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The Turkish Government's Ambivalent Policy Response to the New Influx of Afghan Migrants through the Public Policy Tools

Sevinç Bermek

Department of European and International Studies, King's College London, London WC2B 4BG, UK; sevinc.1.bermek@kcl.ac.uk or sevincbermek@gmail.com

Abstract: Turkey has been a hub for migrants since the Syrian crisis and has been home to 3.7 million refugees. The literature on migration focusses largely on Turkey's response to refugees from Syria, host country citizens' attitudes towards Syrians and their integration challenges, the EU–Turkey refugee deal, and its political implications for the EU and Turkey. Nonetheless, there has been a sharp rise in the number of Afghan migrants to Turkey since the complete withdrawal of US military forces from Afghanistan in 2020. Both scholarly and grey literature highlights that Turkey has recently been an attractive hub for Afghan migrants and other ethnic minorities, following Pakistan and Iran. Nonetheless, this literature has not substantially explored the Turkish government's attitude towards the new influx of migrants. For this purpose, the article draws upon qualitative research based on secondary and grey literature (including semi-structured interviews with representatives from migration-related NGOs in Turkey). The article underpins its findings from the public policy framework of NATO (nodality, authority, treasure, organisation) by demonstrating how Turkey's ambivalent response to the refugee inflow is shaped by limited information (nodality), weak legal mechanisms (authority), exploitation of new inflow as cheap labour (treasure), and migration system restructuring (organisation, treasure) after the withdrawal of external actors like the EU and UNHCR.

Keywords: refugees; irregular migration; public policy tools; authoritarian regimes; informality; irregularisation



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1. Introduction

The literature on migration studies has focused considerable attention on Syrian refugees in Turkey following the civil war in Syria and the arrival of millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey since 2013 (İçduygu and Osseiran 2022). The literature consists of myriad empirical and theoretical studies that explore Syrians' integration into Turkey, including the education of the Syrian children after their arrival (Alakoc et al. 2022), the host country citizens' attitudes toward the new citizens, and the Syrian refugees' integration into the Turkish labour market (Şimşek 2020; Şahin-Mencütek et al. 2023; Kırdar et al. 2023). On the other hand, this flourishing literature on migration in Turkey has recently started to explore the new influx of Afghan refugees through a rich range of issues since 2019 due to the increasing political power of the Taliban and the withdrawal of US forces from the country on 15 August 2021.

As US and NATO forces began withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Taliban, the insurgent group that had been fighting against the US-backed Afghan government, intensified its offensive across the country. The Taliban quickly gained control of territory previously held by the Afghan government, including key provincial capitals. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan brought about a period of uncertainty and transition for the country, with significant implications for security, governance, human rights, and regional stability. Afghanistan has been engaged in economic and social conflict for decades, with the result that many Afghans have fled, mainly to neighbouring countries (e.g., as of 30 June 2023, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan had 2,011,500 registered Afghan nationals, and Iran was home to another 3,431,680) (UNHRC 2023).

Turkey, as a non-neighbouring country, has also been an important hub for Afghan migrants dating back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 1979. By the end of 1980, more than four million Afghan refugees had already fled to Pakistan, and over the next four years, the number grew even larger, with more than five million refugees in Pakistan and Iran combined. Despite Turkey not being a neighbouring country of Afghanistan, in 1983, the Turkish authorities amended the existing 1934 Resettlement Law for the settlement of 2000 Afghan refugees of ethnic Turkic/Turkish origin. This was the first migratory flow from Afghanistan to Turkey, and it led to an established migration system between the two countries (İçduygu and Aksel 2015; İçduygu and Karadağ 2018; İçduygu and Kirişci 2009).

Over the following decades, Turkey has become a transit country in the migratory system following the route of Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Europe, and it has played the roles of both host/destination country and a steppingstone to facilitate the movements of Afghan asylum seekers and irregular migrants targeting (Kaya 2023). Although both academic and grey literature has focused on Syrian refugees in Turkey and their various challenges, Turkey has also experienced an influx of irregular, mainly male migrants from Afghanistan over the past 15 years. Though there has been a continuous influx, a sharp rise in this number has been observed since 2019. The so-called Doha peace agreement signed in February 2020 between the United States and the Taliban set a date for the US to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, and the Taliban pledged not to attack the US and not to allow the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other affiliated terrorist groups to launch an attack on the US and its allies from Afghanistan (Sullivan 2022). Consequently, the US withdrew completely at the end of August 2021, leaving a tumultuous society with the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's swift takeover of the country (Noor 2021). Most importantly, the Taliban's takeover and the subsequent withdrawal of international aid have exacerbated humanitarian challenges in Afghanistan, including food insecurity, displacement, and lack of access to basic services (Mellen 2022).

With the tumult and lack of safety in Afghanistan under the auspices of the Taliban, Afghans have been willing to move anywhere that might be a safer haven, and Turkey has become such a destination. Regarding the pull factors for Turkey, some people were mobilised out of networks of relatives and friends in Turkey and wanted to join them and settle in Turkey, while others were encouraged to travel to Turkey with the intention of going to other parts of the world, mostly to Europe (Gurcan 2021; Pouya 2022). According to the push-pull model, Turkey has become a pull country due to its attractive 'pull factors,' which include "demand for labour, availability of land, economic opportunities, and political freedoms" (Castles 2004; Castles and Ozkul 2014). The article aims to decipher the host country's policy towards the recent influx of Afghans from the theoretical angle of public policy tools (Hood and Margetts 2007). The rationale behind the usage of this theoretical framework is to understand why the Turkish state, as a competitive authoritarian regime, has an ambivalent attitude towards the new flow of Afghan migrants and to disentangle the motives of its policy toward these migrants via the usage of this theoretical outlook that is novel to migration and refugee studies. Therefore, the article contributes not only to the literature on empirical migration studies but also to the public policy literature on authoritarian regimes—which is often neglected.

Moreover, the research contributes to scholarly migration and refugee studies by looking at Turkey as a receiving country instead of Iran and Pakistan. Turkey has already been a host to Syrian refugees, and as Tsourapas (2019) highlighted, the Turkish state as a competitive authoritarian regime under the presidency of Erdoğan capitalised on Syrian refugee rent-seeking to obtain political leverage from the EU–Turkey refugee deal, and this helped the authoritarian Turkish state's consolidation of its authoritarian rule. Therefore, it is crucial to understand Turkey's policy toward the flow of Afghan refugees, and Erdoğan's current policy should be explored in line with the Turkish state's authoritarian policy tendencies. Furthermore, Kılınç and Toktaş (2022) and Oktem (2016) explored how the EU–Turkey deal enabled the movement of irregular immigrants out of Europe, and at the

same time, Turkey used the deal as a leverage for the relationship between Turkey and the EU. Therefore, this research also considers the Turkey-EU deal as the backdrop to highlight the current policy towards irregular Afghan migrants, given the fact that the deal has been shaping the dynamics between the EU and Turkey since 2016. Therefore, the article aims to decipher the policy codes of an authoritarian regime in the case of irregular migration.

2. Methodology

The article draws upon a qualitative research methodology based on the policy response of the Turkish state towards the new case of irregular migrants via a public policy tools framework. The research design draws upon the public policy literature (Hood 1983; Lodge and Wegrich 2012), and it uses policy tools (nodality; authority, treasure, and organisation (NATO) developed by Hood and Margetts (2007) to explore Turkey's policy response to this new influx of irregular migrants. The research focusses on the case study of irregular refugees since 2019, and mainly, it looks at the Turkish government's policy response to this new case. Its analysis is based on in-depth interviews with think-tank employees working on refugees in Turkey and on grey literature and legal documents related to refugees and irregular migrants in Turkey. It is important to add the main data collection is based on grey literature, and I have conducted in-depth interviews with think tanks and organisations working on migration (Epic-Migrations, *Afgan Mülteciler Dayanışma ve Yardımlaşma Derneği—ARSA, Kırkayak*); however, the interviews were mainly used to support evidence collected by grey literature. Therefore, the core data collection is based on the secondary data analysis.

The article's analysis section is based on the four policy tools (NATO) that were developed by Hood and Margetts (2007); hence, Turkey's public policy response to the new refugees is elaborated by four public policy tools (nodality, authority, treasure, and organisation tools). As mentioned in the introduction, the core political background is based on the competitive authoritarian regime setting as well as the 2016 EU–Turkey refugee deal: legal amendments in 2013 and institutional changes with respect to migration management. The originality of this study draws upon the incorporation of policy tools into Turkey's authoritarian regime, and it blends both authoritarian and government tools (NATO). For this study, I collected data on irregular migrants and refugees in Turkey, and at a second stage, I looked at Turkey's policy attitude to this new case of irregular refugees by blending both authoritarian habitat and government resources or tools: nodality, authority, treasure, and organisation. In doing this, I have restructured this taxonomy (a.k.a. NATO) to fit both an authoritarian setting and the migration issue. For instance, the nodality tools leverage the central role of government in the information network to influence public opinion, public attitudes, and behaviour. Hood and Margetts (2007) name them as effecting tools that capture relations between government and citizens. For this research, I have not only looked at the dual relationship that is called the government–citizen interface; I have also looked at the relations between government–citizens–refugees.

3. Analysis

3.1. Nodality: Information or Lack of Information?

Nodality refers to the “ability of government to reside at the centre of an information network” (Anstead 2009). In a recent article, it signifies “government's capacity to receive signals and disseminate information” and is a way for democratic governance to work more effectively as it permits governments to know more about society and citizens to know more about government (Margetts and John 2023). Furthermore, any policy intervention requires some nodality to leverage the government's capacity to receive and disseminate information. For instance, governments used this tool during the COVID-19 pandemic to influence the public health behaviours of citizens (e.g., by reporting local case levels and publishing estimated risks for different age groups and indicators of disease spread). Surely, the nodality tool needs to be used with other tools (such as authority) for an effective application of this policy intervention. As John (2013) and Hood and Margetts (2007) found,

governments are taking advantage of global policy trends and aim to preserve power and implement policy.

Though scholarly literature has been exploring historically this set of public policy tools in established democracies, recent literature highlights how the public policy tools are, indeed, similarly implemented in authoritarian regimes, e.g., (Ulybina 2022). In addition, nodality refers to the networks of relationships and interactions among actors involved in policy processes. In the context of Afghan refugees in Turkey, nodality encompasses collaboration and coordination among government agencies, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society groups, and host communities. Turkish governments have engaged in partnerships with UN agencies such as UNHCR and humanitarian organisations to aid and support Afghan refugees. These networks facilitate information sharing, resource mobilisation, and service delivery, enhancing the effectiveness of refugee response efforts. Among this rich set of nodality networks, this article looks at the Turkish government's engagement with irregular refugees, NGOs, and multinational organisations. In addition, I also explore how the Turkish government employs the public tool of nodality to affect Turkish citizens' attitudes towards refugees.

The Turkish state's migration regime has gone through significant changes in the last couple of years. Previously, Turkey's migration system was based on the reception and provision of temporary protection to asylum-seeking applicants; however, this regime has shifted towards a regime centred around the fortification of borders and aims to decrease the size of the migrant and refugee population via deportation and voluntary returns. This change in migration scheme has been in line with international trends (Ulybina 2022; Hafner-Burton et al. 2008). This change in Turkey's policy aligned with the externalisation policies of the European Union (Tsourapas 2019). Scholarly literature has long emphasised that EU's borders start with Turkey and, therefore, that in line with the deals such as the EU–Turkey refugee deal¹, Turkey aims to fight *de jure* against irregular migrants; however, when the grey literature and interviews with key stakeholders are taken into account, we find that though Turkey's migration regime draws upon the global norms, it demonstrates an ambivalent stance to a new influx of migrants that leads to the irregularisation of Afghans, especially for the newly arriving young males (Association for Migration Research 2023).

A recent migration report (Association for Migration Research 2023) states that Turkish authorities employ three core mechanisms for maintaining this irregularity. A recent migration report (Association for Migration Research 2023) states that Turkish authorities employ three core mechanisms for maintaining this irregularity. The first mechanism is the requirement that an irregular migrant should lodge their international protection application with the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management (PDMM). The official information regarding the registration and information is clearly indicated on the UNHRC website (UNHRC 2023). Despite this legal information, which is supplied in line with the epistemic community (The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), European Council), the state, acting through the PDMMs, delays applications. For instance, when an Afghan newcomer applies to the PDMM of a city, the officers tell them to come back in a month's time, which does not indicate when they will be notified of the decision a clear time of waiting; it may vary from two months to a year, and during this uncertain time span, applicants are not given any documentation proving the initiation application was submitted or anything of that nature; hence they remain undocumented for the period in question. As a result, the first step of response on the ground gives irregular migrants illegal status by default (Leghtas and Thea 2018; Association for Migration Research 2023).

Furthermore, the second mechanism occurs in contradiction to the nodality (information) concept; the second one is the lack of information and no provision of information to irregular migrants. The lack of information in the policy setting is not a surprise in the realm of authoritarian regimes' immigration policies, which are more restrictive than democratic institutions (Shin 2017; Hafner-Burton et al. 2008). An Afghan applicant who

would like to apply for temporary protection in line with the legislation may be informed by the PDMM that the city (to which applicants apply in the first place) may not be open to new registration without providing information on other registration cities. This lack of information exacerbates the vulnerability of irregular migrants, and it leads them to remain irregular and illegal migrants. It increases the likelihood of apprehension as they are not given any document showing their intent to register, making them vulnerable to irregularisation at best and detention and deportation at worst ([Association for Migration Research 2023](#)). Finally, the third mechanism is the default rejection, which happens mainly by young males; even though refugees obtain an appointment for Refugee Status Determination, if they are young males, they are more likely to receive a default rejection than any other age and gender category. The official authorities' rejection and low registration rates for Afghans also draw upon gender biases, as single men are considered to migrate for rational reasons ([Almasri 2023](#)).

In addition to the grey literature, based on interviews I conducted with NGOs, EpicMigrations asserted that even NGOs, the civil society organisations that specialise in refugees, do not have the capacity to collect information from PDMMs or any other government-based institution regarding the status of irregular migrants. The existing literature

([Howell and Pearce 2001](#)) portrays the government's reluctance to cooperate with NGOs as a natural phenomenon, as the NGOs are considered "agents of liberal development practices. I was told that since the legislative elections of May 2023, following the change in the leadership in the Ministry of Interior Affairs, there is an even more restrictive attitude towards irregular migrants; the government has a tendency to gather refugees from the city centres via mobile migration points that have some shuttles (called Mobile Immigration Point vehicles), and they collect irregular migrants at the mobile immigration hubs (Mobil Göç Noktaları), and they send them to provincial detention and removal centres based that were based in Catalca, Istanbul. During my fieldwork research in Istanbul, I had the opportunity to witness one of the migration collection points in action; nonetheless, there was not a single opportunity to obtain any information from the relevant representatives of these mobile immigration hubs except the refugees would be taken to the detention centres in Çatalca.

Similar to [Shin \(2017\)](#), withholding information and manipulating information are two of the crucial tools of authoritarian regimes ([Chen and Xu 2017](#); [Chan 2024](#)). They do it mainly for their own citizens for propaganda purposes; however, authoritarian regimes also use this tactic for other incoming irregular foreign citizens. Therefore, the stance of an authoritarian regime towards refugees goes hand in hand with the attitude towards its own citizens. Another mechanism, according to the Association for Migration [Association for Migration Research \(2023\)](#), is the default rejection mechanism, which is especially applied to young males. In case migrants manage to obtain an appointment for Refugee Status Determination (RSD), PDMM officers do not take into consideration the special conditions of irregular migrants in line with the accepted world norms ([Meyer et al. 1997](#); [Cole 2017](#)), and they tend to reject any interviewee who refers to economic hardship in Afghanistan. The field research also confirmed these claims as to the discriminatory treatment of applicants, and due to deteriorating economic conditions, the government has no tolerance towards any irregular migrants, and police officers are ready to detain and/or expel irregular migrants if found sans papiers. If the policy of the Turkish government towards irregular migrants is considered overall, it is clear that the current government does not have any tolerance for them; state officials aim to adopt a secretive policy towards them and other civil society organisations, as expected by authoritarian regimes ([Barros 2016](#)).

Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, the government employs three instruments towards this influx of irregular migrants: the continuous difficulties of migrants' registration to the PDMM, the lack of information and orientation to irregular migrants, and the last one is the default rejection of young male migrants. These mechanisms, when compounded

with the case of Turkey's authoritarian setting, lack of information provision to irregular migrants exacerbates the vulnerability of irregular migrants who are already desperate. Turkish authorities' usage of informality and lack of information mechanisms further enhances the irregularisation of migrants and their potential for further exploitation, detention, and deportation. I would argue they are being made 'malleable' in such a way that, when the authorities arrest and detain irregular migrants because of their being sans papiers, if there is a need for the authorities to deport them to look good to its own citizens (e.g., prior to elections, increasing oppositional voices against the refugees), irregular migrants are the first scapegoats due to their lack of documentation (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018; Karadağ and Sert 2023).

Prior to the 2023 legislative and presidential elections, the nationalist and secular political bloc had been canvassing for votes by capitalising on anti-migrant feelings; while the incumbent AKP managed to become the winner of the 2023 elections, the ultra-nationalist votes had dramatically increased and reflected on the parliamentary distribution of parties. At the same time, Turkish social media and mainstream media were using many videos that advance the false narrative that millions of Afghan migrants were crossing the Iranian–Turkey border (Bagci et al. 2023; Yılmaz 2021). While many irregular migrants arrived in Turkey in 2021, the claim that millions of Afghan migrants passed the border was false; nevertheless, the deportation of irregular migrants has been used for (mis)informing citizens prior to elections (Aker et al. 2024; Karadağ and Sert 2023). Apparently, the new AKP government, following the 2023 elections, has adopted restricting irregular migration as one of the core goals of its new term. While the public policy tool of nodality reflects the government's policies that capture the dynamics of the government–citizen interface (Hood and Margetts 2007), it is applicable to the context of migration policies, where the tool needs to inform or persuade migrants, the government, and citizens. Efforts to inform or persuade the public on various issues. While this section aimed to explore the Turkish government's stance on irregular migrants through its use of the tool of nodality, the next section will explore the authority tool that is linked to any legal and regulatory framework on irregular migration.

3.2. Authority: Between Legalism and Informality

The original framework of public policy tools focusses on authority, and according to the basic definition, any piece of paper with an official stamp on it reflects authority tools. (Hood and Margetts 2007). Authority reflects the use of law as the central means for governmental intervention and provides legitimacy of legal or official power to the government in order to force societal actors to follow legal rules (Knill and Tosun 2020). Hood and Margetts (2007) developed four tools: nodality, authority, treasure, and organisation. Each tool refers to the government's strategic position at the centre of information networks. Each tool's strategic position allows the government to disseminate information and influence citizens effectively; therefore, Hood and Margetts focus on the effecting tools of each public policy. Effecting means influencing citizens' actions based on government nudges. On the other hand, there are also detecting tools (for each public policy) that refer to mechanisms being used to gather information (from citizens) and monitor and evaluate the implementation and effects of public policies. Like nodality, it has both detecting (for many policy areas) and effecting aspects, but in the case of public policy analysis of migration, the detecting mechanism of the tool is very modest. On the other hand, the effecting tools in the authority category have a significant impact on the government's public administration and governance, and any legal amendments and regulations have implications on the public policy outcomes. As pointed out above, public policy instruments are being developed for established democracies where the rule of law has an enforceable impact on policymaking; in the case of authoritarian regimes, legal amendments lack a binding nature. To be clearer, there is often a discrepancy between legal frameworks (authority) and policy implementation. In authoritarian regimes, many authority tools are structured by competing rationales and logic, with policymaking primarily shaped in line with in-

ternational practices and remedies (such as those of developmental agencies, migration agencies, the EU, EC, UNHRC, local NGOs, and academic circles working on migration and asylum), and on the other hand, the calculated informality policy and legalism make it easier for the Turkish government to have a more flexible policy implementation and to adopt non-transparent legislative acts.

When the authority tool of public policy is applied to the context of Turkish public policy towards Afghan refugees, authority is manifested through legislative measures, administrative directives, and institutional structures established to govern refugee management. Historically, Turkey is a signatory to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols, which form the cornerstone of international humanitarian law (ICRC 2024). Regarding Afghan migration in the early 1980s following the Soviet invasion, the Turkish government adopted a legal amendment that favours Afghans with a kin relationship with ethnic Turks (ethnically Turkic background living in Afghanistan), and a defined number of this group and their families were accepted by Turkish authorities. Therefore, Turkish authorities' historical stance on refugees has been mainly based on kinship, and refugees with Turkic background (e.g., the Turkish population in Bulgaria, Crimean Tatars, and Turkmens in Iraq) have been favoured over refugees with other ethnic backgrounds (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018).

This pro-Turkic ethnic stance had changed following the Syrian war. By 2013, the influx of Syrian refugees was already substantial, and there was a clear need for a comprehensive legal framework to manage this situation effectively. Turkey adopted the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2013 for several key reasons, seeking to modernise and systematise its approach to managing migration and providing international protection. The LFIP provides the legal framework for refugee status determination and temporary protection in Turkey. In line with the LFIP amendment (Law of 4 April 2013 No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection), Article 103 of Law no. 6458 governs the establishment of the Directorate General of Migration (DGMM), which serves as the primary authority responsible for implementing refugee policies and coordinating response efforts at the national level (Directorate General 2024). As a third important legal framework related to refugees, Turkey introduced the Temporary Protection Regulation in 2014 to manage the Syrian refugee crisis. This regulation grants Syrians temporary protection status, providing them with access to basic services such as healthcare and education. It also allows them to reside legally in Turkey until it is safe for them to return to Syria (ICRC 2024).

As pointed out earlier, the 2016 EU Turkey Refugee Deal—although it only provides a legal framework—should be considered as a legally binding mechanism for Turkey's policy towards refugees and migrants. In this legal mechanism, what is the position of Turkey's attitude towards Afghans? I conducted in May 2024 an interview with the leader of the Afghan Refugee Solidarity Association (ARSA). She asserted that Turkey aims to suit the agreed points of the EU–Turkey deal points, and hence, it delivers the points concerning Syrian refugees. On the one hand, the Turkish government delivers its responsibilities in line with the EU–Turkey legal framework. On the other hand, for the other migrants, Turkey appears to follow a more restrictive approach. Moreover, even though Turkey is responsible according to international conventions that each person should be registered for temporary protection, as highlighted above, the Turkish government, via the Ministry of Interior Affairs, is taking a non-transparent approach, and instead of following the rule of law, the government provides a blend of informality and lack of information. Both informality and lack of information are key aspects of authoritarian regimes (Radnitz 2011; Chen and Xu 2017), and the Turkish government follows this informal and secretive practice when it comes to Afghan refugees. Based on an interview with the manager of the ARSA (Afgan Mülteci Dayanışma ve Yardımlaşma Derneği ARSA 2024), which cooperates with both DGMM and the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the authorities do not want to register them within the temporary protection scheme, these newcomers, but they will not say why when asked. Almasri (2023) describes this reliance of the Turkish government on illegalisation as

the ‘calculated informality’ to manage the presence of Afghans. This calculated informality becomes especially obvious when we compare it with the Turkish policy attitude towards the Syrians; due to the legal binding of Turkey with the 2016 EU–Turkey Refugee Deal, Syrians have legal status in Turkey. Based on the migration policy of illegalisation and ambiguity, [Biehl \(2009\)](#) links this ambivalent attitude of the Turkish government with the presence of Afghans, as the Afghans are particularly securitised in the Turkish context. Scholarly literature considers this calculated informality to be a deliberate tactic that has been employed by the government to tighten the territorial practices of the state ([Almasri 2023](#)).

[Mielke \(2023, p. 1109\)](#) further develops this calculated informality and considers this policy as “a strategically and purposefully applied governance mechanism reflecting a state-sanctioned mode of deregulation” in line with migration and return practices. [Mielke \(2023\)](#) applies the calculated informality mainly to India’s migration management; the informality tool in public policymaking exists in both democracies and authoritarian regimes. Indeed, informality politics are one of the key features of authoritarian regimes ([Ledeneva 2012](#); [Radnitz 2011](#)), and in the case of Turkey’s response to the presence of Afghans, both scholarly research and interviews illustrate that the Turkish government refuses to register them and incorporates them into refrains from registering the migration system. This lack of registration contributes to the perpetuation of illegalisation of Afghans in Turkey and the rise of informal bargaining (between Turkish authorities and irregular migrants), especially when Afghans face deportation ([Karadağ and Sert 2023](#)). In the case of potential deportation, Afghans use the ethnic mechanism (e.g., Turkish language, Turkic ethnicity) to convince authorities of their adherence to Turkish society norms, and, with the help of Afghan associations based in Turkey, Afghan refugees may obtain humanitarian residence permits (which require renewal every six months). Therefore, Afghan refugees face an extreme level of illegalisation under the Turkish migration policy and the legalism feature of the Turkish regime, and Afghans face treatment arbitrarily different from Syrians. This arbitrary attitude towards Afghan refugees is also understandable as a response to Turkey’s economic downturn and continuous hyperinflation since 2019. Therefore, the next section of the analysis focusses on the treasure tool aspect of Turkey’s migration policy towards the presence of Afghans.

3.3. Treasure: Fine-Tuning Calculus via Informal Employment

The treasure tool enables the government to make use of the financial resources and economic instruments available to the government, to court popularity, to buy favours, and to hire mercenaries [Hood and Margetts \(2007\)](#). Treasure resources are based on money, or more precisely, the various financial tools of governments. The treasure tools involve anything that can be freely exchanged, which can also be materialised as rewards as well as fines ([Knill and Tosun 2020](#)). If I bring the idea of the treasure tool to the context of the migration issue, treasure or resources refers to the allocation and mobilisation of financial, human, and material resources to support migration policy objectives. In the context of Afghan refugees in Turkey, treasure encompasses the provision of humanitarian assistance, social services, and infrastructure development. Turkish governments have allocated significant resources to support Afghan refugees, including funding for refugee camps, healthcare facilities, and education programs. International assistance from donor countries and organisations has also played a crucial role in supplementing Turkey’s efforts to meet the needs of Afghan refugees.

Like nodality and authority, the treasure tool also reflects a discrepancy between the legal framework and actual policies that have been applied to refugees of different origins. In addition, nodality tools (in the shape of informality and lack of information) are prevalent in the treasure. The treasure tool reflects the informal and secretive practices of authoritarian regimes such as Turkey that focus on the resources side of migration management towards the presence of Afghan refugees. It is also important to add that government—whether they have authoritarian or democratic features—would

like to minimise the cost of their policy mechanisms and that nodality tools (that is, nodality tools are information tools) help to achieve this cheaper package of policy tools (Kingdon 2014). Readers may wonder how to link the treasure aspect to Turkey's stance towards authoritarian regimes.

First, the informality tools of refugees—that is, the fact that they are not registered to a specific city following their entry to Turkey—puts these refugees into the category of irregular migrants in the country; migrants who are not registered (and even many registered ones) prefer to move to big cities, which have greater opportunities in the informal sector. Metropolitan cities such as Ankara and Istanbul are the most preferred ones due to job opportunities and existing acquaintances, which is why Ankara and Istanbul have gatekeepers. The LFIP applies, which means that non-Syrian asylum seekers can apply for International Protection Status, which formally allows a person to remain in Turkey while waiting for resettlement in a third country. However, their resettlement takes time, and their registration status allows them a year of access to health care but no access to employment. In such an uncertain and restricted (e.g., no employment opportunity) context, Afghans are obliged to travel across cities to find jobs and make a living. The lack of registration, lack of work permits, and restrictions on inter-city travel lead Afghans towards the informal job market (Karadağ and Sert 2023). Because they have no other options, they put up with terrible working conditions to survive, and they are desperate for any job. Turkish entrepreneurs that look for a cheap labour force in agriculture and sheep breeding recruit Afghan workers. Thus, the irregularisation of Afghans turns them into commodified agricultural and construction workers. Both Karadağ and Sert (ibid.) and my interview with NGO EpicMigrations that I conducted in Istanbul in Spring 2024 indicate that the Turkish government has performed a delicate calculus to balance informal employment and deportation in the absence of pressing opposition and imminent elections. The delicate calculus of the authoritarian government demonstrates that Turkish officials would like to keep resources that would be used for irregular migrants as minimal as possible.

In a way, the government implicitly would like to minimise costs by hiring the cheapest labour in the country. Furthermore, unlike the Syrians' case, the Turkish government has not done any deal with the European Union, and according to Erdoğan's speeches, the government is not willing to make any deal with external stakeholders for Afghan refugees (Daily Sabah 2021; Yackley 2021). In this respect, Turkey does not capture any monetary rent through the influx of Afghan migrants, and therefore, the state is not willing to register them for temporary protected status and, hence, is not willing to provide public services to them. Instead, the government prefers to capitalise on them via the informal recruitment mechanism. The Turkish economy fell into recession in 2018, and with the post-pandemic conditions and the Ukrainian war, the economy still has not recovered. As seen in the 2024 recent local elections, Erdoğan's political party, AKP, has lost the support of most metropolitan cities; two crucial factors have played this major loss: economic recession and deteriorating living conditions compounded with bias against refugees and migrants. The treasure tool of NATO refers to any financial activity of governments; governments would like to minimise their spending as rational actors. Therefore, from the angle of the treasure pool, the Turkish government would prefer to postpone the registration of these migrants and would opt out of their healthcare and social security burden. Instead, it overlooks their informal employment and their precarious employment conditions, and therefore, the government achieves a calculated response to migrants to minimise financial costs. In addition, this calculated policy based on informality and information helps the government to protect itself against criticism that would come from external stakeholders (EU, UNHRC).

In Spring 2024, in Istanbul, on my visit to conduct field research aimed at understanding Turkish authorities' response to irregular migrants, since the change in Minister of Interior Affairs in May 2023, the policy approach to irregular migrants has become more restrictive than ever; apparently, due to the deteriorating economy, the government aims to apprehend them (either in the city centres via shuttle of DGMM or via phone calls from cit-

izens). The vulnerability of Afghan migrants may change if there is a deal between Turkey and any other Global North countries or any other multinational institution. Given the lack of external funds for Afghan migrants in Turkey, the Turkish government would prefer to keep them confined to informal employment by denying them registration/documentation and would also prefer to capitalise on them via the deportation of large numbers of irregular migrants to manipulate Turkish citizens' perception of the government's migration policies.

3.4. Organisation: Migration Management under the Sole Body

Organisational tools are the last category of policy tools and not a large one. They are the heaviest in any government tool kit, and as policy rationale predicts, they are used the most sparingly. The organisation tool also reflects the reliance on formal organisational structures to achieve policy objectives. Many are provided not by government entities but by private businesses directed by the state, which, according to [Hood and Margetts \(2007\)](#), defines them as still policy tools of the state. Political rationality guides the use of organisation tools when, as I show in this section, organisational tools of migration policy advance the state's goals but also when used together with the tools of treasure, authority, and nodality. Organisation (institutional structures) pertains to the establishment of institutional arrangements and administrative mechanisms to facilitate policy implementation and coordination. In the context of Turkish public policy towards Afghan refugees, organisation involves the creation of government agencies, task forces, and working groups dedicated to refugee management. In line with legal changes (law no. 103) mentioned earlier, the DGMM, established in 2013, serves as the central authority responsible for refugee affairs, overseeing registration, protection, and assistance activities. Regional directorates of migration management and provincial coordination councils play a key role in coordinating refugee response efforts at the local level ([UNHRC 2024](#); [CLIP 2021](#)).

The institutional framework of the DGMM is currently the main official institution in Turkey for delivering policies related to migration and refugees ([UNHRC 2024](#)). Nevertheless, the DGMM did not immediately become the main authority following the legal amendment in 2013. In 2018, the external stakeholder, the UNHCR, withdrew from registration and the refugee status determination duty in Turkey. Since then, the sole body responsible for migration matters in Turkey has been the DGMM, which became the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) under the law (numbered 31643, dated 29 October 2021). Research highlights that under the DGMM and now under the PMM's authority, institutional barriers to registration have increased, the lack of transparency has become routine, and hence the level of irregularisation and informality has increased ([Karadağ and Sert 2023](#)).

When the organisational framework of the PMM is explored from the literature of the New Public Management paradigm, these practices of centralisation of a myriad of institutions in the executive branch highlight that their recent reorganisation (that is, the institutions) is a result of the traditional approach to government in Turkey that is a strong unitary nation–state with strong leaders ([Demir 2018](#)). Therefore, reorganisation of migration management under a single authority does not often mean an increase in efficiency, coordination, and public sector performance. Instead, the president's office was expanded as a response to the fragmentation of central government in the early 2000s. Therefore, the analysis of the institutional framework of migration aligns with the institutional changes to governance in Turkey (e.g., change in presidency system), linking different institutions (e.g., migration, housing, environment) to an overarching presidential system.

In addition to the organisation of the PMM in line with Turkey's shift to a centralised authoritarian regime, another important feature of the public policy of migration in Turkey is the lack of collaboration of the PMM with other civil society organisations, and other civil society organisations' access to irregular migrants was blocked. While civil society and its related organisations have been in decline, especially since the 2016 coup attempts ([Yabancı 2019](#)), the think tanks related to migration are also prevented from engaging with

irregular migration's humanitarian needs following their escape from conflict and violence. Nonetheless, the increasing authoritarian feature of Turkish authorities does not only influence its attitudes towards its own citizens but also toward the irregular migrants and the internationally protected Syrian refugees. Moreover, the Syrian refugees are mainly registered to DGMM and now PMM, and therefore, from the perspective of organisation public policy tool, Syrians manage to find access to core public services. Nevertheless, due to a lack of systematic organisational schemes for Afghans, the organisation tool, compounded with authority, nodality, and treasure tools, does exacerbate the irregularisation of Afghans and their vacuuming into informal employment opportunities to survive and help their families back in Afghanistan. Public policy literature highlights that governments aim to minimise their resources for any public policy issue (Hood and Margetts 2007; Knill and Tosun 2020). In this respect, the Turkish government, as highlighted in the nodality section, would prefer to postpone refugees' registration to an uncertain time and thereby refrain from any financial burden (e.g., registration, health costs, deportation costs). The government would neglect the refugees or omit the refugee problem unless there is a macro issue concerning the incumbent party's electoral success in the elections. Therefore, the Turkish government would take a rational approach by making an evaluation of cost–benefit analysis with respect to refugees. The government's reluctance to registration towards migrants also turns these irregular migrants into ghosts who would contribute to the daily activities of the informal labour market, mainly in big cities (Clark 2022).

4. Conclusions

Scholarly literature has been focussing on the Syrian refugees in Turkey; nevertheless, there is no rich literature regarding irregular Afghan refugees in Turkey following the fall of Kabul in 2021 or, to be more specific, any literature focussing on Turkey's ambivalent policy regarding this new influx of migrants. This article, instead of relying solely on theories of migration, draws upon the public policy tools identified by Hood and Margetts (2007) and incorporates them into our understanding of the authoritarian setting of the Turkish state. By blending both public policy literature and authoritarian regimes, this article provides a novel approach to understanding Turkey's response to the new irregular influx. In doing so, it employs four pillars of public policy tools that are nodality, authority, treasure, and organisation. While the original framework has been designed for democratic institutions, the framework can be deployed to understand the hybrid setting of authoritarian regimes. In doing so, the article investigates how the lack of information and the presence of informality provide the opportunity for the Turkish government to deliver an ambivalent response to the refugees. In addition, this ambivalent policy stance contributes to the fine-tuning of the calculus of the regime to keep migrants as irregular and hence to opt them out of the public burden and to capitalise on them as the form of available cheapest labour in the market. This calculus stands even more as a logical approach in the lack of a prolific deal as the EU–Turkey refugees deal for Syrian refugees. When the policy approach is analysed based on legal amendments, the lack of registration of refugees—the irregularisation of refugees—also provides a safeguard to the Turkish authorities as they do not take responsibility for Afghans through a legal stamp. Also, informality allows them to capitalise on the irregular migrants even further, especially prior to elections or during the raising of anti-migrant discourse in society. Thus, the government obtains a flexible tool in the form of the deportation mechanism. As a last tool of organisation, following the EU–Turkey Refugee Deal, the sole authority of the registration mechanism became the DGMM and then PMM in Turkey. The withdrawal of external institutions from the registration mechanism provided an opaque approach to the registration of new migrants. In addition, the organisational scheme of migration authority in Turkey took shape in line with the centralisation attempts of the Turkish state and shifted to the presidential system. The analysis of the Turkish public policy towards Afghan refugees, through the lens of Hood and Margetts's (2007) policy tools, provides valuable insights into the dynamics shaping refugee governance in Turkey. By examining the role of nodality, authority, treasure, and organisation, this

paper highlights the interconnectedness of actors, processes, and resources involved in refugee response efforts. Moving forward, there is a need for continued collaboration, innovation, and investment in refugee management strategies that promote the rights, dignity, and well-being of Afghan refugees while fostering social cohesion and solidarity within host communities.

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Note

¹ The EU–Turkey refugee deal, agreed upon on 18 March 2016, aims to manage the flow of migrants and refugees to Europe. Under the deal, irregular migrants arriving in Greece from Turkey are returned to Turkey, while for each Syrian sent back, another Syrian is resettled from Turkey to the EU. The EU pledged financial aid to Turkey to support refugees, promised to accelerate visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens, and agreed to re-energise Turkey’s EU accession talks. Turkey would take any measures necessary to stop people travelling irregularly from Turkey to the Greek islands. Anyone who arrived on the islands irregularly from Turkey could be returned there. For every Syrian returned from the islands, EU Member States would accept one Syrian refugee who had waited inside Turkey.

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