

Immigration – Between Great Opportunities and Threats

If handled wisely, immigration can benefit everyone, says M. Murat Erdogan. If not, it can threaten democracy. He notes that immigration of culturally close groups in Turkey was long seen as part of building a national identity. Today, the focus is on developing the capacity to manage the system efficiently. Erdogan emphasises, when groups grow large and maintain a distinct identity, integration problems are almost inevitable.



Prof. Dr. M. Murat Erdoğan is a prominent Turkish political scientist specializing in migration studies, refugees, and EU–Turkey relations. He is the Founding Director of the Mülkiye Migration Research Centre at Ankara University’s Faculty of Political Science, as well as a member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Prof. Erdoğan conducts extensive public opinion research and has published widely. As a visiting researcher, he has carried out studies at several European universities and think tanks.

Dirk Bornschein: From a German perspective, Turkey is currently seen both as a country of origin for migrants and, increasingly, as a destination. As a scholar, from which angle do you approach migration?

M.Murat Erdoğan: Migration is an immensely fascinating field. I am working on migration more than 30 years. At the outset, I concentrated on the Turkish diaspora in Europe, particularly in Germany—the so-called guest workers. Later, my focus shifted more and more toward irregular migrants in Turkey, especially those from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries. More recently, together with a colleague from Mexico, I have been comparing the impact of migration on our two countries.

Turkey and Mexico are certainly different in many respects, yet they share an important similarity: in both cases, migrants tend to constitute the cheaper segment of the labor force. Social reactions to their arrival are also strikingly similar—indeed, much as they are elsewhere in the world.

There will always be new migrants; of that I have no doubt. Which is precisely why we must develop the capacity to manage the system effectively.

You say “manage”, you don’t talk about benefits?

M.Murat Erdoğan: Well, if the challenges are handled wisely, then everyone can benefit. But if they are not, immigration can have truly catastrophic consequences—posing risks not only to human rights, but also to democracy itself. Allow me, however, to add another point in this context.

Please do.

M.Murat Erdoğan: We have so far been speaking only about international migration. However, internal migration is also an extremely important phenomenon. For Türkiye, for example, internal migration can be described as the most important social, economic, and political dynamic, especially since the 1960s. Yet Turks are, generally speaking, a highly mobile society—especially within their own country. In 1950, only 25% of Türkiye's population lived in cities; in 2025, that number will rise to 93%. Every year, around three million people relocate to other cities, most of them to one of the 22 cities with more than one million inhabitants. Quite often, they end up living in places with inadequate, sometimes even disastrous infrastructure.

One might say that we have a kind of migrant mentality—a constant search for higher income and greater status. And that, in turn, is an important driver of economic development.

What role does politics play in this field?

M.Murat Erdoğan: Almost all of Türkiye's center-right political parties (including the current ruling party) are very much connected to immigrants. The ruling party can, in many ways, be described as a party shaped by migration. Many of its leading figures originate from Anatolia, including President Erdoğan himself. This background goes some way toward explaining their strong conservatism.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, the territory that constitutes modern Turkey had a population of only 11 million. Today, just over a century later, it stands at 85 million.

M.Murat Erdoğan: Exactly—and that is why Atatürk immediately pursued what we might call a form of migration policy. It had two aims: 1. to increase the population of Anatolia, but 2. to create a new Turkish national identity. To this end, it opened the door for Muslims and Turks from outside the country's borders to come to Türkiye. After the end of the Ottoman Empire, he sought to establish a nation-state—one that required the creation of a national identity that had not previously existed in that form.

Since the Ottoman Empire had encompassed numerous peoples and ethnicities.

M.Murat Erdoğan: Precisely. In that sense, Türkiye is a typical country shaped by migration. At the time, people who were considered culturally similar were deliberately encouraged to settle in Turkey in order to help build this new state.

And with what outcome?

M.Murat Erdoğan: In many respects, the process was successful. Today, there is a clear sense of Turkish identity. If one looks closely, the number of people who are “ethnically” Turkish may be dominant, but there is a Türkiye where many ethnic groups identify themselves with Turkish identity.

What other aspects of migration policy in recent decades deserve attention?

M.Murat Erdoğan: Until the 1960s, Türkiye was not, for a long time, a country of emigration. Only then did significant numbers of people begin moving to Europe, especially to Germany, France and the Netherlands. The most important change in this regard is the 1961 Türkiye-Germany Labor Agreement. Now we are talking about more than 6-7 million Turkey-originated „diaspora“ in European countries.

Then, in 2011, war broke out in neighboring Syria. Millions fled to Turkey. To this day, however, the Turkish government has not developed a comprehensive long-term policy for them. At the time, the issue was framed primarily in terms of security policy. No one expected the refugees to remain for an extended period. The thinking was short-term.

Consider this: at the end of 2012, when 65,000 refugees had arrived, the then foreign minister declared publicly that this was already too many, and that once the figure reached 100,000, no further admissions would be possible. Yet just three months later, there were more than 300,000.

The government was actually doing the right thing by implementing an "open door policy" to save the lives of refugees. But there is no doubt that this policy also had an international political dimension. The Turkish government also sought to exert political influence in the Syrian conflict, and the presence of refugees became a question of international standing, reputation, and influence.

So at that time, it was less about the migrants themselves and more about power politics, with their presence serving a political purpose?

M.Murat Erdoğan: That is correct. But in fact, this is true for every country in refugee interventions. It must be acknowledged that Turkey has shown significant action and sacrifice. Once again, the presence of refugees was not perceived as a migration issue in the conventional sense. Globally, countries increasingly look for migrants who are deemed economically useful—but refugees are something most states would rather avoid.

Angela Merkel allowed more than a million migrants into Germany in 2015/2016. Shortly afterward, however, she reached an agreement with Turkey, and the Balkan route was closed.

Several million people also arrived in Turkey.

M.Murat Erdoğan: Yes, it was five, six, perhaps even seven million.

And how did the population react?

M.Murat Erdoğan: For the first two or three years, there were hardly any complaints. That changed over time, as Turkish society realized not only that the numbers kept increasing, but also that no one seemed willing to return. The shift in public opinion was radical.

You regularly conduct surveys.

M.Murat Erdoğan: Yes, and they clearly show that Turks do not want to share their future with the Syrians. But of course, certain social realities cannot simply be reversed. At some point, it becomes too late.

But last year, 600,000 Syrians returned from Turkey to their home country, didn't they?

M.Murat Erdoğan: They did, but if you look at the numbers when the regime changed in Syria, the percentage of those returning was only 18%. Of course, 600,000 people returned to their country, mostly voluntarily. These were people whose lives became difficult in Türkiye or who were looking for a future in Syria. But there are still 2.3 million Syrian refugees in Türkiye, and they don't seem very willing to return. The future will largely depend on the Turkish government's policies.

Migration brings certain advantages, but more often it entails significant risks. Every society has a general sense of what its well-being and balance should look like. When large numbers of migrants arrive within a relatively short period of time, that balance is inevitably disrupted.

Maintaining a certain distance from newcomers is, in itself, legitimate—and it tends to reduce tolerance. And it makes no difference whether those migrants are Turkish, German, or British.

We have spoken about history, about the effort to integrate people from neighboring countries into Turkey. In the present, migration has also become an instrument of political influence. Looking at it overall, where would you locate the deeper roots of the various migration policies?

M.Murat Erdoğan: As I've said before, Türkiye, in the first fifty years of the Republic, consciously pursued a policy of accepting immigrants, both to establish an identity and to bring people to Anatolian lands. In the late 1980s, 300,000 Bulgarian Turks fleeing the oppression of the Zhirkov regime came to Türkiye in this way. Interestingly, Erdoğan was among those who objected to this migration at the time.

With the Syrian migration that began in 2011, Erdoğan took on a different role. He became a politician who saved the lives of Syrians. Moreover, he used the migration movement very successfully in international politics. Between 2011 and 2016, he constantly criticized the EU, sometimes even threatening it. But even after the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement, he maintained a balanced relationship with the EU.

The Erdoğan-Merkel dialogue gave the EU a breather; Erdoğan didn't push too hard for Türkiye's EU membership, but he developed trade and security relations with Europe. This was quite good for the EU as well. He even managed to preempt the EU's criticisms of Türkiye regarding human rights, democracy, and similar issues in this way. Refugees and Ukraine have strengthened Türkiye, and Erdoğan in particular, within the EU, transforming it into a leader with whom cooperation for security purposes is seen as beneficial.

So internally, the immigration of Syrians is a burden for Turkey...

M.Murat Erdoğan: Turkey is a country with limited resources and many economic and political problems. The number of refugees, which was 54,000 in 2011, suddenly jumped to 7-8 million, half Syrian and half from other countries. Carrying this burden is, of course, very difficult. We know how much trouble Germany faced when it took in 1 million refugees. And it must be acknowledged that there is no universal burden/responsibility sharing. The support the EU gave to Türkiye was also for self-protection, not burden sharing; we must add that as well. However, politically, the Turkish government managed the process well and was able to turn it to its advantage.

And the other? Are there perhaps collective traumas or deeper historical roots?

M.Murat Erdoğan: I already mentioned Bulgaria. Turkey has consistently sought to bring into the country migrants whom it considers, let us say, ethnically or culturally related. This distinction is even reflected in the language. We use the term “migrants” for people of Turkish descent who come to Turkey; all others are referred to as foreigners.

In addition, both the Turkish government and Turkish society have traditionally maintained a certain distance from the Arab countries. Surveys show that 80 to 90 percent of Turks no longer want Syrians to remain in the country. It has not been easy for people, because for the first time we are dealing with millions of non-Turkish migrants. This is seen as a fundamental challenge to the question of Turkish identity.

Other fears follow—concerns about job losses or rising crime. But the primary issue is identity. There is a widespread perception that Arabs will change Turkish society. This greatly intensifies emotions within society. 89% of Turkish society says "Syrians should leave." But it must be acknowledged that they are also managing to coexist.

What role does academia play in the national debate in Turkey?

M.Murat Erdoğan: Let me put it this way: Turkish academia has experienced a very productive period in these areas. Very serious studies have been conducted. However, as the issue became highly politicized, the criticisms began to become unsettling for the government. The two main problems facing Turkish academia are the inability to access official data and the lack of financial support.

Academic studies can only be conducted with the support of international institutions, and this is not easy. As you know, in the last elections in 2023, Erdoğan, known as the protector of Syrians, was forced to form an alliance with a party that could almost be described as racist – essentially far-right. Now he is under pressure to reduce the migration issue. However, even today, Erdoğan portrays a more supportive profile towards migrants. He even made a statement saying, "those who want to can stay," when the government changed in Syria and Turkish society began expecting Syrians to return.

However, conducting objective academic research is neither easy, nor do those in power (the government) adequately consider such critical findings. This limits the impact of academic research.

Does this strained relationship also have negative consequences for the media landscape?

M.Murat Erdoğan: Migration has become a kind of taboo in Turkey. Over time, mistakes made and problems experienced in process management were not well received when discussed in the media. This situation continues even now.

Are there any lessons learned from the Turkish case that might be relevant for our migration discussion in the European Union?

M.Murat Erdoğan: First of all, we need to be clear that so-called international solidarity or “burden sharing” is largely an illusion. Refugees are, in theory, supposed to be distributed more evenly. All countries are interested in skilled migrants. But when it comes to irregular migrants, every country tries to seal itself off.

At most, there is financial compensation in exchange. We did receive money from the European Union—but not from Russia, China, or the wealthy Arab states. So the first lesson is the lack of genuine solidarity.

Second, any society can suddenly become racist, especially when confronted with uncontrolled migration occurring within a short period of time. In such moments, societies react very sensitively.

And third, we must be precise about which type of migration we are discussing. There are many women here from Central Asia, for example. They work as babysitters or in other domestic roles, including caregiving. Their contribution is enormously important. The careers of many Turkish women are only possible because of this workforce from Central Asia. You have to understand, we have very few childcare facilities here.

Is that being discussed publicly?

M.Murat Erdoğan: No, everyone simply knows that it is useful.

If we were able to manage migration properly, it could become a genuine part of development.

And how would you „manage“ immigration, as you put it?

M.Murat Erdoğan: Just look at Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States—and by now Germany can also be considered a country of immigration. Let's focus on the first three. Why are they open to immigrants, and what methodology do they follow? They need labor—skilled professionals as well as people to take on more basic tasks. Canada, for instance, admits around 350,000 immigrants per year.

According to which criteria?

M.Murat Erdoğan: It is a highly bureaucratic process. Applicants must submit all documentation—bank statements, certificates, everything. And naturally, they select those whom they believe they need at that particular moment. At the same time, they ensure that immigration remains heterogeneous—people from the Philippines, Iran, Japan, Germany, Russia, and so on. In other words, there is also a security dimension: they do not want any single group to become dominant.

All of this is important for migration process management. However, we suddenly found ourselves faced with millions of refugees. You don't have the chance to look at their education level, criminal record, or other characteristics. Managing this is very, very difficult. Therefore, countries that receive regular immigration and "can select immigrants" have a much easier job, and such immigrants are a tool for development.

As in Germany, with Syrians and Afghans?

M.Murat Erdoğan: Exactly. The idea is to prevent people from clustering too strongly within their own communities. From the outset, the goal is to maximize the chances of integration. If we compare this with the history of Turks in Germany, Syrians in Turkey, the large Moroccan community in France, or Latin Americans in the United States, we see a recurring pattern. Whenever a country receives hundreds of thousands—or even millions—of people from the same nationality, integration becomes far more difficult. It increases social tensions and creates significant challenges.

You are not describing immigration as inherently good or bad.

M.Murat Erdoğan: Precisely. Its success depends on hundreds of factors. First, a country must clearly define whether it wants immigrants, from where, and with what professional background. When that clarity exists, migrants can indeed become an instrument of economic development.

But when groups become too large and maintain strong internal solidarity networks and a distinct identity, integration problems are almost inevitable.

M.Murat Erdogan, thank you very much for this interesting talk.