People as Pawns: Leveraging a Migrant Crisis

Brianna Goetzke | American University | School of International Service | Olson Scholars

RESEARCH QUESTION

How did factors of forewarning and perceptions of state capacity influence the negotiations and use of coercive migration leading up to the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement on Syrian migrants?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative comparison through process-tracing of the EU's and Turkey's negotiating strategies and positions within the single case of the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement
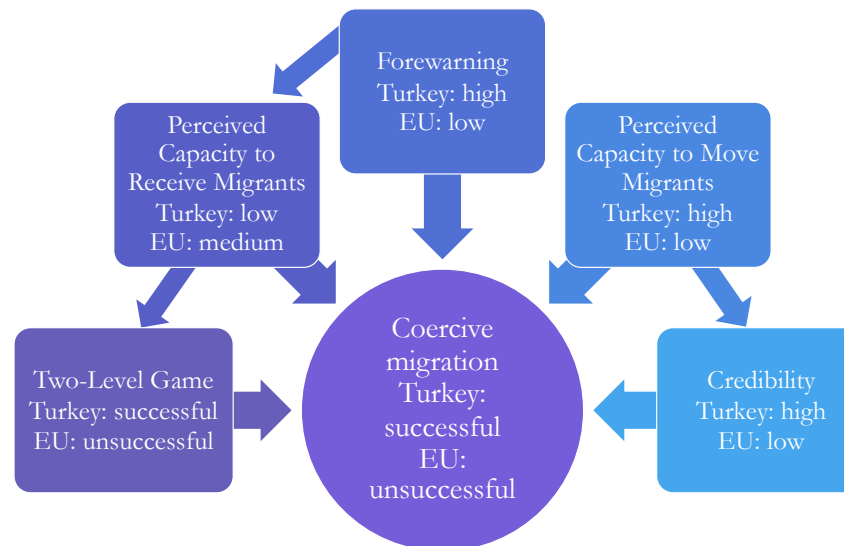
Sources: open-source statements from the EU and Turkish government bodies, international and regional news media, statistical evidence from international organizations

VARIABLES

Independent variables: forewarning, perception of state capacity to accept migrants, perception of state capacity to move migrants, credibility (to threaten or deter), success in the two-level game.

Dependent variable: success in implementing coercive migration, reaching a favorable agreement

FINDINGS

Forewarning
Turkey: high
EU: low

Perceived Capacity to Receive Migrants
Turkey: low
EU: medium

Perceived Capacity to Move Migrants
Turkey: high
EU: low

Two-Level Game
Turkey: successful
EU: unsuccessful

Coercive migration
Turkey: successful
EU: unsuccessful

Credibility
Turkey: high
EU: low

BACKGROUND

2011: The Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War begin.

2012: The first 124 Syrian refugees arrive in the EU; Turkey hosts 135,519 refugees.

2015: Migration to Europe reaches "crisis" level as more than 1 million migrants arrive; Turkey hosts over 1.5 million migrants.

2016: The EU and Turkey reach an agreement on the processing and resettlement of Syrian migrants, the prevention of border crossings, and financial and political support for Turkey.

LITERATURE

Schelling: coercion is "use of power to hurt…the very exploitation of enemy wants and fears" to achieve a goal.

Greenhill: coercive (engineered) migration is "the use of migration and refugee crises as instruments of persuasion," for which a country engineers or takes advantage of a migration flow to threaten other countries

Putnam: international negotiations between state actors tangle domestic and foreign policy needs

IMPLICATIONS

The process of the negotiations leading to the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement on Syrian migrants demonstrates that, as other negotiation and diplomacy scholars have found, power asymmetry does not always work in favor of the traditionally powerful actor. It also confirms the strong influence of the two-level game, as well as the concept that the story a coercer tells about a threat is in some ways more powerful than the reality of the threat. Perhaps more importantly, though, the negotiations show that capacity can be constructed paradoxically to help states anchor their negotiating positions, that a novel threat of coercive migration is a strong threat, that coercive migration intensifies the two-level game, and that that entire blocs of states can be threatened by coercive migration at once.