization fail to see the social or even communal links that exist between experts, and the confidence they have acquired in their ability to analyze and solve social problems apparently objectively. This promise of a valued membership in a community of experts is also suggestive in convergent language in the mission statements of IOM Turkey, ICMPD Turkey, and the Turkish Directorate for Migration Management. Thus, the Turkish government's response to the so-called migration crisis, notably through the signing of the infamous 2016 Statement to contain migration on Turkish soil is embedded in a long enculturation process into a good governance community. Evidence for this is manifest in the Turkish delegation's participation in the two intergovernmental dialogues, namely, the Mediterranean Transit Migration (MTM) dialogue and the Budapest Process, which offers a fruitful stage for the examination of interactivity between IOs and Turkish actors. The MTM dialogue was established in 2003 to enable the ICMPD to expand its activities in the southern Mediterranean countries. It declares itself to be a technical dialogue that brings states together to network, share information, and promote common solutions to a range of migration issues (Thouez & Channac, 2006). The MTM dialogue aims for consensus by positioning "partner states" as the power holders. The informal environment aims to create synergies and allow states to talk frankly about the challenges they face and the possibilities for cooperation and coordination. As for the Budapest Process, it has been in existence since 1993 and Turkey has held the co-chairmanship since 2006. In addition to organizing expert meetings, the Budapest Process funds capacity building programs. Like the MTM dialogue, it claims a comprehensive approach through promoting information sharing and international cooperation. These instruments of global governance are led by a little-studied IO, the ICMPD (see also Hess, 2010; Cobarrubias, 2019).

It is through routine migration management practices (expert meetings, capacity building, training exercises) that actors situate themselves in and identify with a group (Wenger, 1998). This coheres with Lave and Wenger's emphasis on situated learning, according to which becoming competent in a profession requires two contextual conditions, first learning is less a formal didactic process and more about the daily participation and performances of "newcomers" alongside "old timers"; second, what participants learn is not limited to technical know-how but extends to understanding the cultural norms of a professional community. The effects of this dual learning process—the technical and the cultural—are a shift in identity. Doing and being a migration manager become fused.

From the IOs, there is what might be called a courtship process in which seduction plays a part in forming this dual identity. Turkey, it is repeatedly declared, is a useful broker between the west and non-west, a bridge between the two. The attribution of this privileged position is an element of a broader process of insertion into a professional community. It is difficult for actors to have the feeling of contributing to a community and to conceive of themselves as a real member of a group without meaningful forms of participation. Shared activities, from giving PowerPoint presentations in

expert meetings, to informal corridor chat and sharing lengthy dinners—strengthen a sense of belonging and adoption of the cultural practices associated with migration management expert communities. Access to professional cultures through informal contact of this nature strengthens a sense of belonging to a club (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014), in this case, with the expert standing of an international in-group.

Performing Leadership in Migration Diplomacy

First, we will see that the Turkish actors' apparent enthusiastic embrace of EU externalization practices is primarily because it gives them a privileged status in migration diplomacy as "expert," "modern" and most recently in a crisis situation, "savior." The Turkish delegation assumed a leadership role in the Budapest process as co-Chair with Hungary in 2010. Within this role, Turkey's delegation was assigned the formal task of mediating between the so-called origin countries ("beneficiary" states) and EU member states (the donors). Similarly, in 2014, Turkey was appointed chair of the Global Forum on Migration and Development. As "chair," IOs gave "Turkey" the status of a quasi-European state with the expertise to train other countries "further south." As a "Muslim" country, Turkey was seen by the ICMPD as advantageously positioned to make its voice heard by the "sending countries" with which it supposedly shared cultural affinities. These actors saw Turkey as sufficiently European to serve as a model for migration management further east and south, without being too European, and useful in facilitating dialogue and cooperation with supposedly like-minded "Muslim," "southern," and "origin" states (Zarakol 2010). The Turkish actors exploited this status emphasizing their ability to mediate between Europe (the donors) and the countries of the South (the so-called beneficiary states). As one officer declared that "Turkey knows both and knows what Europeans and Orientals think."¹

We can observe a similar pattern concerning the MTM dialogue. The Turkish delegation was referred to as "European" rather than a "southern" country by the ICMPD within the MTM dialogue. In meetings, European state actors took on a pedagogical posture vis-à-vis southern "beneficiary" states, who were positioned as learners from their "European" peers about how to effectively manage migration flows. In each of these instances, we can observe symbolic maneuvers which categorize the Turkish state no longer as an object of European externalization practices and interventions by IOs, but as a subject. By taking the lead in two intergovernmental dialogues on migration, Turkish officials were presented by IOs as active participants in European externalization practices, not only with regard to "good" migration governance in Turkey, but also by disseminating the notion of migration management as "good governance" to neighboring countries and further afield.

It should be noted that Turkey's categorization as "leader" and "European" reflects the attribution of a formal status without giving it access to all the rights of established members of the club. By positioning Turkey as European or chair the ICMPD and EU actors are signaling to Turkish actors that they have sufficiently converged with modern standards of good migration governance. However, this classification is fragile, as it does not extend to other sectors beyond the field of migration, as evidenced in EU

progress reports which continued to assess, evaluate, and benchmark (Larner & Le Heren, 2004) Turkey as substandard and unEuropean in many policy domains such as human rights, freedom of press, or rule of law. While this categorization within the context of these dialogues has little in the way of material consequences for Turkish actors, it perhaps reveals a more symbolic maneuver; its main objective is to create a sense of belonging in a community²—a community which conflates “good governance” with externalization practices—and is thus likely to encourage enthusiastic participation in the EU’s migration containment agenda, both pre- and post-“crisis.” Processes of assimilation of this kind do not imply that Turkish actors are successfully manipulated by relatively small symbolic concessions. On the contrary, a subtle game of impression management (Goffman, 1956) on both sides is at play. Indeed, a number of interviewed Turkish actors expressed their ambivalence with a total identification with Europe.

The presence of an attentive audience for the presentations of the Turkish actors also contributed to their sense of belonging to the in-group. In these meetings, state representatives take turns making presentations on a topic assigned by the ICMPD Secretariat. The sessions involve a series of PowerPoint presentations on specific topics, often defined by the ICMPD. In the short time available for discussion (about 15 minutes at the end of each session), participants are provided with “benchmarks” to help them manage the time and content of the discussions.³ The participants were always attentive to the presentations of the Turkish actors and exhibited respect during their speaking time. As chair, the Turkish delegate always concluded the meetings by thanking the participants for their “valuable contributions,” which is suggestive of their identification with a community in which Turkey played the role of leader.

As suggested, a practice-based approach demands attention to the apparent minutia of events under scrutiny with the aim of identifying how meanings are assembled including how actors are positioned (both physically and symbolically). This attention extends to a concern for room layout (who sits where), who draws up and controls the agenda, who has the floor, what gets discussed and how much time is allocated to speakers and then left for general discussion. As with the Budapest Process, the role of the ICMPD’s officials is to draft the agenda, the concept paper, the background paper, and the key points for the plenary discussion. This may be an attempt to cram as much into the meeting as possible; it may also reflect an anxiety to control the event. Whatever the intention, the ICMPD arguably steers the discussion. The topics discussed are in line with those prioritized by the host states; they are decided by the “steering committee” (the donor states) in the case of the MTM or by the “friends of the chair” in the case of the Budapest Process. In any case given their sheer quantity they are more like ritualized performances than knowledge producing dialogues. Given this appearance of effective control, the ICMPD was keen to present the Turkish leadership as the masters of the agenda. Of course, it is impossible to know whether this role was “internalized,” but all actors played it on stage (Goffman, 1956).⁴ If we consider that beliefs and identities presuppose their enaction through practices (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014), we can assume that the ability of Turkish actors to play their part in front of a large approving audience reinforced their conviction that they were not only members but even leaders of a club of modern’ countries.

As indicated, immersion in a group takes place through informal practices outside of meetings and sometimes leads to the creation of friendships through what can be called “*backstage* diplomacy,” many agreements are made during coffee breaks or at dinner (Christensen, 2017). The atmosphere at meetings is friendly and, despite attempts to steer a tight ship, the agenda is often relaxed. There is a familiarity among participants; most knew each other from past meetings. At each meeting, a group photo is taken and distributed to the participants. It is an “authenticated” affirmation of “team” or even family membership. Indeed, often the actors referred to a “family photo” of themselves. Cultural outings and social events were always a part of the program. Immersing oneself in “good” migration governance involves what might be called “*doing being*.” It involves participation in a group, often through serendipitous opportunities outside formal structures of dialogue (Wenger, 1998). Indeed, much of the learning takes place informally, as this participant noted: “These dialogues are more about the process than the outcome. It’s about talking, making friends, sharing ideas rather than making concrete policy decisions.”⁵ Many of the dialogue delegates even say that the main thing is happening behind the scenes:

These meetings are rather surreal experiences . . . All the good stuff happens during the coffee breaks. The actual meetings are rather long and arduous. I come here to make contacts. You get to know the right people, exchange contacts. It was easier to discuss our projects with the Turkish delegate here than in Ankara.⁶

These informal activities then foster a spirit of conviviality that perfectly complements the formal objectives of the meetings aimed at bringing the southern and European states closer together and to create social bonds among participants. This immersion process is also based on the assimilation of a common language that is intended to be universally applicable to the entire migration issue. Thus, despite the calls for policy recommendations based entirely on the facts, these informal spaces are above all places for the production of transnational migration knowledge:

Through our collaboration with ICMPD and IOM, we learned what issues were on the international agenda and what migration management solutions were recognised by the international community . . . I guess these organisations have played a role in building a common vocabulary and a shared community. And that is extremely important, otherwise there is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding.⁷

Turkey as a Model State for Managing the “Mediterranean Migration Crisis”

The positioning of Turkey as a sort of leader in good migration governance has had a significant impact on the development of Turkish migration policies and arguably the willingness of the Turkish government to sign the 2016 Statement to respond to the perceived Mediterranean migration crisis. Turkish actors have continued to play the game by presenting themselves as “modern” and “European,” striving to promote their reputation through legislative and institutional “advances” in migration control and purposeful

participation in externalization. In the context of the 2015/2016 Mediterranean crisis, EU member states held a common narrative according to which the EU could not handle alone the migrant invasion—they were overwhelmed by the numbers and lacked the capacity to receive the influx of migrants and refugees. In this situation, they needed help and assistance. The Turkish government stepped in to assist EU member states with this declared threats and was heralded as a kind of savior for Europe—protecting European territory from a threatening invasion. Thus, with the signing of the EU–Turkey Statement which had the intention of containing all migrants and refugees in Turkey, the Turkish government did not only receive funding, but also glory and praise for saving Europe from its impending invasion. To give one example, in April 2016, just 1 month after the EU–Turkey Statement was signed, the then German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Donald Tusk, former President of the European Council, visited a refugee camp in southeastern Turkey. Tusk praised the Turkish government, declaring that his visit to the camp had shown him that Turkey “is an example for the whole world on how we should treat refugees” while Merkel stated that she was “very impressed” with Turkish efforts at the Nizip refugee camp.⁸ Indeed, Turkey was consistently presented by these political leaders as a developed, modern country and as a model for others in terms of its migration governance and response to the migration crisis (a far cry from the perspective of pro migrant civil society groups and academia). Thus, we can understand this framing as a symbolic reward designed to offer to Turkey a valued status to encourage its cooperation. Such design process may not be consciously achieved but it appears to be the outcome of a courtship process.

The Mediterranean migration crisis offered an opportunity to Turkish actors to reinforce their identity as active participants in the good governance of migration. No longer would Turkey be understood as a peripheral country in European migration governance, but the Mediterranean migration crisis would position the Turkish government at the center, as a critical contributor and even “the solution” in halting the invasion of the undesired migrants and refugees from Syria and elsewhere, as signaled by a member of Merkel’s government: “In many respects he’s certainly not our interlocutor of choice, as you might imagine, but without him it won’t be possible to find a solution.”⁹ This assigned role as a country on which EU member states depended is considered here as a critical symbolic reward that helps us make sense of Europe–Turkey cooperation in light of the apparent crisis.

Assigning the role of contributor or active participant Turkish migration actors did not appear from the declared crisis but is embedded in past practices. One important way in which Turkish actors were framed as contributors is through their presentation as *generators* of expertise (rather than simply consumers of expertise from organizations like the ICMPD and the IOM). What we might call a “conceptual entrepreneur” often manufactures a knowledge of migration that resists operationalization in practice but is a useful illusion because it confers the status of an idea producer, or even a mastermind, within an organization or social group. The case of crisis can be treated in this manner (Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). This recalls Wenger’s (1998) re-conceptualization of the notion of reification. For Wenger, the reification of concepts refers to a process by which the categories created by a community acquire a life of their own and serve

multiple purposes often dissociated from the original intentions. The maintenance of a category becomes almost an end in itself, independent of the context in which it was created. The commodification of categories often serves to reinforce the authority of an organization. Wenger (1998) has argued that any community of practice must produce meaningful objects that serve as means of belonging through participation. But such objects do not necessarily correspond to an intended function. Instead, reification suggests that “forms can take on a life of their own . . . they acquire a certain autonomy from the occasion and purposes of their production” (Wenger, 1998, p. 72). In this way, entrepreneurial concepts can be at a distance from what seems to be happening, thus to be of little practical use.

Indeed, we might understand the construction of the “migration crisis” as a reified concept which has been made through governing interventions and which has taken on a life of its own, serving many purposes far removed from an empirical reality (Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). The migration crisis, understood as a useful illusion, may be entwined with a bureaucratic logic of self-serving organizations which aspire to grow their resources, legitimacy, and authority (Barnett & Finnemore, 2019). Organizations like the IOM and the ICMPD are invested in a migration crisis precisely because it opens up space for these organizations to extend their activities and grow in prestige. We might suggest that EU political actors are invested in a “migration crisis” to defend a security approach and intensified externalization practices to appease unease “at home.” Along the same lines, this concept of migration crisis enabled Turkish actors to contribute to “good” migration governance in unprecedented ways, ensuring “orderly” migration toward Europe. Thus, less than a mere depiction of reality, we might understand the concept of migration crisis as a technique of migration governance ensuring heightened status for those actors who are able to respond to the problem.

To give another example, within the framework of the Budapest Process *Silk Roads Partnership for Migration*, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with IOM, funded a report in 2014 on what was defined as “humanitarian border management.” Through this report and appeals to Turkish “firsthand experience as a front-line state,” Turkish actors were able to position themselves as “conceptual entrepreneurs.” The aim of the Turkish report was to introduce the concept of humanitarian border management and give it visibility through the Budapest Process. The direct experience of the perceived Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey was framed as a means of accumulating expertise among Turkish migration and border actors, who were then able to share their know-how with other migration actors. Thanks to their experience of the crisis as a “frontline” state, the Turkish delegation became a central actor, able to share experiences, and introduced a new and innovative way of understanding border management as entangled with humanitarianism.¹⁰ Discussion of the report at a Budapest Process meeting was limited to approving comments at the end of a long PowerPoint presentation. These comments established a polite consensus that avoided confrontation with tangible dissent within the report. At the meeting, participants praised the presentations of the Turkish representatives. Despite the limited effectiveness of the report, the Turkish government representatives were enthusiastic

(whether sincere or strategic) about the role they had played, as one Turkish diplomat stated: “Turkey is really a laboratory in migration management. We are in the thick of it.”¹¹ What was important in this staging of the Turkish initiative was less to provide a real solution than to underline Turkey’s role as a “contributor.”

This portrayal of Turkey as an actor rather than a recipient has been particularly attractive to Turkish leaders, who are hostile to the professorial posture of superiority (Hindess, 2004) often adopted by EU agencies and other IOs.

One of the main activities of the Dialogue is the establishment of expert meetings for partner states and agencies. These meetings bring together in the same room, for a period of 2 or 3 days, delegates from the ICMPD, the States concerned and partner agencies such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Frontex, and Europol. Expert meetings have been held in European centers in Belgium and Austria as well as in “hot spots” along certain irregular migration routes, such as Turkey, Malta, or Morocco. Under the aegis of the MTM, these meetings have been divided into two categories reflecting the two axes of the Process: irregular and mixed migration; and migration and development. The first category usually includes representatives from the Ministries of Interior, while the second category mainly includes representatives from the Ministries of Development and Foreign Affairs. Similar to United Nations meetings, the representatives of the partner states sit around a large table next to their national flag. French, Arabic, and English interpreters are available to facilitate the informal conversations, which are mainly conducted in French or English. In these meetings, I found that Turkish delegates often speak up and receive frequent signs of recognition in return. They are often held up as examples of good practice in migration management¹²:

It was not the Syrian conflict that led to the urgent adoption of an asylum law, we have been reforming and modernising Turkish migration policies for years, for ten years . . . Nobody had foreseen that Turkey would have to deal with more than two million refugees. But when they arrived, we were ready.¹³

Indeed, I was able to observe repeatedly how the ICMPD and certain “partner agencies” such as IOM and Frontex praised the exemplary nature of Turkish migration management during the so-called 2015–2016 migration crisis:

We have never seen a country in the midst of a crisis adopt an asylum and migration management law. There is no other country. Turkey is the first . . . Every time we sit around a table with other countries, we tell them that Turkey has done it. If you have more refugees coming to your territory, it does not diminish the quality of asylum. This is the Turkish model. It works.¹⁴

In this case, the categories mobilized during the dialogue have not only had an impact on Turkey’s group assimilation, but have indeed shaped Turkish migration policies, including the signing of a readmission agreement in 2013, the passing of a first asylum law in 2013, the creation of a national “migration management” agency—all of which

paved the way for the EU–Turkey Statement to respond to the so-called 2016 Mediterranean migration crisis. The implementation of this policy also has a form of symbolic reward: it positions Turkey as a fully “developed” state and an active player in the “international community.” The migration crisis provides a context amenable to this role.

Conclusion

I began this discussion by challenging a narrative about Turkey’s response to the “migration crisis” through its apparent acceptance to contain refugees notably through the signing of the EU–Turkey infamous 2016 Statement. This “crisis” narrative represents Turkey’s cooperation in externalization as exclusively driven by the quest for material gain and its instrumentalization of the EU’s fear of a migrant invasion. I have argued that it is reductive to understand this cooperation agreement in these terms. To grasp the real or strategic enthusiasm of Turkish actors as active participants in EU externalization, there needs a shift in lens. Specifically, a practice approach exposes the day-to-day of how Turkish actors interacted with IOs in the development of migration policies.

The crisis lens tends to be rationalist, ahistorical, and materialist. This secretes taken for granted assumptions about the delegation of “migration management” to Turkey. I have suggested that there are a number of misleading elements to this interpretation. First, there is an assumption that the Turkish government is merely acting opportunistically in accepting its active role in European externalization. Second, it does not factor in the critical role of IOs in shaping migration cooperation between the EU and Turkish actors over time. Third, the site of analysis is at the level of routine practices from which subtextual meanings emerge; specifically, much of these practices operate at a symbolic level and are about building an identity as a modern state. Fourth, there is a play of positionality in which IOs characterize Turkey as a natural mediator between North and South, East, and West which also allows space for the Turkish government to exploit this role. I have argued that a practice approach to sites of migration diplomacy would reveal a different interpretation against the rationalism of crisis governance. This approach provides a reading of the symbolic level of EU–Turkey migration cooperation which suggests that Turkey’s participation in externalization is as much about the quest for a status within an expert, “modern” community as it is about material incentives. The migration crisis opened space for Turkish migration actors to reinforce their integration into this valued group, as central contributors and even saviors upon which Europe depended.

Quite paradoxically, “crisis” governance is often understood as a sudden break from routines but this article has tried to show that it is also historically rooted in incremental and cumulative practices. An exploration of EU–Turkey migration crisis governance then should not be read as governance which is driven by crisis simply as an idea. Rather, crisis is also produced through governing practices (Brassett & Vaughan-Williams, 2012) which in this case are integral to the externalization of European borders in Turkey. Crisis becomes a reified object through which expert communities engaged in migration and borders are able to thrive.

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Notes

1. I have seen this phrase repeated, in different forms, meetings, and interview between 2013 and 2019.
2. Interview with ICMPD official, Vienna, 2014.
3. This structure was replicated in multiple meetings in Turkey, Austria, and Belgium where we were able to conduct our observations between 2013 and 2015.
4. I observed Turkish leaders in this “leadership” role in numerous meetings preceding the so-called “migration crisis” between 2013 and 2016.
5. Interview with a French diplomat, September 2015, Istanbul.
6. Interview with a German diplomat, September 2015, Istanbul.
7. Interview with a Turkish diplomat, Ankara, 2014.
8. Aljazeera, EU leaders praise Turkey for its treatment of refugees, April 24, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/4/24/eu-leaders-praise-turkey-for-its-treatment-of-refugees>
9. The Guardian, Angela Merkel backs deal offering Turkey up to three billion for tightening its borders, October 16, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/16/angela-merkel-eu-backs-aid-deal-turkey-tighten-borders>
10. Interview with a Turkish diplomat, Istanbul, 2014.
11. Interview with a Turkish diplomat, Istanbul, 2014.
12. March 14, 2014, Vienna; October 23, 2014, Vienna; and May 5, 2015, Istanbul.
13. Intervention by a Turkish diplomat, December 15, 2016, Istanbul.
14. Interview with IOM official, Geneva, 2018.

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