

# CONNECTIVITY WITHOUT HUMAN MOBILITY: TURKEY-EU RELATIONS AND THE POLITICAL LIMITS OF THE MIDDLE CORRIDOR

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## Introduction

In recent years, two parallel developments have reshaped the governance of global trade and cross-border movement. On the one hand, growing geopolitical and economic uncertainty, most notably following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has driven states to pursue new trade and transportation routes. As the discourse on "connectivity" gains traction, such initiatives are framed as tools for diversification and risk mitigation amid state competition to secure strategic positions as hubs within reconfigured global supply chains. Paradoxically, on the other hand, this renewed emphasis on infrastructural openness has coincided with a marked trend toward political closure in liberal democracies, a problem that is particularly visible in the European Union's (EU) mobility and migration regimes. The EU-Turkey relationship illustrates this contradiction clearly: despite deep economic integration, as EU-based firms constitute 70 percent of foreign direct investment in Turkey and generate nearly half of Turkey's exports to the EU, mobility from Turkey into the Schengen area has become increasingly restricted.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in non-EU citizens' persistent difficulties in accessing short-term, work-related visas, including for truck drivers essential to cross-border trade. Therefore, seeing that restrictive migration regimes threaten to impede connectivity, it is against the backdrop of human mobility that the renewed prominence of the Middle Corridor should be examined. While an ambitious connectivity initiative projected by the World Bank to triple freight volumes by 2030,<sup>2</sup> the corridor is advancing in the absence of a coherent framework for governing the human mobility required to sustain it.

## The Middle Corridor in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

The Middle Corridor, formally known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), has become a focal point of the emerging connectivity debates. It is a multimodal trade route that links China to Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus, with onward connections either through Turkey or across the Black Sea. While trade through this corridor previously accounted for less than one percent of China-Europe trade and functioned largely as a secondary regional route, a convergence of geopolitical disruptions and shifting trade priorities has rapidly elevated its strategic significance.<sup>3</sup> The most decisive catalyst was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As such, EU-China container shipping via Russia declined by roughly 35% in 2023 compared to the previous year.<sup>4</sup> The Middle Corridor emerged as the only viable east-west land route that bypasses both Russia and Iran, allowing major actors to diversify connectivity away from sanctioned territories. The corridor's growing relevance has been further reinforced by the rerouting of maritime trade following the war in Gaza, as insecurity in the Red Sea diverted traffic toward the Cape of Good Hope, leading to an estimated 75% decline in ship transits through the Red Sea between 2023 and 2024, with effects extending into 2025.<sup>5</sup>

Debates surrounding the Middle Corridor reflect a growing tendency to frame connectivity projects as sites of strategic contestation and cooperation rather than as purely technical infrastructure initiatives. The European Union situates the corridor in relation to broader narratives of strategic autonomy and de-risking, particularly through the Global Gateway, emphasizing diversification away from Russian transit routes, access to Central



Asia's critical raw materials, and the promotion of a rules-based and sustainable model of connectivity.<sup>6</sup> Turkey, by contrast, frames the corridor through a more explicitly geostrategic narrative, presenting it as a vehicle for consolidating its role as a central logistics and energy hub while advancing project-based regional integration among Turkic-speaking states, an understanding reinforced through investments in infrastructure such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, transportation projects within Turkey, and the planned Zangezur Corridor.<sup>7</sup> Amid strained EU-Turkey relations and a stalled accession process, the Middle Corridor is increasingly framed as a pragmatic arena for renewed strategic cooperation, offering an avenue to rebuild economic and geopolitical alignment in a relationship otherwise dominated by migration management and security.<sup>8</sup> China, in turn, has shifted toward incorporating the route into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a form of tactical diversification, articulated through a South-South cooperation narrative and motivated by concerns over sanctions exposure and maritime vulnerability.<sup>9</sup> These partially overlapping yet distinct visions unfold within an increasingly dense connectivity landscape that includes competing and complementary initiatives, from the Northern and Southern corridors to initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the Iraq Development Road, highlighting how corridor politics have become a central arena of geopolitical positioning, while leaving the governance implications of enhanced connectivity largely unresolved.<sup>10</sup>

Across policy documents and institutional reports, connectivity through corridors like the Middle Corridor is framed through a predominantly technical, economic, and geostrategic lens that prioritizes the efficient circulation of goods, energy, natural resources, and data, while

systematically marginalizing the governance of human mobility. Yet corridors are not merely trade routes: they reshape patterns of production and human mobility in spatially uneven and politically consequential ways. This is made explicit in earlier analytical work by the World Bank on the Belt and Road Initiative, which demonstrates that the largest economic gains from connectivity emerge precisely under conditions of labor mobility and firm relocation. In high-impact scenarios, certain nodes experience rapid population growth and agglomeration pressures, underscoring that large-scale corridor projects structurally entail mobility even when policy frameworks seek to suppress or ignore it.<sup>11</sup> A comparable dynamic is observable at the regional level in the experience of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), where transport and infrastructure cooperation has long advanced under a depoliticized, technical framing of connectivity, without the development of a systematic mobility and migration agenda. While such framing has enabled institutional continuity, it has also limited the effectiveness of regional projects in a context where mobility remains securitized or instrumentalized.<sup>12</sup> These experiences suggest that the governance gap identified in global connectivity frameworks is not accidental but structural—one that the Middle Corridor now risks reproducing.

## EU-Turkey Relations and the Limits of Selective Openness

This structural disconnect recalls James Hollifield's seminal formulation of the "liberal paradox," developed in the early 1990s against the backdrop of deepening global economic integration and the consolidation of liberal democracies in Western Europe and North America. At its core, the liberal paradox captures a persistent tension



in migration governance between economic and political logics: integration into global capitalist markets generates pressures to accommodate labor demand and sustain openness, while electoral competition and securitized public debates push political leaders toward restriction and control. Subsequent scholarship has shown that states manage this paradox through differentiation rather than resolving this tension. In particular, Hein de Haas et al.<sup>13</sup> demonstrate that migration regimes are inherently selective: openness and closure coexist through the categorization of migrants and mobility types, allowing states to expand access for some groups while tightening controls over others. Building on this insight, Katharina Natter shows that such selective openness is not confined to liberal democracies but characterizes mobility governance across regime types under contemporary conditions.<sup>14</sup> Selectivity thus emerges as a core governing strategy through which states seek to capture the economic benefits while containing the social and political consequences of cross-border mobility.

Turkey-EU relations expose how selective openness arises through a structural contradiction: economic integration premised on circulation, coupled with enduring political resistance to mobility. Since the establishment of the EU-Turkey Customs Union in 1995, the relationship has been premised on the free movement of industrial goods and processed agricultural products, creating integrated production and supply chains across borders. Yet the mobility of the people and vehicles required to move these goods has remained subject to restrictive and increasingly politicized controls. Visa liberalization has long been a central expectation on the Turkish side, formally embedded in the accession process and reiterated through political dialogue, most notably in the context of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.

While this arrangement has been widely criticized by human rights defenders for externalizing migration control and normalizing containment, it nonetheless rested on the assumption that cooperation would be accompanied by at least incremental facilitation of regular mobility. Nearly a decade later, this premise has not merely stalled but reversed: unlike other EU candidate countries, Turkish citizens remain excluded from visa-free travel, and accessing even short-term Schengen visas has become increasingly difficult, unpredictable, or practically impossible for broad segments of Turkish society.<sup>15</sup>

Restrictive Schengen practices extend well beyond the regulation of irregular migration, affecting even businesspeople with established investments in the European Union, professionals affiliated with Europe-based institutions, well-known journalists, academics travelling for conferences or research collaboration, and students admitted to European universities. While the EU reports that member state consulates in Turkey received over one million Schengen visa applications in 2024, placing Turkey second only to China in total applications, refusal rates for uniform Schengen visas varied sharply across member states, ranging from approximately 1.5 percent to over 30 percent, with the issuance of multiple-entry visas remaining highly discretionary.<sup>16</sup> In 2024, the EU advanced a “cascade” regime as a solution to improve predictability in Schengen visa applications, allowing Turkish nationals with a documented travel history to move incrementally toward longer validity and multi-entry visas.<sup>17</sup> However, the system remains procedurally demanding: applicants often face significant obstacles even in securing visa appointments, while the cascade regime retains substantial discretionary elements that may interrupt progression to longer-term visas and explicitly excludes truck drivers from its scope.<sup>18</sup> Taken



together, these dynamics point not to a coherent mobility regime but to a fragmented system in which access to regular movement depends heavily on destination country, consular practice, and administrative discretion rather than on objective criteria. This pattern resonates closely with Hollifield's observation that, "unlike goods, capital and services, the movement of people involves greater political risks," a tension that has become increasingly pronounced in the European Union amid the rise of right-wing populism.

The rise of right-wing populism clearly factors into the growing reciprocal mistrust in EU-Turkey relations, which has been predominantly fueled by transactional bargaining across issue areas where interests converge most sharply.<sup>19</sup> Another central force driving the mistrust has evidently been the deadlock in Turkey's EU membership process and the evolution of Turkey's bilateral disputes with some EU member states into EU-Turkey disputes in particular, as is reflected in the blocking of some accession chapters (e.g., Chapter 2 Free Movement of Workers, Chapter 15 Energy) for purely bilateral issues. The other factor that has reinforced mistrust has been the "othering" of both sides, particularly during critical months leading to elections. For instance, previous research has documented how Turkey contested the EU's international actor status throughout the 2014–2022 period by drawing attention to its colonial past, its inability to take on responsibilities for Syrian refugees, or its selective and impartial approach toward Turkey's EU membership.<sup>20</sup> In EU circles, in turn, Turkey has been "geopolitically othered," specifically being termed a third country rather than portrayed as an enlargement candidate as exemplified in the joint statement of Turkey and the EU on irregular migration in 2016 and the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis during the 2018–2020 period.<sup>21</sup>

## Truck Drivers, Supply Chains, and the Political Limits of Connectivity

This tension becomes particularly visible in the case of transport workers, whose mobility is directly tied to trade and supply-chain continuity. As documented by the International Transporters' Association (UNDT), Turkish truck drivers face systematic visa rejections, excessively short visa durations, or de facto exclusion through prolonged waiting periods, even as European economies struggle with chronic driver shortages. The consequences are immediate and material: logistics costs rise, deliveries are delayed, contractual obligations go unmet, and drivers' right to work is effectively suspended, with spillover effects for their families.<sup>22</sup> These dynamics indicate that Schengen visa governance increasingly collapses distinctions between different forms of mobility—ranging from logistical and professional movement to asylum and irregular migration—into a single securitized policy field, thereby undermining the very logic of selective openness on which corridor-based connectivity formally rests. These constraints acquire added significance in the context of the Middle Corridor, where increased connectivity will depend on Turkish drivers as key intermediaries linking Europe to the South Caucasus and Central Asia. On the European side, shortages of qualified transport labor limit the capacity to operate extended east-west routes, while Central Asian drivers are likely to encounter similar visa and transit barriers when moving across multiple jurisdictions and into the EU.

The implications extend beyond transport labor to highly integrated production networks, where human mobility plays an essential role. The Turkish-German automotive supply chain clearly illustrates this dynamic. While passenger cars constitute the single most exported product from



Germany to Turkey, Turkey's primary exports to Germany consist of motor vehicles, parts, and accessories.<sup>23</sup> Germany alone accounted for 13% of Turkey's automotive exports in 2024.<sup>24</sup> Notably, road transport has been one of the most frequently used methods for transporting automotive products from Turkey to Germany,<sup>25</sup> which inevitably puts cross-border mobility on center stage. The main departure and arrival points of trucks from Turkey to Germany are Istanbul-Cologne, Ankara-Frankfurt, Gaziantep-Hamburg, Izmir-Bremen, and Mersin-Berlin.<sup>26</sup>

This integrated Turkish-German trade pattern is reinforced by Turkey's extensive spare parts industry, which also supports German bus manufacturers operating in the Turkish market, most notably Mercedes-Benz Türk (with 67% of shares owned by German Daimler Truck AG) and MAN Türkiye (a subsidiary of German MAN Truck and Bus SE).<sup>27</sup> From January 2025 to November 2025 in particular, Mercedes-Benz Türk and MAN Türkiye accounted for 71% of total bus exports from Türkiye.<sup>28</sup> Notably, the Europe region constitutes the leading export destination for both companies.<sup>29</sup> Another central pillar of the Turkish-German automotive supply chain is Bosch Türkiye, a part of the global Bosch Group, which reported net sales of EUR 5.5 billion in 2024 and employs more than 18,000 people in Türkiye.<sup>30</sup> It produces and exports automotive components, including diesel fuel injection systems, braking system components, and automotive sensors and electronics. Most notably, Germany constitutes one of the leading export destinations of Bosch Türkiye.<sup>31</sup>

Visa barriers are inherently a burden for such resilient and highly integrated supply chains, as they disrupt the mobility of technical staff, logistics workers, and business actors on which these production networks depend. More specifically,

there have been instances in which businesspersons who owned a factory in Europe or were supposed to attend trade fairs encountered such visa barriers.<sup>32</sup> According to a representative from Turkey's transport sector, these barriers have increased over the last three years, particularly in the post-pandemic period. They also pose a longer-term risk to their future functioning in an international environment in which Chinese investments are increasingly emerging as a competitive alternative to European capital, particularly for middle powers such as Turkey. While their negative impact on the Turkish economy is hardly surprising, their growing costs for European firms and economies remain insufficiently acknowledged in policy debates.

## Conclusion: Connectivity without Human Mobility?

The renewed prominence of the Middle Corridor is unfolding within a deeper and unresolved paradox at the heart of contemporary connectivity governance. While states increasingly invest in corridors as instruments of diversification and geopolitical repositioning, the governance of human mobility remains politically constrained and increasingly securitized, producing a structural contradiction in which openness for goods is actively decoupled from openness for the people required to move them. Drawing on the liberal paradox and subsequent scholarship on selectivity, the analysis shows that states have historically managed this tension not by choosing between economic integration and political closure, but by institutionalizing selective openness, facilitating economically functional forms of mobility while restricting others. The Turkey-EU case, however, indicates that this logic is no longer operating as intended, as current Schengen practices increas-



ingly collapse different types of mobility into a single restrictive policy field. In this sense, it does not merely confirm the liberal paradox: it points to its mutation, in which the very mechanisms designed to manage the coexistence of openness and closure are themselves eroding under heightened securitization and populist pressure. The implications for corridor-based connectivity are therefore substantial. Although the Middle Corridor is increasingly presented as a logical response to mounting uncertainty along northern and southern routes, its viability depends not only on railways, ports, and infrastructure, but on safe, orderly, and regular mobility.

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