



EU-TURKEY RELATIONS AFTER THE COUNCIL SUMMIT: A CHANCE FOR REENGAGEMENT OR FACING A COMPLETE BREAKDOWN?

Nilgün Arısan-Eralp, Senem Aydın-Düzgit, Atila Eralp, Fuat Keyman, Çiğdem Nas



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Introduction

EU-Turkey relations have experienced many ups and downs throughout their long history. Yet, the unprecedented deterioration in bilateral relations in recent months thanks to foreign policy actions in Libya and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean signal that the very fabric of the relationship might be changing.

Over the past two decades, Turkey's status in relation to the EU has gradually transformed from a candidate country on the path to full accession, to a neighbor, and, finally, to an adversary. Turkey's relations with the EU were upgraded from association to accession with the start of membership negotiations in 2005. However, with the EU's decisions to neither open eight chapters of the accession negotiations nor close any negotiating chapter due to the Cyprus conflict, as well as France and Cyprus's unilateral vetoes that blocked the opening of more chapters, the accession framework became hollow and indeterminate. While the accession process continued to serve as a formal framework for EU-Turkish ties, relations between the parties increasingly displayed a confrontational and incredulous tone.

As the transformative impact of the EU membership goal weakened, the process of Europeanization was replaced by a policy of de-Europeanization in Turkey. A combination of domestic politics and external destabilizing factors contributed to Turkey's further distancing from Europe and the Copenhagen political criteria toward a highly authoritarian, hierarchical, and centralized regime. This took place in conjunction with the rise of anti-Western sentiments in Turkey and Ankara's sense of public disillusionment with the EU. According to an opinion poll conducted in 2019, 60 percent of Turkey's population supports the goal of EU membership, while only 23 percent believe that Turkey will actually become a member of the EU. The spillover of insecurity and volatility from the Middle East and surrounding regions following the Arab uprisings of 2011, combined with domestic dynamics, created a fertile environment for nationalistic and militaristic policies in Turkey. Yet, relations did not totally break down. The 2015/16 Syrian refugee crisis and the ensuing EU-Turkey migration deal in-

creased Turkey's leverage over the EU as the EU became more dependent on Turkey as a bulwark against unwanted immigration. This facilitated a change in the nature of the relationship, from an accession-related one to a purely interest-based and transactional one, thus enabling an increasingly adversarial relationship to take hold given diverging interests between the two sides.

The Current State of the Conflict: How Did We End Up Here?

The strong nationalistic and anti-Western turn in Turkish domestic politics also had significant implications for Turkey's foreign and security policy. The power vacuum left by the United States in Turkey's immediate neighborhood opened a wider space for maneuver for Turkey, along with other regional actors such as Russia. Turkey's disillusionment with the West was also coupled with the firm belief that the West, and in particular Europe, was in decline and in no shape to act in a uniform fashion in its wider neighborhood. Having also alienated potential allies in the Mediterranean such as Israel and Egypt—mostly due to domestic political reasons—and thus feeling isolated in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey increasingly resorted to unilateralism and a militarized foreign policy in its regional operations and actions, creating a deeper rift with the EU.

The most recent case in point is Turkey's intervention in the Libya conflict and its seismic exploration vessels off the coast of Cyprus and later Castelorizo. The EU accused Turkey of illegal actions that ran counter to international law and the sovereign rights of EU member states. Greece and Cyprus have formed closer ties with Egypt and Israel, leaving Turkey feeling increasingly cornered. France, which is on a collision course with Turkey over strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the Libya conflict, supported Cypriot and Greek positions against Turkey, calling for harsh sanctions on Ankara. Germany, on the other hand, adopted a conciliatory position and acted as a facilitator and mediator to start dialogue and reconciliation between the parties.

The divergent positions of the member states ulti-

mately led to a compromise, as reflected in the conclusions of the October European Council Summit, in which member states decided to keep the possibility of sanctions open while also offering Turkey a positive agenda consisting of a modernized Customs Union, further cooperation on migration, and enhanced people to people contacts in return for a change in Turkish foreign policy away from unilateral actions. Both the summit conclusions and the European Commission's Turkey report published right after the summit associate Turkey with conflictual relationships and unilateral policies. In turn, the EU called for a multilateral orientation to the problem and a stop to Ankara's unilateral policies. The conclusions of the summit were also notable in the way in which they made no mention of the state of democracy and human rights in Turkey, despite the fact that the European Commission's Turkey report highlights Turkey's deteriorating conditions in these areas. In a similar vein the lifting of political conditions, which were the main impediment to the Customs Union modernization talks, in lieu of geopolitical demands also suggests that the primacy of geopolitics combined with the absence of a credible membership perspective in sight may have led the EU to ease its normative demands on Turkey.

The summit conclusions provide a window of opportunity for dialogue and negotiation between the parties until the next Council Summit, which will be held in December. Yet, the problems between the two sides seem to be far from over. One key reason for the lack of progress relates to the fact that in the absence of the membership perspective, the EU has lost almost all of its leverage over Turkey. The main constituents of the "positive agenda" conditionally proposed to Turkey in the conclusions of the summit of the EU leaders are not adequate to gain sufficient leverage over Turkey to change its foreign policy behavior. When we analyze the constituents of the positive agenda together with the recently published Turkey Report of the European Commission, we observe that neither the modernization of the Customs Union nor the tacitly referenced visa liberalization process can be materialized anytime soon given Turkey's lack of compliance with EU requirements in these areas. Furthermore, there is also considerable doubt as to whether Ankara desires to obtain these incen-

tives given the loss of enthusiasm for a modernized Customs Union after the failure of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) talks and the government's years-long reluctance to amend the few remaining provisions of the criminal code as required by the EU to proceed with visa facilitation talks.

Conclusions: Is There a Way Out?

This recent downturn in Turkey-EU relations displays the limits and dangers of an incoherent and fragmented Turkey policy on the part of the EU and Turkey's inability to pursue improved relations with the EU due to domestic economic and political volatility. At this stage in the relations, it is important to realize past mistakes, draw lessons from them, and use this awareness to construct the basis for a healthy and sustainable relationship.

In the short run, especially concerning the Eastern Mediterranean, the EU should acknowledge the fact that one of Turkey's main targets in the region is to be a recognized player in the East Med energy competition and not to feel "surrounded" by the members of the East-Med Gas forum (Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine). In addition to calling for a multilateral conference on the Eastern Mediterranean—whose participation, scope, and timeline will need to be agreed upon by both parties, thus making it difficult to convene—the EU also should encourage, or at least discuss, the participation of Turkey into the aforementioned forum in order to ensure that the EU's understanding of multilateralism is an inclusive one. The EU should not position itself as a formal mediator in this dispute as it is a party to the conflict. Neither Greece nor Turkey is in a position to claim to have international law entirely on their side; hence, the EU can only urge the countries to initiate negotiations.

It is also important to recognize that a healthy resolution of the conflict also depends on progress toward the resolution of the Cyprus issue. With all due respect to its internal solidarity principle, the EU needs to develop constructive proposals rather than watch the dispute escalate and consider imposing sanctions on Turkey. The counterproductive

nature of these actions is obvious. Unfortunately, in almost all stages of the Cyprus conflict, the EU has largely stood as a bystander, and this attitude has continued since the escalation of the problems after the discovery of hydrocarbons. The EU needs to push its weight toward contributing to a solution if it wishes to remain relevant not only as a soft power but also as a geopolitical one.

Turkey, on the other hand, should refrain from unilateral actions, which are easily perceived as acts of aggression by the concerned parties and create further problems in its relations with the EU. The unilateral and militarized nature of Turkish responses prevents the establishment of much-needed dialogue mechanisms between the parties. Turkey should seek multilateral venues and diplomacy in advocating for its claims and in doing so also contemplate its future relationship in a multilateral and increasingly differentiated Europe.

In terms of short-term policy cooperation, assuming that the current conflict dies down, the most realistic way forward seems to be the Customs Union modernization process, which would rekindle a rules-based approach and restart Turkey's process of harmonization toward the EU *acquis*. Customs Union modernization would enable an upgrade of the trade relationship, trigger structural reforms in the Turkish economy, necessitate political reforms encompassing rights and freedoms and rule of law mechanisms, and align Turkish production sectors with EU norms and standards including the Green Deal agenda. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, the EU is looking to strengthen its resilience through achieving strategic autonomy in its trade and external policies. Turkey, with its already well-integrated business community with the EU, can make a huge contribution to building Europe's resilience and contributing to the struggle for strategic autonomy.

In the longer run, a look into these recent events points to a general conclusion: Turkey-EU relations need to be recalibrated on a coherent, sustainable, and realistic basis. It is clear that there is mutual dependence between the parties. Turkey depends on the EU mainly for economic and commercial reasons and, on top of it all, for international economic credibility. On the other hand, the EU de-

pends on Turkey's cooperation on the refugee issue, and recent events demonstrate the increasing need for the EU to cooperate with Turkey to ensure security and stability in its immediate neighborhood. The parties should thus work toward developing holistic, comprehensive, and sustainable strategies toward each other rather than reacting to conjectural developments and/or crises. The effective functioning of such a strategy necessitates institutional dialogue between the two sides.

While the EU's offer of a positive Turkey-EU agenda in the European Council meeting of October 1 was an encouraging step, what is needed is a comprehensive approach with clear targets, deadlines, and supporting mechanisms. While keeping the ultimate goal of EU membership intact, this new framework should be able to restart a process of engagement between Turkey and the EU and build toward an enhanced relationship. The Future of Europe conference, which is expected to be held in the near future, could be a useful platform and a good starting point to initiate such a substantial rethinking of the relationship.

About the Authors

Nilgün Arısan-Eralp is the Director of the European Union Studies Centre at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV).

Senem Aydın-Düzgit is a Senior Scholar and the Research and Academic Affairs Coordinator at Istanbul Policy Center and a Professor of International Relations at Sabancı University.

Atila Eralp is a 2019/20 Mercator-IPC Senior Fellow, Senior Fellow at the Center for European Studies, and Emeritus Professor in the Department of International Relations at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara.

Fuat Keyman is the Director of Istanbul Policy Center and the Vice President of Institutional Affairs and Social Impact and a Professor of International Relations at Sabancı University.

Çiğdem Nas is the Secretary General of the Economic Development Foundation (IKV) and Associate Professor at the Yıldız Technical University.

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Istanbul Policy Center

Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 4
34420 Karaköy-Istanbul
T +90 212 292 49 39
ipc@sabanciuniv.edu - ipc.sabanciuniv.edu