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Beyond Transactionalism: Germany's Role in Intra-EU and EU-Turkey Cooperation on Migration During the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on hegemonic stability theory (HST) and accounts of transactionalism, we analyse Germany's role in EU migration policy in the immediate response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015/16. We ask whether Germany followed short-term self-interested considerations in line with transactionalism or whether it acted as a benevolent hegemon both vis-à-vis its European partners and indeed Turkey. A benevolent hegemon is defined as a leader that is ready to create a public good from which its partners benefit as well, and potentially even more than itself. To do so, we study the cases of Germany's suspension of Dublin III in September 2015, internal EU relocation and the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. Analysing EU documents, international press, and secondary data, we find that Germany pursued self-interested goals in its crisis response, but also engaged in refugee responsibility-sharing, thus providing the public good of stability to other member states and partly to Turkey. It thus exceeded a purely transactionalist logic and has to some extent acted as a benevolent hegemon.

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Introduction

Was Germany's handling of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015/16 a moment of transactionalism, as is often claimed (Saatçioğlu 2020; Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020)? Germany assumed an important role in addressing the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, both within the EU and internationally. Although not an immediate neighbour of Syria, it attracted a large Syrian refugee population, making it the top host for Syrian refugees in Europe and the sixth largest recipient of refugees worldwide at the time

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(Betts, Costello, and Zaun 2017, 47). Moreover, Germany actively shaped the EU's response towards this crisis and played a leading role in several initiatives, including refugee relocation (European Union 2015a, 2015b) and the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement (European Council 2016). Thus, German chancellor Angela Merkel was named the person of the year (2015) by Time Magazine and hailed as the 'chancellor of the free world' and the 'de facto leader of the continent' (Time 2015). Despite this essential role in both hosting the largest Syrian refugee population outside of the Middle East and putting forward the EU's policy response to the crisis, Germany's role in this response has received little academic attention. An important exception is Reiners and Tekin (2019) who have argued that Germany assumed a leadership role in the EU-Turkey Statement but less so in the internal EU crisis response. Defining leadership in line with Nye (2008, 56) as the ability to 'help create and achieve goals' and focusing on the successful facilitation of consensus among partners, they argue that Germany was unable to reach a broad consensus in the internal dimension, with the Visegrád countries repeatedly challenging Germany's approach, while all member states could subscribe to the EU-Turkey Statement. We take a slightly different perspective and focus less on the consensus of all actors involved as a feature of leadership, but instead on the readiness and ability to initiate cooperation and provide solutions to the benefit of the parties involved in line with hegemonic stability theory (HST) (Kindleberger 1973; Grunberg 1990; Snidal 1985). More specifically, we ask whether Germany acted as a benevolent hegemon, i.e. a state that follows self-interested goals, but in doing so provides public goods or whether it acted as a transactionalist state (Goldman 1969; Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020; Beeson 2020) which focuses entirely on short-term gains at the expense of a long-term strategy.

In our analysis, we study three of the most important initiatives that resulted from this crisis, namely, (1) Germany's unilateral suspension of the Dublin III Regulation, (2) the two EU relocation decisions of 2015 and (3) the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement as probably the most important initiative of the EU in the external dimension as three 'critical cases' (Yin 2018, 49). This allows us to evaluate Germany's role in the immediate crisis response from summer 2015 to March 2016. Our data comprises secondary data from press, EU documents, testimonies from an observer of European Council meetings (the 'Ludlow papers') and secondary sources.

Empirically, we show that Germany acted as a benevolent hegemon for a short period in 2015. It did so particularly in the intra-EU dimension, but to some extent also in EU-Turkey relations. We show that transactionalism, i.e. the rational pursuit of interests (like the alleviation of domestic electoral pressures) through short-term one-off deals rather than a (value-based)

long-term partnership is neither entirely contradictory to the idea of the benevolent hegemon nor to European integration. Instead, we find that transactionalism is not uncommon in EU internal affairs either.

Theoretical Framework: Transactionalism and the Benevolent Hegemon

In the following, we present HST and transactionalism as two competing theories to explain Germany's role in the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis both with regards to EU internal affairs and EU-Turkey relations. HST has been occasionally applied to Germany's role in the EU, but it has been done so mostly with regards to the Eurozone (Bulmer and Paterson 2013; Bulmer 2014; Crawford 2007; Morisse-Schilbach 2011) and certainly not focusing on EU-Turkish affairs. Transactionalism has in recent years been a dominant theoretical approach to describe EU-Turkish relations, especially regarding the EU-Turkey Statement (Eralp 2019; Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020; Turhan and Tekin 2023). Yet, it has never been applied to intra-EU relations.

Transactionalism has been traced back to the work of Karl Deutsch (1957) and been employed as a form of 'functionalism' (Saatçioğlu 2020) or 'realism' (Dursun-Özkanca 2022). Essentially, it refers to a bilateral relationship of exchange where both sides 'see a net gain when measuring what is received against what is given up in the transaction' (Goldman 1969, 719). For the critics of transactionalism in EU-Turkey relations, it may meanwhile refer to.

> a foreign policy approach that favours bilateral to multilateral relations, focuses on short-term wins rather than longer-term strategic foresight, adheres to a zero-sum worldview where all gains are relative and reciprocity is absent, rejects value-based policymaking, and does not follow a grand strategy. (Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020, 168)

While some agree with defining transactionalism as following a zero-sum logic (Zenko and Lissner 2017), others emphasise its inherent 'deal-making approach' (Beeson 2020, 11), recognising the reciprocity of a transaction. Transactionalism is essentially bilateral, short-term, and devoid of an overarching strategy or long-term perspective (Hadar 2017; Zenko and Lissner 2017; Eralp 2019; Beeson 2020; Güvenç and Özel 2020; Dursun-Özkanca 2022). It is associated with the idea of a *quid pro quo*, and conceived of as implicitly adversarial, with threats being a common element (Dursun-Özkanca 2022; Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020). Transactionalism is 'norm-free' cooperation and pursued by individual leaders seeking personal gain rather than multilateral, rules-based cooperation (Eralp 2019; Dalay et al. 2020, Saatçioğlu 2020; Güvenç and Özel 2020). It is juxtaposed with institutionalised long-term relations of shared commitments and of mutual trust, loyalty and solidarity (cf. Püttmann 2018).

In contrast, hegemonic stability theory (HST), first conceived by Kindleberger (1973), argues that international cooperation is usually facilitated through a (benevolent) hegemon. The benevolent hegemon is a 'big' and 'powerful' state that fosters cooperation for self-interested goals, e.g. to liberalise trade to gain access to other markets and expand its own exports. Yet, the effects of doing so are also positive for other states (Layne 2012; Grunberg 1990, 440) and include the provision of public goods which are produced quasi as a side-effect of self-interested behaviour (Layne 2012). Other states might even benefit more from the cooperative framework thus created than the hegemon which may entail a relative loss of power in the long run (Grunberg 1990, 437). According to Snidal (1985, 585-590), this is the biggest difference compared to the coercive hegemon which would never enter cooperation that could potentially benefit others more than itself, as it takes a zero-sum approach to cooperation. Under HST, hegemony is usually operationalised through a country's monetary reserves or gross national product, i.e. its economic wealth (Russett 1985, 209). Germany has not only the largest population in the EU which makes it powerful both demographically and in EU decision-making, but it has long been the largest economy among EU member states. It therefore comes as no surprise that it has occasionally been studied as a 'reluctant'/benevolent hegemon (Bulmer and Paterson 2013; Morisse-Schilbach 2011).

The above definition of the benevolent hegemon suggests that the provision of public goods is key to the benevolent hegemon. This resonates with the literature on international public goods. Both studies on burden-sharing within NATO (Olson and Zeckhauser 1966; Sandler 1977) and refugee responsibility-sharing (Betts 2003; Suhrke 1998; Thielemann 2018) highlight that economically big, powerful states provide goods to the benefit of others, although such behaviour is rather rare and international public goods provision thus uncommon. Scholars specifically studying refugee responsibility-sharing have argued that refugee responsibility-sharing creates a public good: By protecting refugees, states contribute to stability and safety, because refugees represent an anomaly in the post-Westphalian state system that is linked to chaos and insecurity (Suhrke 1998; Betts 2003). Without connection to and protection by a state, refugees find themselves in a legal limbo and without access to basic human, social or political rights. Under such conditions, especially larger refugee flows have been linked to chaos, crisis, and even conflict. Taking charge of and/or sharing the responsibility for these refugees can help overcome these dynamics and contribute to an overall stabilisation of the situation which is hence a public good. Noll (2000) argues that there are three ways of responsibility-sharing (and thus three ways of contributing to the public good of stability/safety): States can share people (i.e. take in more refugees), they can share money (disburse financial support to top host countries) and they

can 'share' policy (by adopting a rather liberal policy approach that attracts more refugees). Some of the international 'public goods' literature has also suggested that public goods are usually not provided based on altruistic considerations but when the provider additionally deduces private benefits from it (Sandler 1977; Betts 2003).

HST has been criticised, e.g. for the lack of the empirical presence of a global hegemon (Russett 1985, 211) or the expectation that the presence of a hegemon is always required for cooperation to come about (Keohane 2005). We are not trying to test any of these expectations but are merely interested in whether Germany has acted as a regional benevolent hegemon that has initiated cooperation at a given point in time and provided a public good. Moreover, the term is normatively contested, because it implies some idea of (white) saviourism and takes a potentially paternalistic view over those 'ruled' by the hegemon (Grunberg 1990, 446, 457). However, we are not interested in assessing German domination during the crisis response, but rather in potential German leadership. Lentner (2005, 736) has distinguished two possible meanings of hegemony, namely dominance or leadership. According to Bulmer and Paterson (2018, 14), the term leadership is more commonly used in the EU context, because domination would be incompatible with the collective goals of peaceful coexistence and cooperation that underly the EU's creation. Additionally, it reminds of images of Nazi Germany which would badly fit with German self-perceptions post-World War II. Still, we refrain from using the concept of leadership and stick with the notion of the benevolent hegemon ('with a capital B'), because of its focus on providing public goods and considering cooperation a positive sum game. Hence, our aim is to test German leadership in a specific crisis situation, but our definition of leadership rests on the ability to provide a public good.

The previous discussion demonstrates that benevolent hegemony is not opposed to transactionalism but goes *beyond* transactionalism: Both theories suggest strategic and self-interested rather than norm-driven behaviour, but transactionalism follows a short-term, zero-sum logic, which considers each 'deal' or decision made one-off. The benevolent hegemon in contrast takes into consideration the interests of others to sustain long-term cooperation and to create a public good from which the benevolent hegemon but also others benefit following a positive sum logic.

Germany as a Benevolent Hegemon Vis-à-Vis Other EU Member States

Germany's approach to European migration policies has been shown to be widely driven by self-interested goals and, we would even argue, transactionalism: Germany perceives EU migration policies as a tool to decrease its own

intake of asylum-seekers, thus implicitly underwriting a redistribution of refugees towards its fellow member states (Zaun and Ripoll Servent 2021, 167). Germany has historically been one of the main, if not the main, proponent(s) of common European asylum policies and it was able to impose its own policies and standards on other member states (Ette 2017). Together with a few like-minded member states (France, Sweden, the Netherlands), Germany took the lead in framing the purpose of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) as one of producing a 'fairer' (i.e. more even) distribution of asylum-seekers and ending secondary movements (usually from border countries to the centre) (Vink 2010, 45).

One way to do so is through policy harmonisation: If all member states provided the same protection standards, asylum-seekers would no longer prefer to apply for asylum in Germany or Sweden instead of Spain or Bulgaria (des Places and Deffains 2003). Another policy aiming to achieve redistribution was the Dublin Regulation: Those member states that had 'porous borders' and that would easily let in asylum-seekers, usually border countries in South-Eastern Europe, were deemed in charge of processing their applications under the Dublin Regulation (II, III) and to subsequently protect and host successful applicants. Put bluntly, the CEAS served as a tool to redistribute asylum-seekers from North-Western countries (and especially Germany) to South-Eastern member states (Zaun 2022). This on the one hand demonstrates the central role Germany had in EU asylum policymaking and on the other hand how exploitative, Germany's approach to EU asylum integration has been: Germany did not consider the broader implications of this approach on its fellow EU member states, but instead was looking to decrease its own asylum-seeker intake in the short term at the expense of its fellow member states, suggesting a zero-sum logic.

Moreover, Germany only promoted responsibility-sharing initiatives when they served its goal to reduce its own intake of asylum-seekers. A case in point is Germany's initiative for quota-based relocation in 1994 after asylum applications in Germany had reached a peak (Council 1994). While promoting refugee distribution at this occasion, it would block it in 2011 when Italy and Greece, facing high asylum-seeker numbers at the time due to the Arab Spring, asked for a commitment towards more solidarity in the then negotiated Dublin III Regulation (Zaun 2022, 204). This highlights that Germany has traditionally not provided any public goods but applied a zero-sum logic: The idea of a CEAS was to redistribute refugees from Germany (and a few other traditional refugee recipient countries) to member states that were not traditionally hosts of refugees.

Scholars have therefore argued that respective EU agencies and especially the EU Asylum Agency function as a proxy for a coalition of like-minded member states from North-Western Europe, spearheaded by Germany

(Ripoll Servent 2018). Their aim is to enforce policy harmonisation in border countries to avoid secondary movements towards Germany. This suggests that Germany has pursued a transactionalist or 'functionalist' (Saatçioğlu 2020, 176) approach towards in EU asylum policies for the past thirty years. This is further evidenced by Germany's approach to integration in the area altogether. Germany has tried to block further EU integration in asylum when its political leaders felt that refugee numbers were low, and more EU integration could change that (Zaun and Ripoll Servent 2021). For instance, when asylum-seeker numbers had peaked in the early and mid-1990s in Germany, Chancellor Helmut Kohl actively pursued the full integration of asylum policies with the Amsterdam Treaty, only to back down when numbers were again on the decline and the German *Länder* perceived that full integration could reverse that trend (Hellmann et al. 2005, 151-153). When Germany experienced an all-time low in asylum applications in the early 2000s, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder actively blocked the full communitarisation of migration policies at the EU level until he could tie a package deal with the UK – a then top recipient of refugees in Europe and hence fervent supporter of EU policies that could end this (Fella 2006, 14).

This demonstrates that transactionalism can be even found within the context of repeated and normatively embedded cooperation in the EU. Put differently, EU integration and transactionalism are not two opposing poles, as is often suggested (Dalay et al. 2020, 10, Saatçioğlu 2020), but they can, in fact, go together.

However, during the early phase of the 2015 crisis, this approach changed, and Germany partly assumed the role of a benevolent hegemon which provided other EU member states with the 'public good' of stability and security in a perceived situation of crisis and ensured that the Schengen area would remain intact (cf. Biermann et al. 2019, 254). For instance, Germany was among the main supporters of the adoption of two relocation decisions (Ludlow 2015a, 7) in May and September 2015 to the benefit of Italy and Greece (EU 2015a, EU 2015b) and successfully pushed through the adoption of the second relocation decision against growing opposition from the Visegrád countries (Monar 2016). Germany along with a few other member states understood that helping both countries would stabilise the situation and contribute to security and stability in the EU more generally. This meant that Germany was ready to receive more refugees through physical responsibility-sharing ('sharing people') from Italy and Greece at a time when it was already the top recipient of refugees in the EU (Zaun 2018, 49). This stands in stark contrast to its previous zero-sum logic according to which Germany would only adopt policy that would primarily help it reduce its own asylum-seeker intake. Germany understood that its own situation would not get better before the situation in border countries was

stabilised. Moreover, there is evidence of a genuine concern for border countries. Whereas German policymakers had previously been unsympathetic towards border countries, blaming their being overwhelmed on the lack of implementation of the CEAS, Chancellor Merkel repeatedly suggested during the 2015 crisis that it was not fair that these two countries bore a disproportionate burden 'simply because of their geography' (De la Baume 2017). Clearly, the German government finally considered the needs of other member states and tried to stabilise the situation in the EU, even if that meant that it would receive more asylum-seekers in the short run.

Germany again contributed to calming the crisis in the EU when it suspended the Dublin Regulation (EU 2013) on 4 September 2015, an instance of 'sharing policy'. When Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had asylum-seekers bussed to the Hungarian-Austrian border, Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann called Merkel for help, as he was afraid his country would be unable to absorb such large numbers of asylum-seekers (de Maizière 2019, 75). Merkel and Interior Minister de Mazière were concerned about the 'domino effect' resulting from Germany unilaterally closing its borders in response to the refugees coming through Austria, further straining the resources of already overburdened countries at the European external border, especially Greece (de Maizière 2019, 77; Ludlow 2015a, 7). They therefore decided against closing the border to Austria. Thus, once again Germany, as a big member state with comparatively strong absorption capacities, agreed to take in more refugees (by liberalising its policy and not enforcing Dublin) to support smaller, less capable member states, thus providing the public good of stability and security.

Of course, Germany was following self-interested goals when supporting Italy and Greece or Austria. Helping Austria would prevent ugly pictures in the global media of German border guards pushing back families at the German-Austrian border which could damage Germany's global reputation (de Maizière 2019, 78). Stabilising the situation in border countries through active relocation, moreover, would mean less chaos in these and fewer refugees self-relocating to Germany. This would ultimately also stabilise the political situation in Germany which was becoming increasingly tense politically with the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) gaining significant ground in elections in several German *Länder* (Ludlow 2016, 46). Finally, it would also incentivise border countries to stop waving through asylum-seekers (cf. Costello and Mouzourakis 2016). Nevertheless, by pursuing self-interested goals, Germany also implicitly helped others, which is typical for the benevolent hegemon. Germany also volunteered with a view of leading by example, hoping other member states would follow and actively contribute to responsibility-sharing (Ludlow 2015a, 6; Turhan 2019). This attempt remained unsuccessful and some neighbouring countries like Denmark would close their borders with Germany on 9 September 2015 to keep

refugees out. Germany then also unilaterally closed its borders on 14 September 2015. In this regard, Germany's leadership did not last very long. Nevertheless, such a systematic suspension of Dublin III was a previously unseen act of solidarity in EU migration policy.

When further cooperation around refugee distribution proved unsuccessful, Germany also took a lead in negotiating the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement (European Council 2016; see also Introduction to the Special Issue). The European Commission, Germany, and the Netherlands were key actors in negotiating this Statement (Reiners and Tekin 2019; Saatçioğlu 2020). Once more, Germany as a big member state with historically close relations to Turkey (Kramer and Reinkowski 2008) but also with a key interest in decreasing refugee flows to Europe (and to Germany) used its weight in EU-Turkey relations and took the lead in a policy which – if successful – had the potential to benefit all other EU member states with similar interests, including border and transit countries. While the EU-Turkey Statement has been widely criticised for its human rights implications (Amnesty International 2017) and even for its supposed lack of effectiveness (ESI 2023), it is another case of Germany taking a lead with the intention to create stability and security in the entire EU, but, of course, with a view to ultimately decrease secondary movements to Germany (Zaun 2018, 56). A case in point is the 1:1 resettlement scheme (European Council 2016, art. 1 and 2) which aimed to bring down numbers in the entire EU, but especially in Greece. Other member states largely welcomed the initiative except for Italy (Euractiv 2016), arguably because it feared that a blocking of the Eastern route through Greece would shift flows to the Southern Mediterranean route and hence to Italy.

Overall, we find strong evidence for Germany having acted as a benevolent hegemon vis-à-vis the EU, especially in summer/autumn 2015 when Germany unilaterally suspended Dublin III, pushed for the relocation decisions and took a lead in negotiating the EU-Turkey Statement. While always following its own interest, Germany could take measures of scale that would certainly contribute to easing the situation in smaller member states. Germany's interest in decreasing irregular migration and easing pressures on border countries was largely in line with the interest of other member states and thus oddly in the greater good of the EU. When pursuing these policies, Germany also aimed at keeping up trust between EU member states with a view of keeping EU integration and here especially the Schengen area (Biermann et al. 2019, 254) alive. The inflow of refugees in 2015/16 entailed several crises endangering political stability in the EU and potentially endangering the EU integration project: Germany, France, Italy, and Poland were facing rising support for radical right and Eurosceptic parties which mobilised against refugees and the EU. Cases in point include Poland where Prawo I Sprawiedliwość (PiS) mobilised voters in the 2015

national elections, using the narrative that migrants had committed the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 (cf. Ludlow 2015b, 3–4) or Hungary where Orbán held a referendum against the EU, asking the population whether it subscribed to the illegal settlement of migrants in Hungary against the country's will (Kriesi et al. 2021, 340). Also, the German chancellor had increasingly faced backlash at home. The German government thus spearheaded a coalition of member states that clearly wanted to demonstrate that the EU was responsive and able to find solutions to problems perceived as pressing by the European publics (Barigazzi 2018). This should help maintain political stability.

Germany as a Benevolent Hegemon Vis-à-Vis Turkey

Unlike previous analyses that have criticised the EU-Turkey Statement for its transactionalism (Eralp 2019; Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020), we find that the EU-Turkey Statement does not represent the end of EU-Turkey integration but contributed to the partial stabilisation of EU-Turkey relations when these were slowly but surely crumbling. This suggests that Germany in fact went beyond transactionalism during the Syrian refugee crisis and to some extent acted as a benevolent hegemon vis-à-vis Turkey, pursuing both its own interests and the public good of stability in the wider European neighbourhood.

The common evaluation of the EU-Turkey Statement suggests that the deal embodies value-free transactionalism in contrast to the EU's previous policy that is said to have been norm-based, as evidenced by Turkey's EU accession process and the EU's regular criticism of Turkey's democratic backsliding (Saatçioğlu 2020). The Statement is therefore considered as providing political support to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the turning of a blind eye to the domestic political situation in Turkey regarding the state of its democracy, civil liberties and human rights (Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020). To back this claim, this literature argues that, to finalise the deal, the EU and particularly Germany silenced their previous criticism of Turkey's democratic backsliding at this time and delayed the publication of the EU's 2015 progress report on Turkey until after Turkey's 2015 general elections (Saatçioğlu 2020). This argument implies that the EU was adamant to advocate EU values in Turkey right until the refugee crisis. It stopped doing so when it became strategically dependent on Turkey in the area of irregular migration and when Turkey's President Erdoğan actively exploited the EU's vulnerability to irregular migration by threatening to not cooperate and systematically let migrants cross the Turkish-Greek border (Léonard and Kaunert 2022). Once the asylum crisis occurred, so the argument reads, the EU softened its conditionality (Aras 2019) and promised Turkey an acceleration of the accession process, which effectively

undermined the importance of the Copenhagen Criteria. The EU-Turkey Statement is therefore seen as a 'game changer' (Aras 2019, 47) for Turkey and as a paradigm shift from rules-based political integration to interest-based transactionalism between Turkey and the EU (Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020; Dalay et al. 2020). As Saatçioğlu (2020, 177) writes, 'EU-Turkey strategic cooperation following the [refugee] crisis came at the expense of the EU's foundational democratic principles that had hitherto conditioned the flow of EU-Turkey interactions'. The claimed importance of these principles particularly in German foreign policy towards Turkey is also discussed by Aydın-Düzgit and Turhan (forthcoming) in this issue. In conclusion, the EU-Turkey Statement is interpreted as the effective disappearance of Turkey's prospect of EU membership as the Statement is said to signal that the EU since then conceives of Turkey as merely 'a neighbourhood country and a formal strategic partner devoid of a realisable EU membership perspective' (Saatçioğlu 2020, 179). As a result, the EU-Turkey Statement is seen as the nail in the coffin of Turkey's potential future inside the EU and as the EU's withdrawal from a value-based foreign policy that furthered the consolidation of democracy in Turkey (Aras 2019).

Certainly, the inherent conflict between values and interests in this case is undeniable, as is the great socio-economic burden that Turkey carries as a result of its reception of the refugees (Erdoğan 2021; Püttmann 2025). The fading of the EU's normative criticism of Turkey at the time is also evident, and some might even say that the EU gave a blank check to authoritarianism in Turkey, in line with Germany's generally pragmatic approach to European and international politics, as discussed by Smith and Tekin (forthcoming) in this issue. Indeed, the EU's interests in one area (migration control) may have contradicted its aims in other areas (democracy promotion) here, leading to what some call 'organised hypocrisy' (Lavenex 2018), i.e. the adoption of contradictory policies in response to different demands by different actors within the EU and its institutions.

However, the above argument rests on the crucial assumption that, prior to the refugee crisis, Turkey's EU accession process was still a realistic prospect and determining EU-Turkey relations. In contrast, we find this premise to be unfounded. Rather, at the time of the EU-Turkey Statement, the 'already turbulent' relations between Turkey and the EU were marked by a 'crisis of trust' (Dursun-Özkanca 2022, 743–748), and the benefits of political integration with Turkey for the EU had become too little to keep the process alive in practice (ibid). As Ali Usul from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it in 2014: 'Though the accession negotiations between Turkey and the EU continue in the official sense, in reality, the relations are in a deadlock' (Usul 2014, 283). Usul moreover described EU-Turkey relations at the time as having 'lost their momentum' and as 'going through a period of steady deterioration' (ibid). Already before, in 2006, Turkey's

accession negotiations with the EU had been partly frozen, making some analysts call EU-Turkey relations 'as ambivalent and ambiguous as ever' (Redmond 2007, 306). In the run-up to 2015, Turkey was even labelled as being in a process of 'de-Europeanisation' (Yilmaz 2016, 86). In fact, in 2014, many were finally hoping for a 'new era' in the EU and Turkey's desolate relations (IKV 2014; Usul 2014), with high-level talks on EU visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens, for example, being resumed after Turkey signed a Readmission Agreement regarding irregular migrants, which promised to 'inject a healthy dosage of trust into the poor state of EU-Turkish relations' at the time (Kirişci 2014, 4). Still, the general judgment among analysts at the time was that one should not expect 'a breakthrough in the relationship' (Eralp 2014, 6; Usul 2014) and Eralp (2014, 7) even named the accession process a 'dialogue of the deaf'. Against this backdrop, some later described the EU-Turkey Statement as 'the only bond left' between Turkey and the EU (Yinanç 2017). The Statement thus became the almost last instance of intense cooperation between the two sides and a chance to work on the 'major trust issues' (Dursun-Özkanca 2022, 753) that had emerged over time. As Reiners and Tekin (2019, 117) find, following the EU's cooperation with Turkey on the refugee crisis, their relations 'seemed to be closer than they had been for years'. Therefore, rather than thinking of the EU-Turkey Statement as a 'divorce protocol', it should maybe be thought of as a 'therapeutic opportunity' – even if this opportunity ended up being unused (Dimitriadi et al. 2018; Erdoğan and Püttmann 2023).

Goldman (1969) has shown that political transactions between states do not necessarily lead to pure transactionalism in the long run but can lay the very foundation upon which political integration can arise. That is because repeatedly successful transactions between actors that are perceived as benefitting both sides can generate trust in each other's compliance. This mutual trust is quintessential for any political integration to occur. Only if actors can be sure of each other's reliability to comply and reciprocate they will be ready to rely on shared rules. Therefore, the more trust these political transactions induce, the more they may eventually result in the transition to long-term political integration. Hence, political transactions between states do not necessarily contradict long-term rules-based integration, but rather they can *lead to* it. Given the critical state of EU-Turkey relations at the time, the Statement may therefore be interpreted not as the end of integration between Turkey and the EU, but as an (eventually short-lived) opportunity to rebuild it.

Indeed, some of the terms set out by the Statement explicitly offered the road to greater issue-specific integration (e.g. visa liberalisation, high-level talks and the prospect of upgrading the Customs Union). Thereby, they created new incentives to remove the domestic obstacles inside Turkey to visa liberalisation, such as Turkey's definition of terrorism that infringes

on civil liberties (European Commission 2022; Grigoriadis and Uslu 2021). This new prospect of political integration was far from unconditional but meant that Turkey's compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria was still considered crucial for Turkish EU membership (Grigoriadis and Uslu 2021). With the coup attempt on 15 July 2016 shortly after the Statement and its political consequences, such as the intensification of the problems with Turkey's law on terrorism, the realisation of the path to greater integration set out in the Statement was largely disabled (European Commission 2016; Erdoğan et al. 2024). That the aftermath of the Statement did not lead to greater integration between Turkey and the EU as set out in the arrangement is therefore not intrinsic to the Statement but demonstrates the persistence of the EU's conditionality. While Tekin (2020) has criticised the issue linkage between elements of Turkey's EU accession process and the keeping of the Syrian refugees as undermining the logic of the accession process, she too recognises that the decoupling of such things as visa liberalisation or an upgrade of the Customs Union from the accession process made it more likely that they will ever see the light of day – especially given that the accession process has become effectively 'braindead' (Borrell 2024).

Thus, by negotiating the Statement, Germany followed its strategic interests, yet also provided the basis for continued close cooperation between Turkey and the EU. Rather than ending a long-term perspective, it offered a new perspective for issue-specific integration at a time when membership was often considered not on the table anymore. Moreover, the EU did not completely sacrifice its own values (the Copenhagen criteria) for short-term gains. This highlights that Germany's approach exceeded purely transactionalist considerations.

Moreover, the Statement also paved the way for the EU's financial support of Turkey in hosting the Syrian refugees – 'the EU's biggest humanitarian project ever' (van Heukelingen 2021, 3) – and thereby contributed the Syrian refugees' relative welfare in Turkey, which again created stability in Turkey. In addition, it strengthened Turkey's financial stability as an important actor in the region (van Heukelingen 2021). This is important because the majority of Syrian refugees wanted to stay in Turkey in any event (Erdoğan 2021), so Turkey would have had to manage their reception either way. The Turkish government therefore welcomed the EU's financial support (Cakmak 2020), which is a clear case of 'sharing money', one of Noll's dimensions of refugee responsibility-sharing. Until today a substantive sum of €10 billion in humanitarian and development aid were provided under the EU-Turkey Statement (European Commission 2023). The Statement thus creates a public good, namely stability for top recipients of refugees in the sending country's neighbourhood. More specifically, the funding was supposed to ease the effects of the refugee inflows in Turkey, of course with a view of incentivising Turkey's continued readiness to host

refugees, which is not uncommon for such public goods provision (Betts 2011, 53–77). This demonstrates that Germany, 'the hegemon of the EU', as Gisclon and Keyman (forthcoming) write in this issue, and a top player in the EU's external relations towards the Eastern Mediterranean, as discussed by Müftüler-Baç and Taştan (forthcoming) also in this issue, to some extent also acted as a benevolent hegemon vis-à-vis Turkey, even if this was much more limited than in intra-EU relations. Of the first €6 billion agreed when the Statement was issued on 18 March 2016, about one quarter went to Turkish state institutions for education, health, social services and migration management whereas the other three quarters went to international organisations operating in Turkey in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis (European Commission 2024). Thus, most of the funding occurred in an institutionalised multi-lateral setting and not in a norm-free environment.

Finally, and crucially, the realistic political alternatives to the Statement at the time were not the intake of a greater number of Syrian refugees into the EU and their distribution across member states, but the full closure and reinforcement of the EU's borders, as several EU member states also did at a later stage (SPIEGEL 2018; Vogler 2020). A case in point are the events in February 2020 when Turkey decided to 'annul' the Statement and the EU heavily geared up its border protection in response, with Greece suspending the registration of any asylum applications for one month (Amnesty International 2020).

The EU-Turkey Statement thus represented a policy option at the time that would help stabilise EU-Turkey relations and Turkey's reception of the Syrian refugees – which the other available policy options did not (Erdoğan et al. 2024). In doing so, cooperation was maintained in a context where Turkey and the EU were increasingly drifting apart (Glos and Püttmann 2020). In sum, the Statement kept the route to integration more open than other policy options at the time and thus maintained an order that had long been crumbling (Dinç and Aydemir 2016). Following this path, Germany has been keen to keep up cooperation with Turkey on the issue of migration in contrast to other EU member states, such as France or Cyprus (van Heukelingen 2021; Glos and Püttmann 2020). While 'sharing money' with Turkey is arguably not as much of a commitment as 'sharing people', as done internally in the EU, it still is an instance of public goods provision. We are therefore led to conclude that Germany's approach towards Turkey in the EU-Turkey Statement exceeded that of pure transactionalism and Germany even acted as a benevolent hegemon towards Turkey, albeit this role was much more restricted than in intra-EU migration policies.

Conclusion

In this paper we have analysed Germany's role in intra-EU and EU-Turkey cooperation on migration in the context of the 2015/16 Syrian refugee crisis and asked whether Germany followed purely transactionalist concerns or whether it may have acted as a benevolent hegemon. We followed Lentner's (2005) distinction between hegemony as either domination or leadership and focused on the leadership aspect, bearing in mind that the concept of domination would sit uneasily with Germany's foreign policy approach post-World War II or any European foreign policy after decolonialisation in the 1960s. We specifically focused on benevolent hegemony as leadership being provided by a 'big' and 'powerful' state that is ready to engage in providing the public good of stability in a region. Scholars have indeed argued that a defining feature of the benevolent hegemon is the provision of public goods even when their provision has negative consequences for the hegemon itself and can undermine its power and wealth in the long run. A transactionalist actor, on the other hand, would only follow short-term interests and not provide any public goods that third actors could benefit from. Moreover, as cooperation is usually considered a one-off, maintaining and nurturing a long-term relationship is not a concern for transactionalists. We argue that Germany's role exceeds pure transactionalism. Instead, Germany has in part acted as a benevolent hegemon in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015/16 both vis-à-vis the EU and Turkey. As the example of the relocation decisions from 2015, Germany's unilateral suspension of the Dublin III Regulation and Germany's proactive role in the external dimension (especially the EU-Turkey Statement) demonstrate, Germany aimed to alleviate the political and material pressures resulting from the crisis on its E(U)ropean neighbours by finding solutions. When solutions in the internal dimension proved unrealistic, it looked for external solutions.

While the German government has largely done so, following its interest of reducing the number of asylum-seekers in its own country, a few instances show that it did make a genuine effort to help other EU member states as well. When relaxing the application of Dublin III for Syrians, Germany provided support to Austria but also Italy and Greece which were all struggling with unusually large asylum-seeker populations. Germany thus contributed to a stabilisation of the situation in these countries and maintained trust in the Schengen area. Put differently, Germany engaged in responsibility-sharing and liberalised its policies (Dublin III), while also physically 'sharing people' (Dublin III, relocation). While Germany had previously always vigorously tried to decrease its asylum-seeker intake, it now kept its borders open at a crucial moment, thus demonstrating – at least for a short period – its willingness to make material and political sacrifices for

its neighbours with a view to keeping European cooperation alive, which is considered a key feature of a benevolent hegemon.

Regarding Turkey, the EU-Turkey Statement represents the policy option among those being discussed among German and European decision-makers at the time (Erdoğan et al. 2024) that would cater to Germany's and the EU's self-interest of curbing migratory flows whilst also providing stability to EU-Turkey relations as well as to Turkey's reception of the Syrian refugees. That is because, on the one hand, at the time of the refugee crisis, EU-Turkey relations were in a 'crisis of trust' (Dursun-Özkanca 2022, 743-748) and the EU accession process was de facto hardly alive anymore. In this context, the political transaction underlying the Statement was a chance to rebuild the trust in these relations, revitalise cooperation and eventually led to more (issue-specific) integration through liberalising EU visas for Turkish citizens or an upgrade of the EU-Turkey Customs Union. The other policy options discussed at the time would have only reinforced EU borders and further destabilised EU-Turkey relations, in general, and Turkey, in particular. Likewise, the Statement provided financial means to Turkey in its struggle to host the highest the number of refugees in the world and thereby alleviated some of the economic burden on the country, helping to (partially) stabilise it. Given these concerns for wider stability embedded in the political transaction that is the Statement, Germany's push for it is more symptomatic of benevolent hegemony than of pure transactionalism. However, as we have demonstrated, Germany acted as a much more 'restrained benevolent hegemon' in EU-Turkey relations as compared to intra-EU cooperation where it did not only 'share money', but also 'people' and policy.

In both cases, Germany did provide leadership and responsibility-sharing of different forms, because it benefits significantly from the persistence of the EU and Schengen but also because it has a clear interest in maintaining productive relations with Turkey. Nevertheless, Germany soon abandoned its role as a benevolent hegemon in EU asylum and migration policies and returned to its purely transactionalist approach, e.g. when it unilaterally closed its borders in September 2015 after it became clear that other member states would not follow the German example. Likewise, the EU more generally, later reinforced border protection in Greece, blocking off migration from Turkey rather than supporting Syrian refugees in Turkey or cooperating with it. After this short period of benevolent hegemony in summer and autumn 2015, Germany returned to its transactionalist logic in migration governance, be it in intra-EU relations and beyond, arguably in some issue areas earlier than in others.

The analysis has demonstrated that it would be incorrect to depict EU-Turkey relations as purely transactionalist and intra-EU relations as purely principled and value-driven. Indeed, the history of European integration

has been described as founded on 'functionalist' (Saatçioğlu 2020, 176) dynamics and pressures, where states would collaborate on 'low politics' issues, based on their economic interests which could be more easily pursued in a common European framework (Haas 2008;). This low-key transactional collaboration and regular interaction would then eventually lead to a building of trust and gradual integration. It is debatable if the EU-Turkey Statement, too, could have resulted in such cooperation from which more integration could have ensued – especially given that the EU eventually did not seem to share the expectation of the Turkish government to use the Statement as a pathway to more integration (Dimitriadi et al. 2018; Erdoğan and Püttmann 2023). But the question is also: what would have happened if there had not been the Statement?

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