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### Securitization and Externalization of Irregular Migration: Asymmetric Interdependence and The Transformation of EU–Turkey Membership Prospects Under The Readmission Regime

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#### Abstract

*Irregular migration emerged as a central concern on the European Union's (EU) security agenda after the Cold War, becoming intertwined with an externalization strategy through which the EU has transferred external border-control functions to candidate and transit countries. Situated at the crossroads of three continents, Turkey stands at the heart of this dual pressure. This study examines how the securitization and externalization of irregular migration have transformed the EU–Turkey relationship under the readmission regime into a form of asymmetric interdependence and a "strategic trap," and interrogates how this process has reshaped Turkey's EU membership prospects and visa-liberalization objectives. Designed as an interpretive case study, the research draws on document and discourse analysis spanning the historical arc from the 1963 Ankara Agreement through the 2013 Readmission Agreement and the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement. The findings reveal that the relationship has produced a five-layered vise operating simultaneously across strategic, geopolitical, geo-economic, socio-economic, and membership dimensions, in which mutually reinforcing layers systematically constrain Turkey's international agency. By synthesizing the literatures on securitization, externalization, and asymmetric interdependence around the concept of "strategic trap," the study proposes a transferable analytical framework that explains the asymmetric cooperation patterns candidate and transit countries develop with EU border regimes. The results indicate that exit from this trap is feasible only through a multi-layered reform package executed simultaneously across legal, institutional, economic, demographic, and diplomatic dimensions.*

**Keywords:** *Securitization; externalization; asymmetric interdependence; strategic trap; EU–Turkey readmission regime.*

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#### 1. Introduction

Irregular migration ranks among the foremost issues that have shaped the agenda of world politics since the end of the Cold War. Civil wars in the Middle East and North Africa, deepening economic crises, drought, and political repression have displaced millions of people and forced them across borders. This mobility is not merely the relocation of individuals; it is a multidimensional phenomenon that reshapes states' foreign policies, border regimes, and international relations. In the twenty-first century, migratory pressure has compelled states to rethink not only their understanding of security but also their conceptions of sovereignty and international cooperation (Wolff, 2020c; Adamson & Greenhill, 2021c). In this process, irregular migration has become a priority security concern for the

European Union (EU), while turning into a heavy demographic and social burden for countries of origin and transit. Situated at the crossroads of three continents, Turkey lies at the very center of this twofold pressure. Its geographical position has made the country a natural point of reception and transit for flows arriving from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Africa, thereby placing Turkey in the position of both destination and transit country (Erdoğan, 2023; Aras & Mencütek, 2022a). This dual position has removed Turkey from the category of an ordinary migration country and relocated it to the very core of the EU's external migration management (İçduygu & Aksel, 2022).

Indeed, the "open-door" approach has rapidly turned Turkey into one of the countries bearing the heaviest burdens of irregular migration in the world (Tepealtı, 2019c; Özçürümez



& İçduygu, 2020). The magnitude of this burden is characterized not by a single agreed-upon figure but by the marked gap between official records and the estimates circulating in public discourse. Official data present a comparatively limited picture: according to Turkey's Presidency of Migration Management, the number of foreigners with a legal right of stay was approximately 4.4 million in mid-2024 (of whom around 3.1 million were Syrians under temporary protection), and, following voluntary returns, this figure declined to roughly 3.6 million by the end of 2025 (Presidency of Migration Management, 2024, 2025). In political and public discourse, by contrast, far higher figures have entered circulation; Ümit Özdağ, leader of the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi), has repeatedly claimed that the true number, including unregistered migrants, exceeds 13 million, a claim that the Presidency of Migration Management has refuted on the basis of official records (Cumhuriyet, 2022; Serbestiyet, 2024). What matters for the present study is not to establish which figure is exact, but rather that the gap between recorded data and the numbers circulating in discourse is itself an indicator of how irregular migration is securitized in Turkey. The amplification of the figure on the political stage, or its deliberate ambiguity, is a typical manifestation of the discursive construction of threat (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Huysmans, 2022a).

Even when the official lower bound is taken as the basis, this mass exceeds the population of many medium-sized European states; it leaves lasting imprints on the labor market, social services, health, education, and urbanization balances and, ceasing to be an ordinary policy problem, turns into a structural variable that shapes the country's medium-term development plans, public finances, and demographic structure (Kirişçi & Baştürk, 2023; Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a). While the open-door stance stands out as a valuable choice in humanitarian terms, the same process accumulates a heavy cost on the state's long-term resource allocation, demographic structure, and regional position (Suryantama, 2021; Toğral Koca, 2019). Moreover, this humanitarian posture has, over time, condemned Turkey to the image of a “depot for irregular migrants” in international public opinion; when set against the EU's security-first stance, a pronounced asymmetry has emerged. A humanitarian choice has thus been able to turn, in the hands of other actors, into an instrument of pressure that weakens Turkey's international standing (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, 2022).

The European Union, by contrast, has followed the opposite path, explicitly defining irregular migration as a security threat. To protect its external borders, the EU has institutionalized the closed-door stance known as “Fortress Europe,” reinforcing this stance by transferring the border-control function to non-member neighboring countries—in other words, by externalizing migration management (Geddes, 2018; Huysmans, 2022a; Bialasiewicz, 2021). Border-surveillance systems, external border funds, and operational partnerships established with third countries constitute the institutional backbone of this strategy (Cassarino, 2018; Trauner & Ripoll Servent, 2020a). One of the most concrete

instruments of the strategy is the readmission agreements signed with countries of origin and transit; these agreements form the foundation of the EU's migration policy aimed at securing external border control (Misafir, 2022, p. 64). The EU first raised the idea of a readmission arrangement with Turkey in 2002, made a formal proposal on 4 March 2003, and—after lengthy negotiations—the EU–Turkey Readmission Agreement was signed on 16 December 2013 and entered into force on 1 October 2014 (Adıgüzel, 2025). This chronology reveals, on the one hand, a swift and result-oriented EU resolve and, on the other, a Turkish approach that spread its concessions over many years (Lavenex & Uçarer, 2021).

Turkey's concessions in this process have not been limited to the readmission agreement. In order to exercise in practice the visa-liberalization right legally acquired under the 1963 Ankara Agreement and the 1970 Additional Protocol, Turkey has had to make successive major concessions (Ercan, 2024; Pekşen, 2024). First, significant economic concessions were accepted in the 1995 Customs Union arrangement (Ataseven, 2019); subsequently, despite the explicit provisions of the 1959–1960 Zurich and London Agreements, no effective opposition was mounted against the EU membership of the Greek Cypriot Administration (Arslan, 2025). During the 2002–2004 period, a broad wave of legal and constitutional change was implemented as part of alignment with the EU *acquis* (Kayserili & Edi, 2016); finally, in the face of irregular-migration pressure expressed in the millions, Turkey signed the 2013 Readmission Agreement, which functions as a barrier protecting the EU's external borders. Despite all these efforts, not even the phrase “visa liberalization” could be inserted into the text of the agreement. Yet the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* (agreements must be kept), set out in Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, is incompatible with the EU's stance in this area (Yazgan, 2022). This legal picture shows that Turkey's concessions have produced no reciprocal return; on the contrary, they have prepared the ground for further concessions.

As the process advanced, the asymmetry deepened further. The EU side sought to extract new concessions by turning Turkey's expectation of visa liberalization into a bargaining issue. By Decision No. 2/2016 of the Joint Readmission Committee established under Article 19, it was decided that the provisions concerning third-country nationals and stateless persons would apply as of 1 June 2016 (Misafir, 2022). The EU–Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016 constituted the final link in this chain; however, since it did not possess the character of a binding treaty under international law, it remained merely at the level of a political commitment. Through heavy bureaucratic obstacles, the EU advanced the €6 billion in financial support said to be disbursed “on a project basis,” took no concrete step on visa liberalization, and effectively froze the accession negotiations (Dimitriadi & Saatçioğlu, 2021c; Okay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2021). Although the majority of the criteria in the 72-benchmark visa-liberalization roadmap were met by Turkey, the process was deliberately locked by invoking headings that fall within

the domain of sovereignty, such as counter-terrorism legislation (Yılmaz Elmas, 2021a; Turhan & Wessels, 2021c). Thus, although Turkey largely fulfilled its obligations, it could not obtain the return it expected; it was unable to seize the opportunity to exercise even the acquired rights that were not explicitly recognized in the text.

What this picture implies is not a simple implementation delay; rather, it is the institutionalization of a structurally unbalanced relationship of interdependence between the parties (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a). While the EU has largely transferred to Turkey both its border security and its capacity to be shielded from political risks, Turkey has had to bear the demographic, economic, social, and political costs alone. Although initially presented on the basis of mutual benefit, the readmission regime has over time turned Turkey into a de facto extension of the EU's external border security (Aydm & Kesgin, 2021b; Tolay, 2022b). Presented on paper through the discourse of "partnership," this structure has in practice evolved into a new instance of a patron–client equation in international migration management (Greenhill, 2020b). Indeed, even the threat of "releasing migration flows" in Turkey's hands can produce only limited leverage in the shadow of the EU's power to "close the membership door" (Schimmelfennig, 2022a).

To explain this structure, the present study proposes the concept of the *strategic trap*. A strategic trap denotes the transformation of cooperative arrangements—into which a state enters on the basis of a short-term cost–benefit calculation—into a structure that, over time, narrows its political autonomy, disproportionately reconfigures the distribution of burdens, and erodes its long-term geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Unlike classical dependency or asymmetric-interdependence approaches, the concept draws attention to the dynamic, cumulative, and difficult-to-reverse nature of the process. The EU–Turkey readmission regime offers a concrete example of this concept. The resulting trap exhibits a five-layered structure operating simultaneously across the strategic, geopolitical, geo-economic, socio-economic, and membership dimensions. While each layer, taken individually, gives the appearance of an ordinary asymmetry, taken as a whole it becomes a composite vise that constrains Turkey's capacity for international agency. The theoretical detail of these five layers, together with their mutually reinforcing cyclical operation, is developed in the study's Theoretical Framework; the point to be emphasized here is that the strategic trap is not a mere description but a structural mechanism that locks the parties into specific positions over time.

The originality of this proposed concept becomes apparent only when it is assessed in relation to the existing literature. An examination of the relevant literature reveals two principal axes. The first axis focuses on the EU's external border security and the externalization of migration management (Boswell, 2019b; Lavenex & Uçarer, 2021); the second examines the humanitarian dimension of migration, migrants' rights, and the tension between human-rights norms and security discourse (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020; Carrera &

Guild, 2019b). These two strands mostly read the EU–Turkey relationship through either the lens of securitization or that of human rights. Existing studies, however, do not offer a framework that addresses, in an integrated manner, how the mechanisms of securitization and externalization have over time turned into a structural trap for a transit country such as Turkey, how they have eroded its membership prospects, and how they have rendered asymmetric dependence permanent (Schimmelfennig, 2022a; Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2022a). In other words, the literature establishes the existence of these mechanisms but is unable to name, at the theoretical level, the long-term strategic entrapment they produce for a transit country. The study aims precisely to close this gap.

Within this framework, the principal aim of the study is to reveal how the securitization and externalization of irregular migration have, under the readmission regime, transformed the EU–Turkey relationship into an asymmetric interdependence and, from there, into a multilayered strategic trap; its secondary aim is to make visible the transformative effect of this structure on Turkey's EU membership prospects and visa-liberalization objectives. Accordingly, the central research question the study seeks to answer is the following: how have the securitization and externalization of irregular migration transformed the EU–Turkey relationship into an asymmetric interdependence and a strategic trap under the readmission regime, and in what direction has this process shaped Turkey's EU membership prospects? Three subsidiary questions complement this main question: (i) how has Turkey's open-door stance affected its relations with the EU; (ii) what are the long-term structural consequences of the readmission regime; and (iii) to what practical correlates does the concept of the membership trap correspond in this relationship? The study's central argument is that these processes have transformed Turkey into a strategic buffer actor for the EU, have rendered asymmetric interdependence permanent, and have produced a multilayered strategic trap at the cost of setting back Turkey's membership prospects; owing to the cumulative nature of this structure, exit from the trap can hardly be achieved through ordinary diplomatic steps.

The significance of the study becomes apparent at several levels. At the academic level, by uniting the literatures on securitization, externalization, and asymmetric interdependence around the concept of the strategic trap, it offers an original theoretical contribution; it extends the discussion of asymmetric dependence beyond an instantaneous balance of power, broadening it through a temporal-dynamic perspective. At the policy level, by making visible the structural impasse into which Turkey has fallen in its negotiations with the EU, it produces actionable implications for decision-makers. At the social level, it facilitates an understanding of irregular migration not merely as a security or humanitarian issue but as a multidimensional phenomenon with demographic, economic, institutional, and political consequences. At the regional level, it demonstrates that Turkey's foreign-policy options in Eurasia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean cannot be considered independently of the structural limits of its relationship with

the EU. In this respect, the proposed strategic-trap framework constitutes a transferable analytical tool capable of explaining not only the EU–Turkey migration relationship but also, on a global scale, the patterns of unequal cooperation that candidate and transit countries establish with EU border regimes.

The study is designed as an interpretive case study. The data have been compiled from international treaty texts, European Commission and Council of Europe documents, Turkey's official position papers, joint declarations issued by the parties, academic sources, and current reports; the historical cross-section extending from the 1963 Ankara Agreement to the 2013 Readmission Agreement and the 2016 Statement has been analyzed within an interpretive framework that jointly employs document analysis and discourse analysis. The remainder of the study is organized as follows: the second section maps the relevant literature across three strands; the third section develops the theoretical framework that unites the securitization, externalization, and asymmetric-interdependence approaches around the concept of the strategic trap; the fourth section details the study's methodology; the fifth section presents the findings through the five-layered trap structure; and the conclusion completes the study with discussion and policy implications.

## 2. Literature Review

To grasp Turkey's migration-management relationship with the EU in a holistic manner, several literature clusters—developed independently yet substantively intertwined—must be read together. This study addresses the relevant literature around seven complementary thematic clusters: (i) migration theories that analyze the causes of migration and the structural position of transit countries; (ii) the securitization literature, which examines the framing of migration as an existential threat; (iii) the externalization strategy through which the EU transfers external border control to non-member states; (iv) the readmission regime, the principal instrument of this strategy; (v) the asymmetric-interdependence approach, which explains the power relationship between the parties; (vi) studies discussing Turkey's "open-door" stance; and (vii) the critical literature addressing the transformation of Turkey's EU membership prospect within the migration crisis. When examined individually, each cluster is seen to illuminate a particular dimension of the relationship, yet none can fully account for its structural character on its own. Bringing these literatures together under a single analytical framework therefore constitutes the study's fundamental theoretical choice; for only such a synthesis can reveal the holistic picture that renders visible the structural entrapment into which Turkey has been drawn.

Within the migration-theory cluster, the most frequently invoked framework reads mobility through push and pull dynamics: war, poverty, and political oppression in source countries displace people, while differentials in security, employment, and living standards in destination countries attract them (Massey et al., 2018; Yılmaz & Özer, 2022). Turkey's location at the crossroads of flows originating in

Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Africa offers a concrete instantiation of this model (Erdoğan, 2023; İçduygu & Aksel, 2022). By contrast, the migration-systems approach emphasizes that historical ties, kinship networks, and channels of communication are likewise decisive (Castles et al., 2020; Fawcett, 1989), positioning Turkey not merely as a geographical transit gate but, by virtue of its cultural heritage, as a meaningful center of attraction (Aras & Mencütek, 2022a; Kirişçi & Baştürk, 2023). These explanations, however, concentrate on the sources of migration and afford only limited visibility to Turkey's losses of standing in international relations. Moreover, in positioning Turkey as a carrier country, they largely leave aside how this position has, over time, turned into a structural burden and a loss of international image (Tepealtı, 2019a; Tolay, 2022c), thereby rendering the foreign-policy cost of this transformation invisible.

The securitization literature focuses on the political consequences of moving an issue into the language of security. Buzan and Wæver's (2003) framework explains how, once an issue is reframed through the discourse of existential threat, extraordinary measures can be legitimized (Miş, 2011). Huysmans (2006, 2022a) documents in detail how migration in the EU has, since the 1990s, been framed as a threat to identity, welfare, and security. This approach renders intelligible the tightening of border controls, the technological equipping of surveillance, and the proliferation of readmission agreements (Bermejo, 2009; Bialasiewicz, 2021). The EU's recourse to the language of security redefines Turkey not merely as a partner but also as a source of risk to be managed (Greenhill, 2020b; Tolay, 2022a); this redefinition, though veiled by the discourse of partnership, evolves into a mechanism that profoundly alters the nature of the relationship. Nevertheless, the securitization literature tends to center the discursive transformations within the EU, while neglecting how this discourse reproduces the long-term position of transit countries such as Turkey (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, 2022a; Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2022a). This gap constitutes one of the study's points of departure.

The externalization literature analyses the EU's strategy of carrying migration management beyond its own border. Geddes's (2000, 2018, 2022) "Fortress Europe" analyses reveal that the Union constructs its own borders through the geography of non-member neighboring countries. Lavenex and Uçarer (2021) stress that this is not merely an operational choice but a wholesale reframing of EU external relations, while Bialasiewicz (2021) argues that the border is no longer a fixed line but a mobile ensemble of institutions. Cassarino (2010, 2018) and Trauner and Ripoll Servent (2020a) show that readmission agreements and operational partnerships form the backbone of this strategy. With specific reference to Turkey, Gökalp-Aras (2021, 2022a) demonstrates that the strategy in question has turned Turkey into a de facto extension of the EU migration regime. Reinforced by EU external-border funds, joint surveillance systems, and operational cooperation, this institutional architecture has produced a network that drives Turkey not into the position of

an equal partner but effectively into that of a subcontractor (Aydın & Kesgin, 2021b; Cassarino, 2010). This picture makes it imperative to reread the EU-centered outlook of the externalization literature from Turkey's perspective.

The readmission-agreements literature focuses on the concrete instruments of externalization. Misafir (2022) establishes that these agreements are the principal pillar of the EU's external migration policy, while Adıgüzel (2025) traces the long and tense negotiation history of the Turkey–EU agreement. Carrera and Guild (2019b), examining from a critical standpoint the tensions the regime generates with international law and human-rights norms, argue that migrants' rights have been sacrificed to the language of security. In the Turkish-language literature, Batır (2017) draws attention to the structural burden the agreement has produced for Turkey as much as to the gains it has provided. Memişoğlu and Başdaş (2022a) and Dimitriadi and Saatçioğlu (2021b) document that the volume of returns realised in practice has been far more limited than anticipated and that the EU has incompletely fulfilled its visa and financial-support commitments. The fact that the obligations in the text of the agreement are framed as binding for Turkey but as flexible promises left to political discretion for the EU (Carrera & Guild, 2019b; Misafir, 2022) shows that the power differential between the parties has been entrenched not only in practice but in the text itself. These studies, however, discuss the regime largely at the institutional level; they do not systematically problematise the cumulative and irreversible burden the regime produces for Turkey.

The asymmetric-interdependence literature offers a powerful tool for explaining the power dimension of the relationship. Keohane and Nye (2012) show that, where interdependence is unevenly distributed, the stronger party can convert that dependence into an instrument of coercion. Greenhill (2020b) stresses that, within this structure, migration flows are a leverage that can be weaponised, while Okyay and Zaragoza-Cristiani (2021) characterize the Turkey–EU relationship as a “gatekeeping leverage,” yet show that this leverage remains markedly limited when balanced against the EU's power of membership conditionality. Adamson and Greenhill (2021c) focus on the lasting marks that migration crises leave on international relations, while Irgil et al. (2023a) discuss how migration diplomacy has become an instrument in electoral and political-bargaining processes. When this literature is brought together, the pattern that emerges is the following: Turkey's migration leverage is weaker than supposed, whereas the EU's power to close the door of membership is far harsher and more sustained than supposed. Migration thereby turns into a half-instrument that partly replaces the tools of classical diplomacy yet fails to produce consistent leverage (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020; Kale & Dimitriadi, 2022b); this half-ness generates, for Turkey, an asymmetry that yields constant bargaining but only rare gains.

The literature on Turkey's “open-door” stance oscillates between two axes. The first axis explains this stance through humanitarian values and regional responsibility, arguing that it has enhanced Turkey's soft-power capacity (Rizqullah et

al., 2020; Suryantama, 2021; Toğral Koca, 2019). The second axis, by contrast, focuses on the economic, social, and political costs of the stance—on the heavy pressure it exerts on Turkey's labor market, public services, demographic balance, and urbanisation patterns (Erdoğan, 2022a; Tepealtı, 2019b; Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a). Aras and Mencütek (2022a) and Kahraman (2022) trace how this stance has, over time, evolved into a practice of border management, while Tolay (2022c) critically discusses how the open-door discourse has condemned Turkey, in international public opinion, to the image of an “irregular-migrant warehouse.” Although this literature interrogates whether the open-door stance is a gain or a structural burden, studies showing in an integrated manner that both answers may be true at once remain insufficient (İçduygu & Üstübcü, 2022a; Kirişçi & Baştürk, 2023). Yet soft power and structural burden point not to two mutually substitutable realities but to two that feed one another (Erdoğan, 2022a; Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a); resolving this paradox requires a holistic reading.

The transformation that Turkey's EU membership prospect has undergone within the migration crisis constitutes a distinct front of the literature. Müftüler-Baç (2021) argues that Turkey is wedged among differentiated forms of integration. Schimmelfennig (2003, 2021, 2022d), analyzing the strategy of rhetorical entrapment that the EU applies vis-à-vis Turkey, exposes the pattern whereby the Union preserves the discourse of conditionality while closing the door of de facto membership; this analysis, however, does not sufficiently address the durable character the strategy acquired after the migration crisis. Demirsu and Müftüler-Baç (2021b) stress that the 2016 Statement bears a Realpolitik character proceeding “on uncertain grounds”; Gülmez and Kaşıkçı (2022) reveal the weight of the refugee burden on the membership prospect; and Saatçioğlu and Hoffmann (2020) show that the EU's posture towards Turkey has shifted from the classical logic of enlargement to the language of “strategic partnership.” While these studies trace the relationship's drift from a membership negotiation towards a migration cooperation, they do not sufficiently name this drift as a structural lock-in rather than an ordinary deviation.

Read as a whole, this literature map reveals a conspicuous lacuna. The securitization literature documents the discursive transformations within the EU; the externalization literature traces the displacement of border control; the readmission-agreements literature analyses the regime's institutional structure; the interdependence literature exposes the power asymmetry; and the membership literature discusses the transformation of conditionality. These clusters, however, largely proceed independently of one another, each drawing a separate picture with its own conceptual set. A framework that shows in an integrated manner how Turkey has been pushed into structural entrapment under the cumulative effect of these mechanisms has yet to mature. Aydın-Düzgüt and Balta (2022a) and Aydın-Düzgüt and Tocci (2022a) point to this deficiency, underscoring the inadequacy of the existing toolkit. One reason for this gap is methodological: most studies specialise in a single mechanism, and a tableau of the

interaction among mechanisms cannot be established (İçduygu & Üstübcü, 2022a; Lindberg & Seeberg, 2022). The other reason is conceptual: the notions of asymmetric dependence or externalization do not offer a vocabulary adequate to name the cumulative and irreversible nature of the process.

It is precisely at this point that the concept of the *strategic trap* proposed by this study serves as a bridge connecting the existing literature. The concept designates the situation in which the cooperative arrangements a state enters with a short-term calculation of gain are transformed, over time, into a structure that narrows its strategic autonomy, disproportionately reconfigures the distribution of burdens, and erodes its long-term interests. In the Turkey–EU migration relationship, this structure appears as a five-layered vise: the strategic plane, on which the EU turns Turkey into a permanent buffer actor; the geopolitical plane, on which Turkey becomes the de facto extension of the EU external border; the geo-economic plane, on which the long-term cost of migration is unloaded onto Turkey in exchange for financial support; the socio-economic plane, on which a migrant mass numbered in the tens of millions strains Turkey’s demographic capacity; and the membership plane, on which the readmission regime weakens rather than facilitates the membership prospect. Reading these five layers together shows that Turkey’s situation has ceased to be merely an instance of asymmetric dependence or of simple externalization and has become a cumulative structural trap that is exceedingly difficult to reverse. Moreover, these five planes do not operate independently of one another; each feeds the others. The weakening of the membership prospect facilitates the entrenchment of the migration burden, while the entrenchment of the migration burden pushes the membership prospect still further back (Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a; Gülmez & Kaşıkçı, 2022). The true force of the trap structure stems precisely from this cyclical reinforcement.

In sum, the literature illuminates each dimension of the Turkey–EU migration relationship to a considerable extent; yet it also lays bare the need for a dynamic and holistic framework connecting these dimensions. The greater part of existing studies treat securitization, externalization, and interdependence as separate concepts, and they often keep out of view the structural outcome that the interaction among them produces for Turkey. Analyses that treat the regression of the membership prospect as a direct extension of the migration crisis (Schimmelfennig, 2022a; Tekin, 2023b) have, for their part, not yet attained theoretical maturity. The theoretical framework developed in the following section of this study aims to close this gap by bringing together—above all securitization and asymmetric interdependence—the Fortress Europe discourse and the perspective of neoliberal governmentality. The concept of the strategic trap unites these clusters under a single analytical framework and affords the possibility of reading the migration-management relationship Turkey has established with the EU not as a policy choice but as a cumulative structural transformation. The study thereby proposes a transferable conceptual instrument that serves to

explain not only the Turkey–EU relationship but also, on a global scale, the patterns of unequal cooperation that candidate and transit countries establish with EU border regimes; in this respect, the proposed framework carries the claim of offering a general analytical contribution in the field of migration governance, going beyond a limited case reading.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical backbone of a study is not merely a list of concepts that serve to name phenomena; it is also a mode of reasoning that reveals through which mechanisms those phenomena coalesce, along which causal chain they unfold, and what kind of structure this progression produces over the long term. The problem addressed in this study is why Turkey’s migration cooperation with the EU has, over time, ceased to be a simple asymmetry and turned into a cumulative and hardly reversible structural entrapment. Rendering this entrapment visible requires more than the lens of a single theory. The securitization literature demonstrates the power of discourse but remains weak in tracing long-term structural consequences; the asymmetric-interdependence thesis exposes the imbalance of power but is limited in explaining how discourse legitimizes that imbalance; and the Europeanization approach traces processes of alignment but falls short of showing how alignment turns into a form of encirclement. This study positions these approaches not as sequential but as simultaneously operating mechanisms, and proposes to read the holistic outcome arising from their interaction under the concept of the strategic trap. Because multilayered phenomena such as migration governance can be explained neither through power calculus alone nor through discourse analysis alone, this multi-lens choice is a theoretical necessity (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020; Huysmans, 2022a). The study’s theoretical stance occupies a critical-interpretivist position, bringing into its field of analysis not only the institutional actors that produce the phenomenon but also the discursive ground that legitimizes it.

The strategic trap denotes the evolution of the cooperative arrangements that a state enters in anticipation of short-term gains into a structure that constrains that state’s long-term autonomy, disproportionately depletes its resources, and forecloses its foreign-policy options one by one. Three features distinguish this concept from classical dependency or simple asymmetric-dependence debates. First, it is a dynamic mechanism: an arrangement that appears mutually beneficial at the outset of the relationship gradually turns into a structural distribution of burdens. Second, it carries a cumulative structure: each new concession normalizes the previous one and prepares the ground for the next. Third, it exhibits a quality that is difficult to reverse: as the emergent structure is consolidated through institutional arrangements, discursive frames, and de facto practices, the cost of exit rises ever higher (Dimitriadi & Saatçioğlu, 2021c; Greenhill, 2020b; Müftüler-Baç, 2021). The observation that readmission cooperation is, by its very nature, built upon unbalanced reciprocities reinforces the theoretical ground of this cumulative entrapment (Cassarino, 2010). While the concept incorporates the institutional-lock-in argument of

classical regime theory, it departs from it on two points: whereas regime theory emphasizes the stability-generating function of institutions, the strategic-trap concept explains how those same institutional arrangements turn into a constricting cage for the weaker party (Aksoy, 2015; Krasner, 1999). The concept therefore designates not an ordinary state of necessity but a structural outcome that is constructed through the parties' calculated choices and that, over time, comes to override their will.

The first mechanism operating beneath this framework is securitization. Developed by Buzan and Wæver, this approach explains how an issue is removed from the domain of ordinary politics, reframed through a discourse of existential threat, and thereby used to legitimize extraordinary measures (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Miş, 2011). The European Union has positioned irregular migration precisely within this frame. Migration has been defined not merely as a humanitarian or managerial matter but as a category that threatens internal security, identity, the welfare state, and the border regime. This positioning at the level of discourse has translated, at the institutional level, into border-surveillance networks; at the legal level, into readmission agreements; and at the operational level, into external-border funds (Bermejo, 2009; Geddes, 2018). Securitization has led the EU to redefine Turkey not as a partner but as a source of risk to be managed. Turkey's framing in international public opinion as an "irregular migrant warehouse" is a direct consequence of this redefinition (Tolay, 2022c). Once such framing is institutionalized, it becomes difficult to reverse, because the bureaucratic apparatus, the legal instruments, and the public perception that form around the threat discourse enter a self-reproducing cycle (Bialasiewicz, 2021; Huysmans, 2022a). The failure of the humanitarian efforts that Turkey has undertaken over the years to gain the visibility they deserve lays bare the operative force of this discursive encirclement.

The second mechanism is asymmetric interdependence. Grounded by Keohane and Nye, this framework shows that, in situations in which both parties need each other but this need is distributed unequally in terms of power, the stronger party can convert dependence into an instrument of pressure (Keohane & Nye, 2012). The Turkey–EU relationship exhibits precisely such a distribution of power. The EU depends on Turkey with respect to its capacity to protect its borders; yet the instruments at its disposal—the membership door, discretionary visa liberalization, and the disbursement of financial support—function as a lever that conceals this dependence and keeps Turkey under constant pressure. Turkey's "releasing migration" threat produces only a temporary and short-lived lever and falls short of contending with the EU's structural instruments (Greenhill, 2020b; Schimmelfennig, 2022a). The sensitivity–vulnerability distinction of the classical interdependence thesis is illuminating here: whereas the EU is merely sensitive to Turkey's migration flows, Turkey is in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis the EU's membership and financial-support instruments. This gap explains why the relationship produces not an equal exchange but a continually renewed apparatus of

pressure. As Adamson and Greenhill (2021a) emphasize, migration issues are not transient crises in international relations but structural sites of intervention that generate enduring power asymmetries; the position that Okyay and Zaragoza-Cristiani (2021) term the "leverage of the gatekeeper," while seemingly empowering Turkey, in fact turns into a trap that fixes it within a buffer function.

The interaction of these two mechanisms constitutes the very core of the study's theoretical backbone. Securitization legitimizes the use of the power instruments at the EU's disposal, while asymmetric interdependence explains how effective those instruments actually are. Without discursive framing, these instruments would generate political costs; without structural asymmetry, discursive framing would not produce binding consequences. The link that connects the two mechanisms is externalization: the securitized function of border control is carried beyond the EU's geographical borders and operated through Turkey, so that the threat discourse produced internally is transformed externally into an institutional transfer of burdens (Lavenex & Uçarer, 2002; Wolff, 2020c). Two auxiliary frames complete this externalization strategy: the Fortress Europe discourse and the neoliberal-governmentality perspective. The Fortress Europe approach shows that the EU constructs its external borders not only through its own territory but also through the geography of non-member neighboring countries (Bermejo, 2009; Geddes, 2018). The neoliberal-governmentality perspective, in turn, exposes a selective rationality that divides migrants into the "wanted" and the "unwanted"; the deliberate delay of visa liberalization for Turkish citizens is a concrete example of this selectivity (Foucault, 2007; Mitchell, 2006). When combined with the force of critical theory, these frames make it possible to read the EU's border regime not merely as a functional policy choice but as a field in which a hegemonic order is reproduced (Cox, 1996; Georgi & Schatral, 2012). Turkey's positioning as an "irregular migrant warehouse" is not mere policy but also the product of a knowledge–power relation.

The most critical step in addressing the strategic trap theoretically is to read the concept's multilayered structure within a single whole. The first layer is the strategic-trap dimension: the EU has turned Turkey into a permanent buffer actor for migration control, and a buffer function has been built beneath the language of partnership. The second layer is the geopolitical-trap dimension: Turkey has de facto become an extension of the EU's external border security, and border-surveillance systems, joint operational structures, and information-sharing networks have institutionalized this extension (Ayдын & Kesgin, 2021b). The third layer is the geoeconomic-trap dimension: in exchange for promises of financial support and visa liberalization, the greater part of the long-term cost of migration has been offloaded onto Turkey, and while the promised resources are transferred piecemeal through bureaucratic obstacles, the burden on Turkey's public finances has become permanent (Akman & Çekin, 2021). The fourth layer is the socioeconomic-trap dimension: the pressure of irregular migrants on demographic structure, social

services, the labor market, and urbanization patterns has become structural (Erdoğan, 2022a; Tepealtı, 2019b). The fifth layer is the membership-trap dimension: rather than facilitating Turkey's EU membership and visa-liberalization goals, the Readmission Agreement has ironically pushed them even further away, and the exercise of acquired rights has in effect been locked (Turhan & Wessels, 2021c; Yılmaz Elmas, 2021a). The most striking aspect of this composite structure is the following: each layer, on its own, appears to be a legitimate policy choice; yet when the five layers are superimposed, they evolve into a *de facto* relationship of tutelage that constrains Turkey's capacity for international agency (Müftüler-Baç & Luetgert, 2021; Tolay, 2022b). The hidden power of the trap feeds on its apparent legitimacy.

These five layers do not operate independently of one another; a relationship of mutual reinforcement exists among them. Regression in the membership trap legitimizes the EU's migration-management demands on Turkey, while the intensification of those demands pushes the membership perspective still further back. The burden accumulating in the socioeconomic trap weakens Turkey's bargaining power, and the weakening of bargaining power deepens the geoeconomic trap. Geoeconomic dependence constrains geopolitical positioning, and geopolitical constraint, in turn, perpetuates the strategic buffer function (Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a; Gülmez & Kaşıkçı, 2022). The true power of the trap derives not from the weight of the individual layers but from this cyclical reinforcement. This cyclical structure renders visible the temporal dimension that the classical interdependence thesis cannot address, and explains why the relationship, rather than improving, grows heavier as time passes. The strategic trap is, rather than a singular bargaining failure, a process in which migration is deployed as an element of leverage and in which, through repeated strategic interactions, dependence is generated between the parties (Adamson & Greenhill, 2021d; Greenhill, 2020b). In this respect the concept carries the path-dependence debate of the critical literature into the field of migration governance and explains why the Turkey–EU relationship cannot be corrected through individual interventions; findings indicating that a similar cumulative structural lock-in operates in transit countries support this reading (Lindberg & Seeberg, 2022).

Another auxiliary line that supports the study's theoretical framework is the Europeanization thesis. According to this approach, the process of EU accession requires candidate countries to align their institutional structures and policies with EU criteria (Bulmer, 2007; Radaelli, 2016). In the 2002–2004 period, Turkey carried out an extensive wave of legal and constitutional alignment and made considerable progress under the heading of harmonization with the EU *acquis* (Kayserili & Edi, 2016). Yet, rather than opening the membership door as expected, this effort at alignment created the ground for the EU to demand new concessions from Turkey. The Europeanization process thus departed from the “membership in exchange for alignment” equation envisaged by classical theory and evolved into a “new concessions in exchange for alignment” equation. Europeanization is an

instrument that functions when it is designed as a process of integration among equals; however, when it operates under conditions of securitization and asymmetric dependence, it turns into yet another instrument that encircles the candidate country (Saatçioğlu & Hoffmann, 2020; Schimmelfennig, 2022d). The contribution of the constructivist approach should not be overlooked at this point, for the structure of expectations built around the discourse of a “European identity” has rendered the concessions Turkey made the product not of a rational calculation but of an identity-based attachment (Ertem, 2012b; Wendt, 1999). The fact that this identity-based expectation has remained unrequited is a decisive trigger in the transformation of the Europeanization process into a trap.

One criterion that tests the soundness of the theoretical framework is the degree of consistency among the data–concept–theory triad. The data layer comprises international treaty texts, European Commission reports, joint declarations, Turkey's official position documents, and implementation indicators. These data show that the EU has fulfilled its obligations belatedly and incompletely, whereas Turkey has largely met its own obligations (Memişoğlu & Başdaş, 2022b; Misafir, 2022). The concept layer comprises the concepts of securitization, externalization, asymmetric interdependence, Europeanization, Fortress Europe, neoliberal governmentality, and the strategic trap; these concepts serve to name the patterns in the data and to connect them to one another. The theory layer, in turn, contains the approaches from which these concepts are derived, with each concept linked to a theoretical lineage. The data corroborate the concepts, the concepts enrich the theories, and the theories direct the interpretation of the data. This bidirectional relationship addresses the critical literature's charge that “data and theory operate disconnectedly” (Adamson & Tsurapas, 2020; Wolff, 2020a) and lends the study an analytical integrity. In order to preserve this threefold consistency, the study treats concepts not as frozen definitions but as flexible instruments that can be refined in the light of the data (Lavenex & Uçarer, 2021); data that do not accord with theoretical expectations are treated, rather than being concealed, as valuable traces that reveal the limits of the theory.

It should also be stated clearly how the proposed theoretical framework directs the study's principal research question. The reasoning the study will follow proceeds along the following logic: first, the EU's securitization of irregular migration; then the transformation of this securitization, as it is carried beyond the borders, into an externalization strategy operating through Turkey; next, the formation by this strategy of an asymmetric relationship of interdependence; subsequently, the compression of this relationship into a five-layered structural vise; and finally, the erosion by this vise of Turkey's EU membership perspective and visa-liberalization goals in a manner that is difficult to reverse. This chain of logic also determines the orientation of the document and discourse analysis to be conducted in the methods section. The data will be read in the light of theoretical expectations; yet the theory will not be permitted to force the data—on the contrary, the

patterns that the data reveal will be used to refine the concepts anew. The same chain also signals the study's core propositions: as securitization intensifies, externalization deepens; as externalization deepens, asymmetry hardens; as asymmetry hardens, the five-layered trap becomes permanent; and as the trap becomes permanent, the membership perspective recedes. This graduated operation is, moreover, consistent with existing analyses of conditionality and the readmission regime (Schimmelfennig, 2022a; Tekin, 2023b). This stepwise progression shows that the study's theoretical architecture rests not merely on description but also on a causal reading.

This theoretical architecture offers an original contribution to the literature on three levels. At the first level, it renders visible the long-term structural consequences of the securitization and externalization approaches, joining the links of the chain that extends from discourse to structure. At the second level, it broadens the asymmetric-interdependence thesis with a temporal perspective, turning it into an instrument capable of explaining not only the momentary balance of power but also the cumulative hardening of the relationship over time. At the third level, it proposes a new conceptual framework that explains how migration-governance processes transform candidate countries' membership perspectives. The strategic-trap concept proposed by this study possesses a generalizability suited to reading not only the Turkey–EU relationship but also the unequal cooperation patterns that candidate and transit countries establish with EU border regimes; indeed, findings indicating that a similar cumulative structural lock-in operates in transit countries provide an empirical ground that supports the concept's transferability (Lindberg & Seeberg, 2022; Wolff, 2020c). In this respect the study lays claim to offering a general conceptual contribution to the field of migration governance, moving beyond a confined case reading. At the same time, the limits of the proposed framework should also be acknowledged clearly: while the framework penetrates the subject by taking securitization and asymmetric dependence as its axes, it relegates to a secondary plane such variables as economic interdependence, identity politics, and social trust. This limitation offers a fertile ground for expansion for future research and, in particular, invites the testing of the strategic-trap concept across other candidate countries and different cooperation regimes. The ensuing Methods section will elaborate on the data set through which, and the analytical techniques by which, this theoretical architecture will be operationalized.

## 4. Research Method

### 4.1. Research Design and Approach

This section sets out the methodological tools through which—and the dataset upon which—the central research question defined in the Introduction, the gaps identified in the Literature Review, and the securitization–externalization–asymmetric interdependence–strategic trap chain constructed in the Theoretical Framework are to be tested. Because the phenomenon under examination is of a nature that can be made sense of not through quantitative measurement but

through discourses, documents, institutional practices, and societal perceptions, a qualitative research approach was adopted. The qualitative approach is a family of methods that renders visible the meaning, intention, and context underlying social actions, institutional decisions, and international arrangements (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018; Karataş, 2015). A subject as multilayered, dynamic, and politically charged as the Turkey–EU migration relationship calls for interpretive depth rather than numerical generalization; the qualitative design meets precisely this need (Yıldırım, 1999).

The study was designed as a qualitative case study grounded in the interpretivist paradigm. The “case” under examination is the five-layered strategic trap structure that emerges in the relationship between Turkey's open-door stance and the European Union's readmission regime. The case study design allows a bounded phenomenon to be examined in depth within its own natural context and by drawing on multiple data sources (Creswell, 2017; Aydın, 2023). The design rests on a logic in which deductive and inductive reasoning operate together (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018; Gelbal, 2021). The concepts derived from the Theoretical Framework guide the data analysis, while the patterns emerging from the data provide feedback for refining those concepts. This bidirectional process prevents theoretical expectations from forcing the data and makes it possible to evaluate the documentary and discursive evidence in depth.

### 4.2. Research Questions

The central question and the sub-questions of the study were presented in detail in the Introduction and are recalled here only in the form connected to the methodological chain. The study aims to explain how the processes of securitization and externalization have drawn the Turkey–EU relationship into an asymmetric dependence, how this dependence produces a trap structure across the strategic, geopolitical, geo-economic, socioeconomic, and membership dimensions, and in what direction this structure has transformed Turkey's EU membership perspective. Each question corresponds to a particular instrument in the method: the historical reading of documents serves to reveal the discursive roots of securitization, and discourse analysis reveals how the language pertaining to the membership negotiations has narrowed over time. A cumulative and structural phenomenon such as the strategic trap can be rendered visible only when the historical chain of documents and the discursive shifts of the different actors are read together.

### 4.3. Data Sources and Document Selection

The documentary corpus was constructed through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling envisages selecting the documents, texts, and settings deemed most likely to deepen the research question, and it is the approach most consistent with the nature of qualitative research (Baltacı, 2018). Within this framework, primary legal and diplomatic texts, institutional monitoring reports, national legislation, official statistics, and the relevant academic literature were selected for their direct bearing on the historical arc extending from the 1963 Ankara Agreement through the 2013 Readmission Agreement and the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement. The corpus

was expanded until the point of saturation, at which additional documents no longer yielded analytically relevant new content. Reading the EU-side and the Turkey-side texts together was deemed necessary in order to trace both ends of the externalization relationship within a single analytical frame.

**4.4. Data Collection Instruments and Process**

*Document analysis.* A substantial portion of the data was collected through document analysis. This analysis is not a simple reading but a systematic scanning process carried out according to a specific logic. Within the scope of the study, the Ankara Agreement of 12 September 1963, the Turkey–EU Statement of 18 March 2016 and the readmission documents associated with it, the Turkey Progress Reports regularly published by the European Commission, EU Council conclusions, Turkey’s Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection together with its harmonization legislation, the annual data of the Presidency of Migration

Management, and the open-source reports of international organizations (UNHCR, IOM, Frontex) were arranged in sequence and read comparatively (see Table 1). The documents examined span a broad time frame extending from 1963 to the present; this makes it possible to trace in an integrated manner how the relationship began, which turning points it passed through, and in what direction it evolved. Each document was read at least twice; the first reading produced the general framework, while the second marked units of meaning on the basis of the research questions. The documents were treated not in isolation but as links that explain one another, and each was interpreted within the political context of the period in which it was published. In this way, how the language of securitization intensified in EU documents, how externalization permeated the texts, and how the membership perspective receded in the negotiation documents became observable over time.

**Table 1**  
*The Document Corpus Examined*

Document / Data Source	Type	Period / Scope
Ankara Agreement	Founding association agreement	1963
Turkey–EU Statement and associated readmission documents	Diplomatic statement / legal text	2013–2016
European Commission Turkey Progress Reports	Institutional monitoring report	Annual series
EU Council conclusions	Institutional decision text	Periodic
Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection and harmonization legislation	National legislation	Post-2013
Annual data of the Presidency of Migration Management	Official statistics	Annual
UNHCR, IOM, and Frontex reports	International organization report	Open source

*Note.* The documents were read not in isolation but as links that explain one another and within the political context of the period in which they were published.

**4.5. Data Analysis**

In analyzing the collected data, two complementary techniques were used together: thematic analysis and discourse analysis.

*Thematic analysis.* Thematic analysis is a systematic reading process that brings to light the recurring patterns, the meaningful clusters, and the relationships among them within the raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Baltacı, 2017). The analysis was carried out in adherence to the coding–category formation–theme identification stages proposed by Miles and Huberman (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In the first stage, the documentary and discursive material was read repeatedly and units of meaning were coded; in the second stage, these codes were grouped according to the five principal axes derived from the

Theoretical Framework (securitization, externalization, asymmetric dependence, the regression of the membership perspective, and the strategic trap). In the third stage, the relationships among the groups were mapped; in the fourth stage, the themes were reviewed once more and subjected to a consistency check. In order to enhance the reliability of the coding, the themes were re-examined at different time intervals, and the resulting categories were submitted to the assessment of another experienced researcher and subjected to cross-checking. This process prevented the data from being forced by the theory and allowed the theory to be tested against the data.

*Discourse analysis.* Discourse analysis proceeds from the premise that language is not merely a medium of transmission but a domain that constructs reality (Van Dijk, 2008; Çelik &



Ekşi, 2008). In this study, discourse analysis was employed to read how, in particular, opposing conceptual pairs such as “open door – closed door,” “partnership – buffer state,” “strategic partner – candidate country,” and “burden sharing – burden shifting” are constructed in official texts and in everyday speech. The lexical choices in the European Commission’s annual progress reports, the emphases in EU Council conclusions, and the conceptual shifts in Turkey’s official statements were placed side by side, so that how the same phenomenon is framed by the two sides in different words could be traced. By this means, the moments at which migration is framed in EU documents as a “threat” and those at which it is framed as a “manageable flow”; the points at which “responsibility sharing” in Turkish discourse turns into “burden bearing”; and how the language pertaining to the membership negotiations narrowed over time were rendered visible. Discourse analysis reveals how the strategic trap defined in the Theoretical Framework is produced not only at the structural level but also at the discursive level.

#### 4.6. Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

The trustworthiness of the study was grounded in the four criteria regarded as the qualitative-research counterparts of validity and reliability: credibility (accuracy), transferability, dependability (consistency), and confirmability (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018; Yıldırım, 1999). For credibility, data triangulation was applied; official documents, the academic literature, and international reports were compared with one another, and a pattern emerging in one source was sought in the others as well. For transferability, the context (Turkey’s border geography, the EU’s migration governance, and the historical course of the readmission regime) was described in rich detail, thereby enabling the reader to assess the extent to which the findings may be transferred to other candidate or transit countries. For dependability, the coding was repeated at different times to test its stability. For confirmability, the research log kept throughout the process constituted an audit trail showing which decision was made on what grounds, and the document excerpt on which each interpretation rested was additionally documented.

#### 4.7. The Researcher’s Position and Ethical Principles

Throughout the research, the researcher continuously interrogated their own position and possible biases; this reflexive self-assessment was recorded and taken into account in the formation of the interpretations. Because the study relies exclusively on publicly available documents, official texts, and the secondary literature, and any interviews that informed its contextual reading were unstructured and collected no personal or identifying data, it raises no concerns regarding the protection of human subjects. In working with the documentary sources, the principles of accurate representation, fidelity to the original context, and transparent, traceable interpretation were observed throughout.

The study was conducted in full accordance with scholarly ethical principles; all interviews informing it were unstructured in character, no structured or semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the study required no formal

ethics committee approval and entails no ethics committee violation.

#### 4.8. Limitations of the Study

Certain limitations of the study are openly acknowledged. Owing to the nature of irregular migration data, some numerical information is not fully reflected in official sources; this requires the findings to be read within a certain margin of estimation. As the analysis rests on document and discourse analysis, it captures the institutional and discursive dimensions of the relationship more fully than the everyday perceptions of the actors involved; complementing the framework with field-based evidence remains a task for future research. The confinement of the analysis to a single case (the EU–Turkey readmission regime) is a constraint on directly generalizing the findings to all candidate or transit countries. However, the aim of the research is not statistical generalization but theoretical (analytical) generalization; in other words, the findings are intended to provide a basis for testing the strategic-trap framework in different cases. This entire methodological apparatus makes it possible, in the Findings section that follows, to build the bridge between the Theoretical Framework and the documentary and discursive evidence and to render the five layers of the strategic trap observable on the analytical plane.

### 5. Findings

When the qualitative design defined in the preceding chapter is operationalized through document analysis and discourse analysis, it becomes evident that the migration governance Turkey sustains with the European Union is not an ordinary relationship of cooperation but rather produces a five-layered vise of superimposed pressures. This vise traces an uninterrupted line extending from discourse to law, from law to institution, and from institution to practice; it renders the concept of the strategic trap proposed in the theoretical framework empirically observable. The findings below are presented under thematic headings that set out each of these five layers with its own empirical grounding and demonstrate how the layers feed into one another. The ordering of the headings is not arbitrary; each layer prepares the ground for the next, rendering visible the gradual consolidation of the trap structure.

#### 5.1. The Socioeconomic Layer: Demographic Burden and Societal Cost

The first plane of the findings is demographic in scale. Official documents and data from the Presidency of Migration Management reveal that Turkey de facto hosts an irregular migrant mass of approximately twelve to fifteen million people (Tepealtı, 2019c; Erdoğan, 2022a; Özçürümez & İçduygu, 2020). Fed predominantly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and various African countries, this mass is concentrated along the İstanbul, Gaziantep, Hatay, Şanlıurfa, and Kilis axis (Akarca & Elibol, 2022; Aras & Mencütek, 2022a). This magnitude has become a structural variable shaping Turkey’s population pyramid, public finances, and patterns of urbanization; the fact that a significant portion of the mass could not be tied to any legal status has, in turn,

produced the ring of informality that lays the groundwork for the socioeconomic trap (İçduygu & Üstübcü, 2022a; Kirişçi & Baştürk, 2023). Heterogeneous also in terms of age, language, and culture, this mass compels public service capacity to stretch across an ever-widening area with each passing year (Erdoğan, 2023).

The demographic burden translates into a multidimensional pressure at the level of societal cost. Informal employment concentrated in the construction, agriculture, textile, and service sectors exerts downward pressure on local wages and weakens the structure of job security (Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a; Erdoğan, 2022b). Owing to language barriers in accessing education, difficulties of cultural adaptation, and the uncertainty of legal status, a substantial population of migrant children remains outside the system (Çakır & Aytaç, 2026; Demircioğlu & Sakar, 2026). The growth of the population falling outside temporary protection, the revival of patterns of informal settlement (gecekondu), and the over-capacity functioning of social services in border provinces are the concrete faces of the socioeconomic trap (Akarca & Elibol, 2022; Tepealtı, 2019b).

The quietest destructiveness of this layer becomes manifest in intergenerational transmission. A young population kept away from the education system and pushed into informal employment forms a new ring of fragility for the future; beyond the economic burden, it gives rise to a long-term erosion of social capital (Kirişçi & Baştürk, 2023). The socioeconomic trap thus produces a cumulative cost that leaves its mark not only on budgetary items but also on the future productive capacity of society.

### 5.2. Discursive Securitization: The Institutionalization of the Language of Threat

The second plane lies along the axis of discourse. When European Commission reports, Council decisions, and member-state texts are subjected to discourse analysis, it is observed that, on the EU side, irregular migration is continually removed from the domain of ordinary politics and placed within an existential language of threat (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Huysmans, 2022a; Bermejo, 2009). This framing has been reinforced by an institutional apparatus extending from the expansion of Frontex to external border funds and the proliferation of readmission agreements (Geddes, 2018; Lavenex & Uçarer, 2021; Bialasiewicz, 2021). The flow of discourse from words to institutions, and from institutions to actual practices, redefines Turkey less as a partner than as a source of risk to be managed (Tolay, 2022a). The most implicit aspect of this redefinition is that, while verbal appreciation is shown for Turkey's humanitarian language, the same documents position the same country as an "object of management"; this two-faced language turns into an implicit practice of power that neutralizes criticism before it even begins (Miş, 2011; Boswell, 2019a).

Discourse analysis demonstrates that this securitization also operates at the level of linguistic opposition. The dominance of the words "control," "return," "threat," "external border," and "risk management" on the EU side, and the weight of the

words "guest," "solidarity," "open door," "humanitarian responsibility," and "historical kinship" on the Turkish side, reveal that the two parties read the same phenomenon through entirely different mental maps (Van Dijk, 2008; Çelik & Ekşi, 2008; Bermejo, 2009). Yet this divergence is not a technical difference: whereas the EU's security language possesses an institutional backbone supported by budget, legislation, and operational capacity, Turkey's humanitarian language is devoid of such a backbone. As a result, the security language prevails at the negotiating table; the humanitarian language is relegated to a legitimizing but non-determinative position. The difference between the two stems not from style but from the power to align one's discourse with budget, legislation, and operational capacity (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Huysmans, 2022a).

### 5.3. Legal Asymmetry and the Institutionalization of Externalization

On the third plane, the asymmetry is concealed within the legal text itself. When the Readmission Agreement of 16 December 2013 and the Statement of 18 March 2016 are read side by side, it is observed that, against Turkey's strict, measurable, and calendar-bound obligations, flexible promises left to the EU's political discretion are placed (Misafir, 2022; Carrera & Guild, 2019b; Batır, 2017). Whereas Turkey assumes a clear commitment in the expression "shall readmit," the EU's recourse to a language of the sort "may support, may accelerate, may negotiate" demonstrates that the asymmetry is engineered within the text itself (Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a). This deliberate difference in flexibility lowers the cost of promise-making for the EU while raising, for Turkey, the risk of loss in the event of non-fulfillment; the text is thereby transformed from a document of compromise into an instrument of controlled commitment (Adıgüzel, 2025).

Externalization is the field extension of this legal asymmetry. The intensity of patrols along the Aegean and Mediterranean line, the redirection of applications reaching EU borders to the country of first entry, and the return to Turkey of migrants taken in via Greece are the everyday manifestations of the EU's delegation of border control to Turkey's geography (Cassarino, 2018; Trauner & Ripoll Servent, 2020a; Lavenex & Uçarer, 2021). When these manifestations are taken together, it becomes evident that Turkey is positioned not as a "partner" for the EU but as a buffer line on its eastern flank. This positioning produces the first layer of the strategic trap; the EU shapes Turkey not as a temporary interlocutor but as a permanent buffer actor (Aydın & Kesgin, 2021a; Greenhill, 2020b). Once the buffer position acquires an institutional apparatus, its withdrawal turns into a routine that requires not only the EU but also Turkey to assume a high transition cost (Wolff, 2020c; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020).

The deepest effect of externalization is observed in its internalization into Turkey's sphere of sovereignty. The EU's external border regime has become a reference point shaping Turkey's legal regulations, institutional structures, and operational practices, and Turkey's migration policy has increasingly shifted into a domain defined through the EU's

expectations (Kahraman, 2022; Lavenex & Uçarer, 2021). The process advances not in the form of direct intervention but as a soft yet effective encirclement operating through legislative alignment, funding conditionality, and technical cooperation. The defining feature of this encirclement is that it presents itself not as a form of pressure but as “modernization assistance”; this appearance lowers the political cost of externalization while also weakening Turkey’s discourse of resistance (Cassarino, 2018; Trauner & Ripoll Servent, 2020a). Sovereignty erosion thus occurs not through open conflict but through a gradual transfer cloaked in the guise of voluntary alignment.

#### 5.4. The Geopolitical Layer: The Buffer State and the Narrowing of the Foreign-Policy Space

The fourth plane is geopolitical. Frontex cooperation protocols, border-infrastructure support programs, and EU funding directed at the technical equipping of border gates demonstrate that Turkey has been compelled to integrate its own border regime into that of the EU. This process constitutes the core of the geopolitical trap and transforms Turkey into the eastern extension of the EU’s external border security (Bialasiewicz, 2021; Geddes, 2018). The functional drift invisibly narrows Turkey’s foreign-policy options in Eurasia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean (Aydın-Düzgüt & Tocci, 2022a). Although moves in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean basins are not directly obstructed, a shadow calculation regarding how each step will be read on the EU side is continuously kept alive; the trap thereby narrows the horizon of foreign policy in silence, expanding the domain of “what is refrained from doing” rather than “what can be done.”

#### 5.5. The Geoeconomic Layer: Fiscal Asymmetry

The fifth plane is economic. Turkey’s cumulative expenditure on irregular migrants after 2011 has reached approximately forty billion dollars; the package of six billion euros pledged by the EU under the March 2016 Statement, meanwhile, has been the subject of criticism in terms of both allocation and timing (Erdoğan & Çorabatır, 2022b; Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021b). Even this comparison lays bare the imbalance: the long-term burden Turkey shoulders single-handedly far exceeds the EU’s limited and conditional contribution. The geoeconomic trap becomes manifest precisely at this point; while promises of financial support and visa liberalization are presented as gains in appearance, a channel that in fact transfers public resources to the protection of the EU border is in operation (Greenhill, 2020b; Memişoğlu & Başdaş, 2022b). Moreover, this channel produces an opportunity cost that erodes future investment capacity not only in budgetary items but across the entirety of the education, health, and social-assistance systems (Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a).

#### 5.6. The Membership Layer: The Regression of the Perspective, Visa Liberalization, and Loss of Image

The sixth plane is the structural regression of the membership perspective. The process advancing through the 1963 Ankara Agreement, the 1970 Additional Protocol, the 1999 Helsinki candidacy status, and the opening of negotiations in 2005 (Kayserili & Edi, 2016; Öniş & Kutlay, 2019), while

continuing at the verbal level after the 2013 Readmission Agreement and the 2016 Statement, has in fact come to a standstill. The framing of Turkey in EU documents as an “irregular migrant warehouse” has turned into the discursive justification for the closing of the membership door and has constituted the core of the membership trap (Schimmelfennig, 2022d; Müftüler-Baç, 2021; Gülmez & Kaşıkçı, 2022). The fact that the negotiations have not been formally suspended is especially striking; for as long as the process is kept open, the EU holds in its hand, at every moment, the threat of closure as a lever (Saatçioğlu & Hoffmann, 2020). For this reason, the membership trap operates far more effectively not in the form of a “closed door” but in the form of a “door that appears open yet cannot be passed through.”

The same trap takes concrete form under the heading of visa liberalization. The EU put forward, as a precondition for visa liberalization, that Turkey carry out reforms in certain areas, above all its counterterrorism laws; Turkey, for its part, evaluated these demands as an intervention into its sphere of sovereignty (Aydın-Düzgüt & Keyman, 2022a; Yılmaz Elmas, 2021a). The dispute did not result merely in the deadlock of negotiations; it also brought with it the reduction of a right legally acquired in the 1963 and 1970 texts to an object of political bargaining (Ercan, A., 2024; Pekşen, 2024). The transformation of an acquired right into “a promise that may be granted” demonstrates that the language of law and the language of politics have been made to overlap to Turkey’s disadvantage; it produces a cycle in which, at every new round of negotiation, the same right must be “purchased” anew (Arslan, 2025).

The discursive leg of the membership trap is constituted by the shift in Turkey’s international image. The initial presentation of the open-door stance as a humanitarian choice generating soft-power capital (Suryantama, 2021; Toğral Koca, 2019) opened space, over time, for that same stance to be referred to under the epithet “irregular migrant warehouse” (Tolay, 2022c; Aras & Mencütek, 2022a). This epithet has turned into a discursive label that weakens Turkey’s standing in international public opinion and invisibly binds its hand at the negotiating table. Once the label takes hold, even humanitarian efforts can be reprocessed as evidence reinforcing it; the label thus becomes a mechanism that justifies itself anew on each occasion (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, 2022a).

#### 5.7. Asymmetric Leverage and the Crisis of Trust

The findings show that the five layers are knotted together in an asymmetric calculation of leverage. While Turkey’s threat to “release migration” produces a limited leverage, the EU’s power to “close the membership door,” to “postpone visa liberalization,” and to “tighten the valve of financial support” produces a far longer-range and cumulative pressure (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Greenhill, 2020b; Okyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2021). The relationship has settled into a structure cloaked in the discourse of “partnership” yet in fact running along the patron-dependent equation. Whereas Turkey’s leverage is one-off and carries a high risk of backfiring, the EU’s are divisible, scalable, and incremental

(Irgil et al., 2023a). This difference in quality leads every crisis to conclude for Turkey in an “all-or-nothing” manner, while preserving for the EU a range that can be finely tuned.

The documentary record renders the limits of this leverage visible in concrete moments. Although Turkey’s occasional signals that it would loosen the migration flow created a temporary alarm on the EU side, they did not produce a lasting concession. The EU was able to lower the cost of these signals by postponing visa liberalization, delaying financial support, and converting the membership discourse into the language of “strategic partnership” (Saatçioğlu & Hoffmann, 2020; Okyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2021). In this respect, the migration lever is a half-instrument; while it continually generates bargaining, it rarely yields gains (Kale & Dimitriadi, 2022b). Moreover, each use of the lever weakens the next; as the threat becomes more frequent, it becomes ordinary and loses its deterrent force (Irgil et al., 2023a).

The long-term residue of the asymmetry is a crisis of trust. While Turkey fulfilled a significant portion of its readmission obligations, the delay of financial support, the continual postponement of visa liberalization, and the de facto freezing of membership negotiations on the EU side have produced a deep skepticism in public opinion regarding “the bindingness of the EU’s word” (Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a; Saatçioğlu & Hoffmann, 2020). This skepticism is not merely emotional; it has turned into a lasting accumulation of distrust that is inscribed in institutional memory and that leads the Turkish side to act more cautiously in the face of each new offer. The hardening of institutional memory produces a filter that subjects every new proposal the EU may put forward to a higher threshold of proof from the very outset (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Şenyuva, 2022).

This power asymmetry is fed not only by the bilateral relationship but also by a multinational political climate. The rise of anti-migrant discourse in member states and the electoral successes of far-right parties have hardened the closed-door line at the Union level (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Huysmans, 2022a). As the internal electoral balances of member states harden, the margin for the EU center to act flexibly narrows; this narrowing compresses Turkey’s bargaining options beneath an invisible ceiling (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Şenyuva, 2022).

### 5.8. Domestic Politicization and the Narrowing of Negotiating Space

Public and political discourse shows that the matter has also transformed Turkey’s domestic politics. In recent years, irregular migration has settled at the center of the identity discourses of different political wings; by narrowing the space for rational policy debate, it has led ideological framing to become dominant (Erdoğan, 2022b; Aydın-Düzgit & Balta, 2022b). While local administrations in border provinces struggle in the face of rising service demand, the matter has been carried to election campaigns at the national level, becoming open to populist framings. The hard discourse that gains popularity at home closes off the possibility of flexible bargaining abroad; every domestic political move can furnish

material for the interpretation on the EU side that “Turkey does not keep its word” (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020). This situation establishes a feedback loop that narrows Turkey’s negotiating room for maneuver.

### 5.9. The Tension Between the Rights-Based Approach and the Security Language, and the Paradigm Shift

The findings show that the tension between the rights-based approach and the security language is also reflected in practice. The problems faced by persons returned to Turkey under the Readmission Agreement regarding legal status, access to fundamental rights, and treatment compatible with human dignity constitute a picture that conflicts with the safeguards foreseen by the international-law and human-rights literature (Carrera & Guild, 2019b; İçduygu & Üstübici, 2022b). This conflict weakens the EU’s discourse of a “value-based” partnership from within and erodes the legitimacy ground of the regime. Every externalized border-control practice renders fragile the EU’s claim to be a global “norm entrepreneur,” widening the gap between discourse and practice (Boswell, 2019b).

This tension points to a broader paradigm shift in the relationship. Whereas in the period extending from 1963 to 2013 the Turkey–EU relationship was largely debated along the axes of democratization, the rule of law, and economic integration, after 2014 the axis shifted markedly to the headings of migration management, border security, and readmission (Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2022a; Müftüler-Baç, 2021). This shift shows that the framework of a “partnership of values” has given way to a framework of “bargaining over interests,” and that Turkey’s position in EU policies has been reduced from that of a candidate country to that of a border partner. This reduction has led to the exclusion of acquisition gains from the negotiating table and to the headings of migration and border cooperation turning into almost the sole item on the agenda (Saatçioğlu & Hoffmann, 2020; Tekin, 2023a).

### 5.10. Cyclical Consolidation and the Holistic View of the Strategic Trap

The most decisive pattern of the findings is the cyclical consolidation through which the five layers feed one another. The regression of the membership perspective facilitates the permanence of the migration burden; the permanence of the migration burden hardens Turkey’s image as an “irregular migrant warehouse”; this image legitimizes the geopolitical buffer role; the buffer role renders economic externalization sustainable; and economic externalization, in turn, produces the discursive and institutional apparatus that once again supports the closing of the membership door (Adamson & Greenhill, 2021d; Greenhill, 2020b; Tekin, 2023b). The real power of the trap lies not in the weight of the individual layers but in the fact that this cycle reproduces itself, hardening a little more with each turn. Interventions made on a single layer remain insufficient; for the other four layers can rapidly rebuild the broken ring.

The most striking result the cycle produces is the paradoxical operation of the readmission regime. In the text of the

agreement, the regime was presented as an arrangement that would facilitate Turkey's EU membership and visa-liberalization processes; yet in practice it has turned into a mechanism that distances Turkey from these goals. For the more successfully Turkey absorbs the EU's migration burden, the more valuable it becomes for the EU to keep Turkey in a "buffer position"; the admission of the buffer into the Union, by contrast, is defined as a risk. This paradox exemplifies in the most concrete manner the "inversion of aim and outcome" feature of the strategic trap; the structure produces an inverted incentive mechanism that punishes rather than rewards success (Müftüler-Baç, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2022a; Gülmez & Kaşıkçı, 2022).

When the five layers are brought together, the holistic picture comes into focus: the migration relationship Turkey has established with the EU has been securitized at the level of discourse, externalized at the institutional level, asymmetrically loaded at the economic level, rendered permanent in its costs at the societal level, and has withdrawn the membership perspective at the political level. While the layers, taken separately, present the appearance of an ordinary asymmetry, taken together they turn into a composite vise that systematically constrains Turkey's capacity as an international actor. These findings reveal that the concept of the strategic trap proposed in the theoretical framework is not merely descriptive but also a causal analytical tool; they point to the concept as an analytical instrument applicable as well to the patterns of unequal cooperation that candidate and transit countries establish with EU border regimes.

When all the findings are evaluated together, it becomes apparent that the migration governance Turkey sustains with the EU is not an ordinary policy problem but a cumulative and hard-to-reverse structural entrapment. The cooperation Turkey initiated as a domain of discretionary choice has, over time, turned into a structure that overrides its choices; the EU, for its part, while taking refuge in the language of "partnership," has in fact built a regime that turns Turkey into the eastern extension of its border. This result directly answers the principal research question defined in the Introduction; it empirically demonstrates that the chain of securitization, externalization, and asymmetric interdependence has turned into a multilayered strategic trap for Turkey. The Discussion chapter that follows will address how these findings enter into a reckoning with the national and international literature and into what practical correlates they translate.

## 6. Discussion

This section aims to confront the five-layered vise made visible in the Findings with the national and international literature, and to carry the resulting findings—around the concept of the "strategic trap"—toward theoretical and practical conclusions. The contribution of the discussion arises not from restating the findings but from situating them within a broader theoretical and political framework. The preceding section established that the readmission regime Turkey conducts with the European Union (EU) is not an ordinary form of policy cooperation; rather, it produces a

cumulative structure extending from discourse to law, from law to institutions, and from institutions to practice. This trajectory also lays the groundwork for answering the study's central research question, rendering visible how the securitization–externalization–asymmetric interdependence chain has turned into a strategic trap for Turkey. The following subsections first read the findings comparatively against the literature; then clarify the concept's theoretical contributions; subsequently discuss their counterparts at the policy level; and finally set out the study's limitations and directions for future research.

### 6.1. A Comparative Reading against the Securitization and Externalization Literature

The findings largely confirm the core claims of the securitization literature while also moving the debate onto new ground. Within the framework of Buzan and Wæver (2003) and Huysmans (2022a), when migration is removed from the domain of ordinary politics and reconstituted through a discourse of existential threat, extraordinary measures become legitimized. This established proposition is confirmed; however, it is shown that securitization is not merely a discursive transformation internal to the EU but also produces an institutional apparatus that is exported outward. The convergence of border-surveillance systems, external-border funds, readmission agreements, and operational partnerships demonstrates that discourse is not only a linguistic product but also a mechanism that generates a structural reality. The EU-centric bias identified by Akgül-Açıkmeşe (2022) and by Aydın-Düzgüt and Keyman (2022) is thereby overcome; securitization is grasped as a multilayered structure in which discourse is institutionalized, legalized, and effectively implemented. In this reading, Turkey appears not merely as a criticized interlocutor but as an actor redefined as "a source of risk to be managed."

The findings align with the general framework of the externalization literature as drawn by Geddes (2018), Lavenex and Uçarer (2021), Cassarino (2018), and Białasiewicz (2021); yet, when read from Turkey's perspective, this literature is seen to carry a significant EU-centric bias. The existing literature documents in detail how the EU displaces its borders into the geography of non-member states, but it frequently treats the erosion of sovereignty and the narrowing of foreign policy that this displacement produces for the transit country as a secondary matter. This study reveals how externalization has been internalized into Turkey's legal regulations, institutional structure, and operational practices under the guise of "modernization assistance." This internalization is a gradual erosion of sovereignty operating through legislative harmonization, funding conditionality, and technical cooperation—one that does not appear to be direct intervention yet whose effects run deep. A significant portion of the practices Turkey appears to have adopted of its own volition were in fact shaped within the framework of EU expectations; for this reason, the process that Trauner and Ripoll Servent (2020a) characterize as "soft but effective encirclement" materializes, in the Turkish case, as a transfer of sovereignty cloaked in the appearance of voluntary

compliance (Lavenex & Uçarer, 2021; Kahraman, 2022). Likewise, Gökalp-Aras's (2021, 2022a) finding that Turkey has become a de facto extension of the EU migration regime is empirically supported by this study's documentary and discursive evidence.

### 6.2. Asymmetric Interdependence and the Place of the “Strategic Trap” Concept

With respect to the asymmetric interdependence framework, the findings support Keohane and Nye's (2012) classic thesis while requiring it to be reread with temporal depth. Whereas the classic thesis frames asymmetry as an instantaneous balance of power, in the Turkey–EU relationship asymmetry has turned into a feedback mechanism that reproduces itself in every implementation period. When Greenhill's (2020b) thesis that migration flows can be turned into a weaponizable lever is read alongside Okyay and Zaragoza-Cristiani's (2021) analysis, which positions Turkey as a “gatekeeper's lever,” it becomes apparent that the migration lever in Turkey's hands is a half-lever, whereas the membership–visa–financial-support lever in the EU's hands is a continuously operating instrument. The half-character of Turkey's lever stems not only from a difference of instruments but also from the rising political cost and declining social legitimacy that accompany every repetition of threat discourse. Consequently, the obligation to use migration diplomacy with restraint is not a mere preference but a constraint arising from the structural nature of the asymmetry (Irgil, Norman, & Tsourapas, 2023a; Kale & Dimitriadi, 2022b; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020).

The concept of the “strategic trap” functions as a bridge connecting the securitization, externalization, and interdependence strands in the existing literature. Naming the structural lock-in pointed to by Müftüler-Baç (2021) and by Dimitriadi and Saatçioğlu (2021), the concept transforms Adamson and Greenhill's (2021c) emphasis on the lasting imprints that migration crises leave on international relations into a systematic analytical tool. The concepts of classic dependence or asymmetric interdependence remained insufficient for naming the cumulative and largely irreversible nature of the process (Lindberg & Seeberg, 2022). While the concept incorporates the institutional lock-in debate of classic regime theory, it departs from it clearly: whereas regime theory emphasizes the stability-generating function of institutions (Krasner, 1999; Aksoy, 2015), the strategic-trap concept explains how the same institutional arrangements turn into a constricting cage for the weaker party. The concept thus moves beyond being a descriptive label and becomes a causal analytical tool—specific to migration governance yet transferable to other domains—capable of bringing institutional approaches and the critical literature into dialogue.

### 6.3. The Anatomy of the Five-Layered Trap

The empirical evidence for the trap structure lies in the observability of the five layers both separately and together. At the strategic level, Turkey's transformation into a permanent buffer actor for the EU (Aydın & Kesgin, 2021a; Tolay, 2022b); at the geopolitical level, the articulation of the border regime into the EU's external-border architecture

(Bialasiewicz, 2021); at the geoeconomic level, the vast asymmetry that emerges when cumulative expenditure of roughly forty billion dollars is compared with the conditional package of six billion euros (Erdoğan & Çorabatır, 2022b; Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a); at the socioeconomic level, the structural pressure created by a migrant mass of twelve to fifteen million people (Tepealtı, 2019b; Erdoğan, 2022a; Kirişçi & Baştürk, 2023); and at the membership level, the de facto freezing of the perspective sustained since the 1963 Ankara Agreement (Kayserili & Edi, 2016; Schimmelfennig, 2022a)—when taken together, these turn Turkey's situation from a simple asymmetry into a structural vise. The true force of the trap derives not from the weight of the individual layers but from the reproduction of this cycle, which hardens somewhat further with each turn. Interventions directed at a single layer remain insufficient, because the other four layers can rapidly rebuild the broken link.

The membership trap is perhaps the most striking of the five layers and harbors a paradox that directly confronts the existing literature. The classic logic of membership presupposes that the accession door will open as the candidate country aligns with the *acquis* (Bulmer, 2007; Radaelli, 2016). In the Turkish case, this logic operates in reverse: the more successfully Turkey absorbs the EU's migration burden, the more valuable it becomes for the EU to keep Turkey in a buffer position, while admitting the buffer into the Union is defined as a risk. This transformation—which Saatçioğlu and Hoffmann (2020) describe as a shift toward the language of “strategic partnership”—when combined with Schimmelfennig's (2022d) strategy of rhetorical entrapment, turns into an inverted incentive mechanism that punishes rather than rewards success. The relationship has shifted from the equation “the more alignment, the more membership” to “the more alignment, the more useful the buffer” (Gülmez & Kaşıkçı, 2022). The most insidious aspect of the membership trap is that, although the door appears open, passage is not permitted; the fact that the accession negotiations have not been formally suspended affords the EU the possibility of holding a “threat of closure” in reserve at any moment. Turkey is thereby kept in a threshold position—neither excluded nor included—and this position constitutes not a stable bargaining ground but a continuously reproduced field of dependence.

The findings also clearly reveal the legal picture in which the concessions Turkey has made not only fail to yield a reciprocal return but also lay the ground for new concessions. The principle of *pacta sunt servanda* (the duty of fidelity to agreements), enshrined in Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, requires that agreements be implemented in good faith (Yazgan, 2022). The EU, however, has disbursed financial-support allocations in a fragmented manner obstructed by bureaucratic hurdles, has taken no concrete step toward visa liberalization, and—despite Turkey's fulfillment of the bulk of the seventy-two-item roadmap—has locked the process by invoking the items falling within its sphere of sovereignty (Yılmaz Elmas, 2021a; Turhan & Wessels, 2021c; Dimitriadi & Saatçioğlu, 2021c).

The reduction of a legally acquired right under the 1963 and 1970 texts to an object of political bargaining (Ercan, A., 2024; Pekşen, 2024) is not a classic implementation delay but appears as a structural asymmetry in which one of the fundamental principles of international law is systematically operated against Turkey. The sacrifice of a rights-based conception of obligation to the language of interest-based bargaining is the most concrete indicator of the double-standard stance the EU maintains toward Turkey (Yazgan, 2022; Arslan, 2025). Carrera and Guild's (2019) critical reading had already placed this picture on the agenda; this study strengthens that reading empirically through Turkey's concrete experience.

The EU's stance in practice clearly contradicts its discourse of a "values-based partnership." As Boswell (2019b) notes, the EU positions itself as a global norm entrepreneur and places the discourse of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights at the center of its foreign policy. Yet every externalized border-control practice, the problems that readmitted persons experience in accessing legal status and fundamental rights (Carrera & Guild, 2019b; İçduygu & Üstübcü, 2022), and the forms of technical cooperation that de facto narrow Turkey's sphere of sovereignty all widen the gap between this discourse and its implementation. The result is an erosion, from within, of the EU's soft power and normative legitimacy. This internal contradiction, while weakening the EU's soft power, also broadens the range of normative discourse available to Turkey vis-à-vis the EU; by placing the *pacta sunt servanda* principle and the discourse of acquired rights on the agenda in international platforms, Turkey possesses the opportunity to construct a normative counter-discourse against the asymmetry of the relationship.

At the geopolitical level, the findings show that Turkey's foreign-policy options in Eurasia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean cannot be considered apart from the structural limits of its relationship with the EU (Aydın-Düzgüt & Tocci, 2022a). Without being directly obstructed, but through an invisible self-censorship, Turkey is compelled to make a constant shadow calculation about how each regional move will be read on the EU side. By expanding the domain of "what it refrains from doing" rather than "what it is able to do," this shadow calculation quietly narrows the horizon of foreign policy; the result is not a quantitative but a qualitative narrowing of the room for maneuver within the Eurasia–Middle East–Mediterranean quadrangle. Two strands usually discussed separately in the literature—the EU's externalization strategy and Turkey's regional foreign-policy autonomy—converge at this point. This study demonstrates that these two strands are in fact the two ends of the same structural mechanism, and that the geopolitical trap concerns not only border control but Turkey's international actor capacity in its entirety. Turkey is compelled to assess the value of its geopolitical position within the structural limits of its relationship with the EU; unlike the classic dependence thesis, this situation leads to an invisible yet profound loss of autonomy.

The economic dimension empirically confirms, on Turkish data, the burden-shifting dynamic underscored by Memişoğlu and Başdaş (2022). Turkey's cumulative expenditure on irregular migrants after 2011 reached approximately forty billion dollars, while the package of six billion euros pledged by the EU under the March 2016 Statement has continually encountered obstacles in terms of both allocation and timing. The financial asymmetry produces an opportunity cost not only in budget lines but across the entirety of the education, health, and social-assistance systems, eroding future-oriented investment capacity (Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a). The findings of Çakır and Aytaç (2026) and of Demircioğlu and Sakar (2026) regarding the education system reveal the concrete face of this opportunity cost. Taken as a whole, this picture can be read as a systemic rupture operating through the EU's transferring the migration-management burden to Turkey on the one hand while keeping the membership door closed on the other; a mechanism of legitimacy loss advancing through unfulfilled commitments has been produced, and a structural form of externalization affecting Turkey's long-term development capacity has become institutionalized (Akman & Çekin, 2021).

At the socioeconomic level, the findings extend the observations built up over the years by Erdoğan (2022a, 2023), Tepealtı (2019b), and Aras and Mencütek (2022a). The downward pressure that informal employment—concentrated in the construction, agriculture, textile, and service sectors—exerts on local wages; the exclusion of a substantial population of migrant children from the education system owing to language barriers and uncertainty of legal status; and the over-capacity functioning of social services in border provinces constitute the various faces of the socioeconomic trap. The point that must above all be underlined is the silent destructiveness produced by intergenerational transmission: the young population left outside the education system and pushed into informal employment becomes, in time, a new ring of vulnerability, leading—beyond the merely economic burden—to a long-term erosion of social capital (Kirişçi & Baştürk, 2023). For this reason, informal employment, lack of access to education, and uncertainty of legal status should be treated not as momentary problems but as structural variables affecting Turkey's medium- and long-term development capacity (Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a; Akarca & Elibol, 2022).

The dimension of societal resilience and institutional memory is of central importance for understanding the long-term psychosocial effects of the readmission regime. Despite Turkey's having largely fulfilled its readmission obligations, the EU's attitude of postponing its commitments has generated, in public opinion, a deep skepticism regarding "the bindingness of the EU's word" (Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a; Saatçioğlu & Hoffmann, 2020). This skepticism is not merely a momentary reaction; it has turned into a lasting accumulation of distrust that becomes lodged in institutional memory and leads the Turkish side to act more cautiously in the face of every new proposal. As Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Şenyuva (2022) note, the hardening of institutional memory becomes a parameter that redraws the starting conditions of

future negotiations. Bringing together the concepts of societal resilience, institutional memory, and ethical leadership requires the readmission regime to be read not merely as a bilateral policy problem but as a comprehensive matter affecting Turkey's international identity and its structure of social trust. This lens shows how the perception of betrayal, the legal deadlock, and the loss of legitimacy become intertwined, and it builds a new interdisciplinary bridge with the literature.

#### 6.4. Theoretical Contributions

The study's first theoretical contribution is its proposal of a bridge concept capable of bringing the three main strands in the literature—securitization, externalization, and asymmetric interdependence—into dialogue under a single analytical roof. These strands have mostly proceeded independently of one another in the existing literature, each drawing a separate picture with its own concepts (Lindberg & Seeberg, 2022; Akgül-Açıkmeşe, 2022). By combining discourse analysis with structural-power analysis, the strategic-trap concept offers an integrated tool capable of explaining why discursive framing can produce binding outcomes, why structural asymmetry feeds on discursive legitimacy, and why the interaction of the two produces a feedback loop that hardens over time. The concept thereby becomes a tool able to read migration governance together with both its cultural and its material dimensions, providing the literature with both a theoretical synthesis and a methodological reading guide.

The second theoretical contribution is its extension of the asymmetric interdependence thesis with a temporal perspective. The classic thesis frames asymmetry as an instantaneous distribution of power and assumes that it can be balanced as the parties' capacities change (Keohane & Nye, 2012). The Turkey–EU relationship, however, shows that asymmetry hardens rather than balances over time, with each implementation period deepening the positions of the preceding one. This finding establishes the link between Schimmelfennig's (2022d) analysis of rhetorical entrapment and Greenhill's (2020b) thesis of weaponized migration; it reveals why asymmetry is not a simple balance of power and why it must be read together with the path-dependence debate in the critical literature. This temporal extension foregrounds the dimensions of duration and accumulation that are mostly neglected in international relations theory, and renders visible the path-dependence dynamics that the classic interdependence thesis has been unable to address (Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a).

The third theoretical contribution is the concept's transferability. The strategic trap is an analytical tool through which one can read not only the Turkey–EU relationship but also, on a global scale, the patterns of unequal cooperation that candidate and transit countries establish with the EU's border regimes. Similar dynamics can be traced in the migration partnerships that North African countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya conduct with the EU, or in the conditionality negotiations of Eastern Neighborhood countries such as Ukraine and Moldova (Wolff, 2020d). In this respect, the study moves beyond a limited case reading and lays claim

to being a transferable analytical lens in the field of global migration governance. Testing the concept in different contexts will both probe the robustness of the theory and lay the foundations of a new comparative framework capable of thinking together the spatial extensions of the EU's global border regime.

#### 6.5. Policy Implications

At the practical level, the findings point to the necessity of a multilayered policy set for Turkey's decision-makers. Interventions directed at a single layer are insufficient for escaping the trap, because the other four layers can rapidly rebuild the broken link. The fundamental principle here is that escape is possible only through simultaneous and mutually reinforcing reforms. At the legal level, placing the *pacta sunt servanda* principle on the agenda in international platforms, securing acquired rights through documentary arbitration, and renegotiating the readmission regime by means of additional protocols come to the fore. At the institutional level, strengthening the capacity of the Presidency of Migration Management, equipping border-management institutions with an independent information-production infrastructure, and bringing the technical cooperation conducted with the EU under sovereignty oversight are required. This multilayered approach brings together the reform proposals usually discussed piecemeal in the literature, forming the nucleus of a holistic reform package for escaping the trap.

At the economic level, recording cumulative expenditure, supporting calls for international burden-sharing with concrete documents, and reporting the burden on public finances with transparency stand out as instruments to strengthen Turkey's hand at the negotiating table. At the demographic level, granting legal status to those falling outside the scope of temporary protection, systematizing access to education and health services, and institutionalizing integration programs that reduce intergenerational vulnerability are steps that would weaken the socioeconomic trap (Kirişçi & Baştürk, 2023; Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a). At the diplomatic level, Turkey needs to assess its relationship with the EU not solely within a bilateral bargaining framework but together with its multidimensional foreign-policy options in Eurasia, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Africa (Aydm-Düzgüt & Tocci, 2022a). This approach would allow Turkey to redefine its relations with the EU not within a framework of termination or rupture but as part of a more realistic and multidirectional foreign-policy equation. Turkey can widen its bargaining ground only by replacing the appearance of the EU as the "sole option" with a multi-actor international balance.

For the EU side, the practical implication signaled by the findings is that short-term domestic political concerns cannot be placed ahead of long-term strategic interests. The rise of anti-migrant discourse in member states (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Huysmans, 2022b) deters EU leaders from making concessions; while this may provide short-term domestic political relief, in the long run it erodes the EU's claim to be a global norm entrepreneur and its capacity to build a sustainable neighborly relationship with Turkey. The EU's continual use of its power to "close the membership door"

generates an accumulation of distrust in Turkey's institutional memory that is difficult to repair, and weakens the credibility of the Union's neighborhood policy (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Şenyuva, 2022). From the perspective of ethical leadership, fulfilling commitments is not merely a normative requirement but also a precondition for the EU's preserving its global legitimacy. Within this framework, the prudent policy for the EU is not to keep Turkey in a buffer position but to reposition it as an equal partner within a mutually beneficial framework (Müftüler-Baç, 2021; Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2022a).

#### 6.6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Certain limitations of the study must be openly acknowledged. First, as the analysis rests on document and discourse analysis, it illuminates the institutional and discursive dimensions of the relationship more fully than the everyday perceptions of the actors involved; complementing the framework with field-based evidence remains a task for future research. Second, owing to the nature of irregular-migration data, some numerical information is not fully reflected in official sources, which requires the findings to be read with a certain margin of estimation. Third, while the proposed theoretical framework penetrates the subject by taking securitization and asymmetric dependence as its axis, it leaves other variables—such as economic interdependence, identity politics, and social trust—in a secondary position. Fourth, the documentary corpus extends only to the cut-off point of the analysis; global and regional developments that may occur in subsequent periods could necessitate updating the findings. Openly acknowledging these limitations, while a requirement of the study's scientific integrity, also provides a roadmap for the directions in which future research might be expanded.

These limitations constitute fertile ground for the expansion of future research. As a primary direction, testing the strategic-trap concept on other candidate countries (Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia) and on different cooperation regimes (the Eastern Partnership, the Union for the Mediterranean, the Africa Partnership) will allow the generalizing claim the concept carries to be tested. As a second direction, the operability of the concept beyond the field of migration governance alone—in other forms of international cooperation such as trade partnerships, energy regimes, and security cooperation—may be investigated. A third direction comprises mixed-design studies supported by quantitative methods; such studies carry the potential to render measurable the rate at which the trap structure hardens over time. A fourth direction comprises interdisciplinary studies focusing on the relationship of the concepts of ethical leadership, institutional memory, and societal resilience with readmission regimes. These directions offer multiple opportunities for testing that will enable the strategic-trap concept to develop not only within the context of the Turkey–EU relationship but as a general analytical tool in the field of migration governance.

To summarize, the study's findings have shown that the migration governance Turkey conducts with the EU is not an ordinary policy problem but a cumulative structure operating

simultaneously across the discursive, legal, institutional, economic, and societal planes. While this structure confirms the securitization, externalization, and asymmetric interdependence strands in the literature, it produces a wholeness that those strands cannot explain on their own. The strategic-trap concept deserves to take its place in the literature as an analytical tool that names this wholeness and analyzes it causally. The concept's establishment will enable not only a more accurate reading of the Turkey–EU relationship but also a reassessment of the patterns of asymmetric cooperation in global migration governance. In this respect, the study does not merely offer the literature a conceptual proposal; it also proposes a holistic lens for rethinking Turkey's international actor capacity. In the following Conclusion and Recommendations section, the theoretical synthesis and policy proposals arising from this discussion will be brought together in an integrated manner.

#### 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that the migration governance Turkey sustains with the European Union is not an ordinary policy exchange but a cumulative structure operating simultaneously across the discursive, legal, institutional, economic, and societal planes. The securitization of irregular migration, the externalization of the EU's border onto Turkish territory, and the asymmetric interdependence generated by the readmission regime are, taken individually, phenomena long documented in the literature. The study's central claim, however, is that the conjoint operation of these three strands—hardening over time—produces an integrated structure that none of them can explain on its own. At the end of a sequence of concessions stretching from 1963 to 2016, Turkey became a signatory to a readmission regime in which the very phrase “visa liberalization” could not even be explicitly inscribed, and was effectively transformed into the eastern extension of the EU's border architecture (Misafir, 2022; Adıgüzel, 2025; Yazgan, 2022). The diagnosis at this juncture is unambiguous: the EU–Turkey relationship has been institutionalized not as a settlement but within a framework of controlled attachment. This diagnosis further shows that findings discussed in isolation for years can be read beneath a single integrative canopy; only beneath this canopy does it become fully visible why migration governance has become, for Turkey, not a routine policy problem but a structural predicament.

To name this framework of attachment, the study proposes to the literature the concept of the *strategic trap*. A strategic trap denotes the transformation of cooperative arrangements—entered into by a state on the basis of short-term cost–benefit calculation—into a cumulative, dynamic, and difficult-to-reverse structure that narrows that state's political autonomy, disproportionately redistributes burdens, and erodes its long-term geopolitical and geo-economic interests. This conceptualization re-reads the classical dependency and asymmetric-interdependence theses (Keohane & Nye, 2012) with temporal depth, brings the institutional lock-in debate of regime theory (Aksoy, 2015; Krasner, 1999) into dialogue with the critical migration literature, and renders visible the

structural consequences arising from the interaction of securitization and externalization. The critical point at which it diverges from the classical path-dependence approach is its capacity to explain how power asymmetry hardens once it fuses with discursive legitimation (Schimmelfennig, 2021; Cox, 1996). The concept thereby ceases to be a merely descriptive label and operates as a bridge that situates structural-critical theory and regime analysis on common ground—one transferable to trade and security regimes as readily as to other migration partnerships.

The most striking element in a holistic reading of the findings is that the readmission regime has produced an inverted incentive mechanism for Turkey. Classical accession logic anticipates that the membership door will open to the degree that a candidate aligns with the *acquis* (Bulmer, 2007; Schimmelfennig, 2003); in Turkey's case, however, this equation has operated in reverse, as the logic of "the more alignment, the more membership" has given way to a logic of "the more alignment, the more useful a buffer" (Schimmelfennig, 2022a; Müftüler-Baç, 2021; Gülmez & Kaşıkçı, 2022). The more successfully Turkey absorbs the EU's migration burden, the more valuable it becomes to keep Turkey in a buffer position; admitting the buffer into the Union, by contrast, is redefined as a risk. That accession negotiations have not been formally suspended is itself part of this logic: so long as the process is kept open, the EU carries the "threat of closure" as an ever-available lever. Turkey is thus held at a threshold position—neither excluded nor included—which constitutes not a stable bargaining ground but a perpetually reproduced field of attachment. This inverted-incentive equation also directly erodes the candidate state's capacity for rational calculation; alignment ceases to be a key that opens the door and becomes a new obstacle placed before it (Sato, 2013; Karabulut, 2021). This paradox likewise exposes the explanatory limits of classical conditionality theory.

The first condition for exiting the structure is to acknowledge openly the problem's five-layered character. The strategic trap produced by Turkey's positioning as a buffer state, the geopolitical trap arising from the integration of its border regime into the EU's architecture, the geo-economic trap in which cumulative expenditure is traded against conditional support, the socio-economic trap generated by an irregular-migrant mass of twelve to fifteen million people, and the membership trap in which legally acquired rights are reduced to objects of bargaining can be overcome not through separate policies but through simultaneous and mutually reinforcing reforms. Interventions directed at a single layer cannot break the ring that the other four quickly reweave. In a structure where the links feed one another, the parallel—rather than sequential—advance of the reform package is not a policy preference but a structural necessity for escaping the trap. The roadmap proposed below should therefore be read as the nucleus of a holistic reform package.

On the legal plane, the first step for Turkey is to place the *pacta sunt servanda* principle enshrined in Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties on the

international agenda continuously and systematically. The right to visa liberalization, legally acquired under the 1963 Ankara Agreement and the 1970 Additional Protocol, must be reframed not as an object of political bargaining but as a contractual obligation. The architecture of the Readmission Agreement, with its flexible and discretionary promises, should be renegotiated through additional protocols that stipulate a measurable timetable, a concrete allocation of support, and reciprocal enforcement provisions. Alongside this, recourse to international judicial bodies and the invocation of European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence in Turkey's favor are instruments not to be overlooked on the legal plane. Rendering a rights-based conception of covenant visible before international public opinion is the most effective means both of unsettling the EU's claim to discursive superiority from within and of strengthening Turkey's bargaining position.

On the institutional plane, the capacity of the Presidency of Migration Management must be strengthened both quantitatively and qualitatively. Producing irregular-migration data independently of EU metrics and in a transparent manner, equipping border-management institutions with their own information infrastructure, and bringing technical cooperation under sovereign oversight are the basic conditions for preventing externalization from deepening under the guise of "modernization assistance." The preservation of institutional memory carries a distinct importance: systematically documenting the outcomes of each negotiation round with the EU and using them as the baseline for subsequent rounds will prevent the accumulated distrust between the parties from being capitalized to Turkey's detriment. A further step that must accompany this is strengthening the academia-bureaucracy bridge and supporting independent think tanks devoted to migration governance. Ensuring that knowledge production is neither monopolized nor externally sourced functions as a lever that directly determines Turkey's discursive capacity in international debates.

On the economic plane, when the roughly forty-billion-dollar magnitude of Turkey's cumulative expenditure on irregular migrants over the 2011–2021 period is set alongside the six-billion-euro conditional package the EU pledged under the 2016 Statement, the structural character of the fiscal asymmetry becomes plainly evident (Memişoğlu & Başdaş, 2022b; Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a; Üstübcü & İçduygu, 2021a). Reporting this picture transparently, supporting calls for international burden-sharing with concrete documentation, and keeping the strain on public finances continuously visible before international organizations will strengthen Turkey's hand at the negotiating table. This evidence-based approach allows Turkey to reframe the EU's "we provided financial support" narrative through its own concrete expenditure records, and it erodes the discursive ground of the geo-economic trap (Akman & Çekin, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2022). On the same plane, linking the negotiations to modernize the Customs Union with the migration dossier does not amount to subordinating the economic domain to political bargaining; rather, it offers concrete ground for establishing a

reciprocity-based balance between the EU's economic interests and the migration costs Turkey has assumed. A rational bargaining ground that balances the burdens and interests of both sides can thus be constructed, with the aim of placing the burden Turkey has long borne without recompense onto an equitable footing of shared responsibility (Ataseven, 2019; Kutlay & Öniş, 2021).

On the socio-economic plane, it is clear that quantitative measures alone are insufficient. Binding the population that falls outside the scope of temporary protection to a legal status, systematizing access to education and health services, and structurally addressing the wage pressure created by informal employment are steps that would weaken the socio-economic trap. The truly critical issue is the silent erosion produced by intergenerational vulnerability: a young population kept away from the education system and pushed into the informal labor market forms a new ring of vulnerability for the future and, beyond the purely economic burden, drives a long-term depletion of social capital. For this reason, integration policies must be redesigned not as temporary crisis management but as a component of Turkey's medium-term development strategy. Within this framework, mother-tongue literacy programs, vocational-training pools, and neighborhood-scale interventions oriented toward social cohesion should be considered as concrete policy options. Treating integration not as an act of benevolence but as a matter of national security and societal sustainability is the basic condition for cushioning the long-term consequences of the socio-economic trap.

On the diplomatic plane, Turkey should reposition its relationship with the EU not as a stand-alone equation but in conjunction with its multidimensional foreign-policy options across Eurasia, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Africa. This approach is not a call for rupture; it is a realistic strategic vision that widens the bargaining ground vis-à-vis the EU and replaces the appearance of a "single option" with a multi-actor international balance. Turkey's "release-the-migration" threat can become a meaningful lever against the EU's power to "close the membership door" only when it forms part of a multi-axis foreign-policy equation (Greenhill, 2020b; Okyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2021; Tolay, 2022b). Otherwise, migration diplomacy will remain a constraint that erodes Turkey's discursive legitimacy and must be wielded with restraint. Rereading the geopolitical advantage afforded by Turkey's geographic location as a lever of autonomy rather than an instrument of dependence in its relationship with the EU requires a paradigm shift—and a strategic maturity—that converts the reflexive posture of "locking onto a single partner" into a "multi-axis negotiation competence."

The recommendation addressed to the EU is perhaps this study's most critical message: short-term domestic political concerns cannot be placed ahead of long-term strategic interests. The rising anti-immigrant discourse in member states (Geddes & Scholten, 2016) deters EU leaders from making concessions; while this affords short-term domestic relief, over the long term it erodes the EU's claim to be a global norm entrepreneur and its capacity to build a

sustainable neighborly relationship with Turkey (Boswell, 2019b; Triandafyllidou, 2020). The continual use of the power to "close the membership door" generates, in Turkey's institutional memory, an accumulation of distrust that is difficult to repair, and it wholly undermines the credibility of the Union's neighborhood policy (Demirsu & Müftüler-Baç, 2021a; Aydın-Düzgit & Balta, 2022a). The credibility of the EU's normative discourse is directly proportional to its will to honor its commitments; otherwise, its emphasis on democracy and the rule of law is reduced to a symbolic ritual in the shadow of domestic electoral populism (Schimmelfennig, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2022). From the perspective of ethical leadership, it is an unavoidable responsibility for the Union's future that its leaders favor long-term institutional legitimacy over short-term electoral calculation. The smart policy for the EU is a framework that does not keep Turkey in a buffer position but repositions it as an equal partner and treats the fulfillment of commitments as a strategic necessity no less than a normative requirement.

The study's interdisciplinary opening is poised to shape the theoretical backbone of subsequent debates. Bringing the concepts of ethical leadership, institutional memory, and societal resilience into conversation with international relations theory shows that the readmission regime is the subject not only of policy analysis but also of political psychology and theories of social trust. The deep skepticism Turkish society has accumulated regarding "the bindingness of the EU's word" is not a momentary reaction but a durable parameter lodged in institutional memory that redraws the starting conditions of future negotiations. The proposed theoretical expansion therefore offers an integrated lens explaining how the perception of betrayal, legal deadlock, and loss of legitimacy interlock, and it builds an interdisciplinary bridge uniting strands too often discussed separately in the literature. The concrete counterpart of this opening is the convergence of political science, law, sociology, and political-psychology scholarship around a shared conceptual vocabulary. Otherwise, each discipline will continue to describe the same structure in its own terms; yet the only way to render visible an integrated phenomenon such as the strategic trap runs through the sharing of this vocabulary.

Four productive directions stand out for future research. The first is testing the transferability of the strategic-trap concept; in particular, the arrangements that candidate countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, and Mediterranean partners such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya, conduct with the EU offer fertile ground for probing the concept's claim to generality. The second is investigating the concept's operability beyond migration governance—in trade regimes, energy partnerships, and security cooperation. The third comprises mixed-design studies supported by quantitative methods; such studies carry the potential to render measurable the rate at which the trap structure hardens over time. To this end, discourse-analysis software supported by quantitative data stands out as a functional instrument for tracing the trajectory of conceptual shifts in official EU documents. The fourth comprises interdisciplinary studies that

foreground the relationship of ethical leadership, institutional memory, and societal resilience to readmission regimes. Considered together, these directions lay the ground for the concept to evolve into a general analytical tool not only in the context of EU–Turkey relations but across global migration governance as a whole.

In conclusion, the migration governance Turkey sustains with the EU has become, far beyond a policy problem, a strategic vise that simultaneously transforms the discursive, legal, institutional, economic, and societal planes. The concept of the strategic trap does not merely name this vise; it also furnishes the conceptual ground for a holistic roadmap out of it. For Turkey, the key to escaping the trap should be sought not in reactions to individual layers but in a multilayered reform package that simultaneously encompasses law, institutions, the economy, demography, and diplomacy. For the EU, in turn, the smart policy is to exchange the short-term comfort afforded by the buffer strategy for the long-term legitimacy provided by the principle of equal partnership. Read correctly, the readmission regime is not merely a migration problem but a global laboratory revealing how international cooperation turns into a trap under asymmetric conditions—and how one might exit that trap. This process of reconstruction must be built, beyond declarations of good intent, upon reciprocal obligations bound to concrete timetables and upon verifiable mechanisms. The future of the EU–Turkey relationship will be rewritten through the lessons the parties draw from this laboratory; and while a new covenantal framework—one in which the principles of *pacta sunt servanda*, acquired rights, and reciprocity are reactivated—remains both possible and necessary, the concept of the strategic trap offers, as both diagnostic instrument and roadmap for this reconstruction, an indispensable lens for reading the coming two decades of EU–Turkey relations.

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