



REVITALIZING TURKEY-EU RELATIONS?

Atila Eralp

Executive Summary

The Turkey-EU relationship is once again on the agenda of the EU-Turkey Summit, planned to take place in Varna, Bulgaria, on March 26, 2018. The Summit aims to provide a platform both to discuss important issues and problems facing the relationship and to explore ways to overcome the present stalemate.

This policy brief examines the current vicious cycle of cooperation and discontent between Turkey and the EU and attempts to inject new insights into the discussion by contextualizing the debate on the EU-Turkey relationship in terms of global trends and the Future of Europe debate. It examines important areas of cooperation between the EU and Turkey and identifies possible areas for further cooperation. The policy brief concludes by looking at the future prospects and possible scenarios for the relationship.

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At present, the EU-Turkey relationship is rather gloomy. The two primary institutional processes are at a standstill and risk stalemate. Within the most important institutional process, the “accession framework,” no chapter has been opened in nearly two years. Only sixteen of thirty-five chapters have been provisionally opened in the course of more than twelve years, and one chapter has been provisionally closed. The prospects of opening new chapters are rather bleak, as reflected in the recent coalition negotiations in Germany.

In addition to the “accession framework,” the association relationship is also in a difficult phase. The Association Council has not met in the last two years, and the upgrading of the Customs Union faces major challenges as it is increasingly politicized in negotiations.

Therefore, it seems that the relationship has entered into a vicious cycle: moments of cooperation are swiftly followed by controversy and discontent. In order to break this cycle and inject new insights and optimism into the discussion, it is necessary to contextualize the debate on the EU-Turkey relationship in terms of global trends and the “Future of Europe Debate.”

I. Turbulent Global Change

The international system has been going through a turbulent transformation in recent years, evolving from a unipolar international order towards a multipolar system. However, this new system is not the traditional type of multipolar system witnessed in the 19th century with state actors involved in power politics but a different system altogether. It could be characterized as a “multicentric” system with new actors—not only state actors but also transnational, societal, and even individual actors. In this turbulent system, we witness patterns of cooperation and conflict occurring simultaneously and coinciding with processes of fragmentation and integration.

In this process of change, there are also close linkages between domestic and international domains. Internally, illiberal, populist, and authoritarian tendencies are on the rise, and they affect international developments rather adversely, leading to the escalation of violence and conflictual relations globally.

In the evolving multicentric, multipolar system, the changing role of the West is particularly striking. The West, in general, is in relative decline compared to the golden years of the Cold War and the first two decades of the post-Cold War era amid the rise of new global and regional actors. Furthermore, the relationship between Europe and the United States is dramatically changing because of the “Trump factor” and the Brexit issue. The European Union (EU) has faced a similar trend because of multiple crises in the last decade. However, this does not mean the irrelevance or the disintegration of the EU.

The EU is still relevant in the evolving multicentric system, because in this system it is difficult for any actor to “go it alone.” To be effective in a multicentric system, it is essential to create partnerships with other actors. The EU still has more potential to create partnerships within this new system because of its comparative advantage and practice in formulating compromises and cooperative institutional culture over the past seven decades. This characteristic is particularly important in the context of the rise of illiberal, populist, and conflicting relations globally, in Europe, and in the neighborhood. Without the creation of such partnerships and cooperation, there will be an increasing tendency for the multipolar system to evolve towards a more traditional, state-centric, and power politics-oriented design.

II. Future of Europe Debate

The EU's Future of Europe Debate, the Global Strategy, and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) formulate new ideas and policy orientation in line with these global trends. In these strategy papers, the EU focuses on the need to create partnerships on concrete issues such as migration, energy, and security (terrorism and counterterrorism). It seems that the new policy orientation is more pragmatic and security-stability oriented rather than transformative. However, the critical issue remains as one of delivery, which has been one of the major problems in the EU's neighborhood orientation.

It can be underlined that such partnerships should not only remain at the governmental level but should also include societal actors. The resilience of societal actors is a crucial issue in Turkey and in the neighborhood. There is an increasing demand for rule of law, human and civil rights. Therefore, this pragmatic approach should not neglect fundamental values. In order to build societal resilience, the Turkey-EU cooperation should address socio-economic challenges and sources of social and economic inequality. The Future of Europe Debate is relevant and important in this context, but it only focuses on inside Europe and the EU. This debate needs to have more outward orientation and address socio-economic inequalities and rule of law issues in the neighborhood in order to meet the challenges of the right-wing radical-populist tendencies.

III. On the Turkey-EU Relationship

In line with these trends, Turkey is characterized as a key strategic partner in the ENP and Global Strategy. Turkey's role in the neighborhood is particularly underlined in the context of functional issues such as migration, energy, and security. At present, Turkey, Germany, and the EU relationship face important tensions. Yet, there are common challenges, and they need to find ways to work together, particularly in the context of common challenges arising from their joint neighborhood. The roles of the EU and Turkey acquire even more importance in the context of rising geopolitical competition between Russia/Iran, on the one hand, and the USA/Saudi Arabia, on the other. There is a need for

a more visible EU in the joint neighborhood. This role is particularly important in the context of the reconstruction phase in Syria when humanitarian problems, and particularly refugee problems, will rise high on the agenda. The EU and Turkey need to find ways to work together on humanitarian issues and societal problems if the reconstruction phase in Syria is going to focus not only on security issues but also address important societal and humanitarian challenges such as the issue of refugee returns.

Five areas are important areas of cooperation in revitalizing the EU-Turkey relationship:

- **Humanitarian issues:** There could be more collaboration on the problems of refugees, particularly on the problems Syrian refugees face in returning home and their humanitarian concerns.
- **Terrorism/Counterterrorism:** There are many critical problems and issues, particularly in relation to the Syrian context, such as the return of Islamic State (ISIS) fighters and the diverging orientations between Turkey and the EU on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and their Syrian affiliate, the People's Protection Units (YPG).
- **Upgrading of the Customs Union:** Economic relations remain crucial in the relationship. The Customs Union relationship needs to be revitalized, taking into account services, agriculture, and governance mechanisms. The upgrading of the Customs Union is in the interests of both Germany and the EU as well as an important factor in bringing Turkish business actors closer to their European counterparts. In these difficult times, the revitalization of the Customs Union could be an important catalyst in building societal resilience in Turkey.
- **Visa Liberalization Negotiations:** There has been a stalemate in negotiations on visa liberalization for a long time. Recently, Turkey has presented a roadmap on the remaining seven issues of the seventy-two provisions. Particularly, the clause on terrorism could still face major challenges because of contested interpretations in Turkey and the EU. However, this new initiative is important in bringing the visa liberalization issue on the table again, an issue that has high relevance for societal actors in Turkey.

- **Migration Deal:** Finally, the EU and Germany should not only engage with governmental actors and follow a *realpolitik* approach as in the EU-Turkey migration deal of 2016 but also engage more with societal actors in Turkey to show that they are not left alone in dealing with the refugee crisis amid these difficult times.

IV. Future Prospects for the Relationship

Based on this reflection, I would like to draw three conclusions that could provide possible prospects for improving the EU-Turkey relationship. First of all, there is a need to bring Turkey into the Future of Europe debate. In the recent debate on Turkey in Europe, the focus of attention has been too much on the present situation in Turkey. Whilst the Future of Europe debate is gaining salience in Europe, the focus is on Turkey at present, neglecting the discussion on the future of Turkey. The Turkey-EU relationship has faced many ups and downs. At present, the relationship is at a down period, but historical hindsight informs us that there could be a possibility of an upturn in the relationship.

Secondly, the Future of Europe Debate focuses too much on inside the EU. The issue of flexibility and flexible integration (cooperation) modalities are discussed in the context of the EU. The recent PESCO defense pact is a clear example. It aims to create flexible mechanisms on defense cooperation only among 25 EU member states, not exploring the possibilities of the contribution of other European third countries. It seems that there is a need to create more flexible and inclusive mechanisms in defense and other areas if the EU is going to be effective in establishing partnerships in the turbulent multicentric, multipolar system.

Last but not least, Germany has been the main driver of the EU integration process and the Turkey-EU relationship in recent years. At present, France is taking new initiatives, and there is a possibility of a revitalized German-French relationship. This revitalized relationship in 2018 should not neglect revitalizing the dormant Turkey-EU relationship.

Based on these points, there are four possible scenarios for the relationship:

Revitalization of Accession Negotiations:

It seems that the accession negotiations will remain frozen in 2018. There is no prospect to revitalize accession negotiations in the short term. However, the “accession framework” should remain an important “anchor” in the relationship.

Suspension of the Accession Negotiations:

The issue of “suspension” has dropped off the agenda in most of the member states, including Germany and the EU institutions. It is only on the agenda in Austria. Since there is a need for qualified majority in the European Council to suspend the negotiations, it is not politically and institutionally feasible.

Engagement (Short-term):

In the short-term, the focus seems to be an engagement on concrete issues such as migration, energy, economy, security, and foreign policy as underlined in the Global Strategy and the ENP. The main question is whether these transactional type of partnerships will be interest-driven or rules-based. As the difficulties in the negotiations on the upgrading of the Customs Union and visa liberalization demonstrate, it is not easy to create rules-based transactional relationships in the short-term. The short-term will probably focus more on interest-driven transactional relationships, particularly on migration, energy, and security issues.

Engagement (Medium- and Long-term):

It is important that the transactional Turkey-EU relationship should focus on humanitarian issues such as refugee returns. Such joint concerns could help to rebuild the lack of trust, which is one of the most critical issues in the relationship. In the medium term, it is crucial to move from an interest-driven, transactional relationship to a rules-based one, which depends on the relationship between Turkey and some key member states, such as Germany, as well as on the political context in Turkey. The crucial issue in this context is the upgrading of the Cus-

toms Union, which is important not only for Turkey but also for key member states and the EU. In addition to rules-based transactional relationships, it seems important to bring Turkey into the Future of Europe Debate, particularly as this debate starts to create concrete modalities on flexible cooperation and integration. As previously stated, the recent example of PESCO is quite relevant. At this stage, it is too inward-looking and focused on the participation of the EU member states, but there could be a possibility to include third countries in a flexible manner. Such flexible mechanisms could be important in the revitalization of the EU-Turkey relationship. In time, they could also revitalize the dormant accession negotiations. As the “enlargement fatigue” fades and the process of enlargement towards the Western Balkans gains salience, there could be a possibility of the revitalization of the accession process in the long term.

In the turbulent multipolar, multi-centric system, as underlined in this note, it is important to create partnerships in order to alleviate the rise of illiberal, populist, authoritarian, and conflictual tendencies. The EU has an important role to play in this context, and this role acquires more significance with the rise of important tensions between the United States and Europe, on the one hand, and Turkey and the United States, on the other. In this context, the creation of a working relationship between the EU and Turkey gains the utmost significance, particularly in the context of rising tensions in their joint neighborhood and around the globe.

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