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Transforming Turkey-EU Relations: Ground for Hope

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Executive Summary

Both the EU and Turkey have followed a flawed, populist and identity-based policy towards each other since accession negotiations began as a result of which relations have reached a stalemate. Nonetheless, there has recently been a strengthening of views and voices both within Turkey and the EU that express their concerns with this stalemate. They highlight the contributions that Turkey and the EU could make to one another as well as to global peace and stability on a wide scale, ranging from economics to politics, culture and foreign policy. At the same time, the Eurozone crisis has spawned new questions over the institutional future of the EU with alternative models of membership circulating. We should thus discuss and work on what type of full membership for Turkey would be both possible and desirable in the years ahead. Turkey should be actively engaged in such debates and the EU should ensure that any future cooperation model with Turkey besides full membership would treat the country as an equal partner enjoying more than a mere “privileged partnership”.

It is common knowledge that Turkey-European Union (EU) relations have reached a stalemate with the lack of progress in accession negotiations and the increasing uncertainty over both the future of the European project after the Eurozone crisis and Turkey’s role in it. Enlargement is no longer on the EU’s list of priorities and Turkey is currently suffering from Euroscepticism, stemming from a disproportionate degree of self-confidence based on its foreign policy activism and economic growth. We argue in this brief that Turkey-EU relations need to be renewed and transformed to enable both actors to respond more effectively to global challenges, to strengthen the EU’s profile as a global player and to deepen the currently stagnating process of democratic consolidation in Turkey. This requires a reflection on the potential future shape of the EU as well as the different models of full membership that could lead to more flexible arrangements that would still strongly anchor Turkey to the EU.

This debate is necessary since the current state of affairs is no longer sustainable. Turkey has been waiting for sixty years to become a full member of the EU. There is no comparable case in the EU’s history. It has been repeatedly stated over the decades that Turkey is closely bound to the EU. These strong links were emphasized in the 1990s when Turkey experienced severe political and economic instability

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and it is highlighted again today when it is an economically dynamic country in a multipolar global configuration. However, Turkey is not considered adequate for full EU membership either when it is strong or when it is weak. While underlining the need to foster strong ties with Turkey, the EU seems unable to make a clear commitment regarding full membership based on a long term vision. This is no longer an acceptable situation.

3 October 2005: The First Day of the Crisis

The negotiation process with the EU began on 3 October 2005. However, on that very day the negotiation process started stalling. The day when negotiations were scheduled to start was not a day of celebration but one of crisis. The negotiations could not begin as scheduled due to the reservations expressed by Austria on that day. Negotiations could only begin after a temporary management of the crisis. By the time the crisis was settled, it was well into the 4 October, although the clocks were symbolically turned back a few hours so that negotiations would begin as scheduled. This extraordinary situation was a somber sign that Turkey-EU relations would move towards crisis in the period ahead. The EU has pursued actions geared towards hindering Turkey’s full accession to the EU.

A Series of EU Obstacles along Turkey’s Path to Europe

Four substantial and unacceptable steps were taken to block Turkey’s progress towards EU accession. First, was the debate on the “absorption capacity” of the EU, launched by France to prevent Turkey’s full accession. While the debate acknowledged Turkey as an important country that could potentially make serious contributions to the EU, it also stressed that it was too big to be politically, economically and culturally absorbed by the EU. Turkey was characterized as a country too big to be absorbed. The political and institutional structure of the EU, its economic strength and resources, and its cultural identity would be harmed by Turkey’s full membership. This debate which seemed to be theoretical on surface was in fact a highly political move to prevent Turkey’s full membership. The debate on the EU’s inability to absorb Turkey continued to be used for a certain period despite all the research and studies that argued the contrary.¹

The second step was the concept of “privileged partnership” put forward by France and Germany. Turkey would be closely tied to the EU, especially in the area of security, but would not be a full member.

1 For a comprehensive treatment of the concept of “absorption capacity” and the debates that surround it, see Michael Emerson et al., “Just What is This ‘Absorption Capacity’ of the European Union?”, *CEPS Policy Brief*, No. 113 (September 2006), <http://www.ceps.be/node/1219>.

This in turn implied that it could not participate in EU institutions and would continue facing visa restrictions. But it would be required to follow EU norms. This attempt was of an exclusionary nature on the brink of racism. It was not only unacceptable, but it also accelerated and deepened the process that would almost suspend Turkey-EU accession negotiations. While Turkey rejected this proposal, the support for the EU within Turkey began to fall rapidly. Nonetheless, both the concepts of “absorption capacity” and “privileged partnership” went beyond public and political debate, being officially inserted into the Negotiating Framework document with Turkey. These notions were absent from Croatia’s Negotiating Framework document, which was drafted on the same day and contained the same language with these exceptions standing.²



The third step concerned the vetoes placed by France and Cyprus on Turkey’s negotiation chapters. Negotiations reached a *de facto* state of suspension due to these vetoes.

The fourth step is related to the Cyprus conflict in which North Cyprus voted “yes” and South Cyprus voted “no” in the referendum to unite the island through the Annan Plan in 2004. Even though the South of the island expressed its stance against the resolution of the conflict, it gained full membership to the EU representing the whole island. This was an unacceptable development and created a very severe trust problem in the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government’s perception of the EU. The Cyprus problem led the AKP and Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan to view the EU as an “untrustworthy partner”.

In addition to these four negative developments, EU leaders such as former French President Nicholas Sarkozy who opposed Turkey’s full membership for populist and short-term domestic interests also severely damaged Turkey-EU relations.

The EU followed a flawed, populist and identity-based policy towards Turkey as a result of which it came today to the brink of losing Turkey.

Reactionary and Delusional Euroscepticism in Turkey

The EU dimension is only one side of the coin. The other side concerns Turkey’s mistaken policies and approach. After accession negotiations started, Turkey followed a policy line and discourse which favoured the suspension of relations rather than their improvement. In reference to the negative and discriminatory approach of the EU explained above, it declared that Turkey-EU relations had come to a standstill. In response Turkey started acting like an “axis-free nation-state” that tries to engage with different parts of the world on the grounds of a multi-vector foreign policy.

Hereby it is necessary to underline two key problems in the Turkish context. The first concerns the attitudes of political parties. Since 2005, the AKP has not displayed a political and vision-based commitment to EU membership, but has adopted instead a more instrumentalist and functional EU discourse. It did not seem to be too concerned with the stalemate in the accession process. The AKP government frequently declared that cooperation with other regions could be an alternative to the EU, that the Ankara criteria could replace the Copenhagen criteria, and that Turkey achieved its status as a regional and global actor without EU membership.

Similar to the AKP, other political parties also failed to show the necessary commitment to full EU membership. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) continued with its line of Euroscepticism. The pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) also, albeit later tensed its relations with the EU due to the Kurdish issue. The EU’s criticisms of terror and violence as well as its criticism of the ethnic nationalist tone of Kurdish actors when advocating a democratic solution to the Kurdish question

opened a difficult phase in EU-BDP relations. The BDP started to criticize the EU and display a more sceptical attitude. Even though the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu recently started using an EU discourse, it has not shown sufficient commitment to full membership. Just like the AKP, the CHP and the BDP have followed an instrumentalist and functional approach towards the EU. They have not sufficiently criticized the AKP for the stalemate in Turkey-EU relations, nor have they complained much about the current situation.

The second major problem is the persistence of Euroscepticism amongst the Turkish public. While a nationalist and reactionary Euroscepticism existed until 2005, this has been replaced largely by a type of Euroscepticism that belittles the EU’s importance and exaggerates the global power of Turkey and the AKP. This can be defined as “delusional Euroscepticism”, which exaggerates Turkey’s economic and foreign policy power and dismisses its democratic and human development deficiencies, while downplaying the power and effectiveness of the EU and its member states.

Until 2005, Euroscepticism in Turkey entailed a reactionary nationalism and underlined issues such as state sovereignty and partition: EU membership would harm Turkey’s state sovereignty and ultimately trigger partition. Alongside this, today a reverse type of Euroscepticism is voiced: one stemming from self-confidence to the point of arrogance, which looks down on the EU, states that Turkey’s economy is strong and does not need the EU anchor, whereas the EU needs Turkey, and which believes that Turkey is a regional and global power.

The Euroscepticism established along the “strong EU-weak Turkey” axis in 2005-2010 has shifted today towards the “weak EU-strong Turkey” axis. Both types of Euroscepticism entail an ideological, reactionary or delusional approach devoid of knowledge of the EU. They misread Turkey and the EU as well as regional and global developments. It also demonstrates a viewpoint that is at best not beneficial, and at worst harmful for Turkey’s future governance.

The Need for a Transformative Approach

There has recently been a strengthening of views and voices both within Turkey and the EU that express their concerns with the stalemate in Turkey-EU relations and the dominance of sceptic attitudes in the political and public debates on both sides. The need to revitalize EU-Turkey relations is appreciated not only for the benefit of Turkey and Europe, but also for the stability and peace of the globalizing world. This view argues that accession negotiations should resume by the lifting of vetoes and that Turkey-EU relations should be transformed so as to respond to global challenges. This transformative approach to Turkey-EU relations forcefully counters Euroscepticism, while calling for a revitalized public debate on the question.

These voices argue that joint Turkey-EU actions and the contributions that Turkey and the EU could make to one another on a wide scale ranging from economics to politics, culture and foreign policy are very significant not only for the two sides, but also for regional and

² For the debates on the “privileged partnership” proposition and how it figures in the Negotiating Framework for Turkey, see Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, *Seeking Kant in the EU’s Relations with Turkey*, Istanbul, TESEV, 2006, <http://www.tesev.org.tr/en/publication/seeking-kant-in-the-eus-relations-with-turkey>.

global peace and stability. They underline that the EU anchor, the Copenhagen criteria, the EU single market, and the EU axis in foreign policy have made and will continue to make important contributions to Turkey. They also stress that Turkey's economic dynamism, its foreign policy, its entrepreneurial culture, its democracy/secularism and its experience of good governance could make an important contribution to the EU. They highlight that against Turkey-scepticism in the EU and Euroscepticism in Turkey, Turkey-EU relations need to be reinvigorated on the grounds of mutual benefits, joint actions and contributions to regional and global peace and stability.

What Kind of EU Membership for Turkey ?

At this point of the debate, an academic discussion that has not yet permeated politics emerges. Full accession to the EU is important and beneficial. Yet what type of full membership is envisaged for Turkey?

This question calls for a reconceptualization of Turkey-EU relations from the perspective of mutual benefits in a globalized world, where more flexible modes of membership are not excluded. The Eurozone crisis has spawned new questions over the institutional future of the EU with the possibility of closer political integration entailed in a fiscal and monetary union. The fact that the federalist logic inherent in this approach may not be acceptable to some member states such as Sweden, the Czech Republic, and most notably the United Kingdom, can pave the way for alternative models of integration, which could have strong ramifications for the EU's relations with Turkey.

These developments and debates in the EU overlap with Turkey's own concerns with respect to joining the EU. Turkey's economic dynamism stems from the diversification of its trade relations at the global level and its participation in the governing structures of global institutions. A global Turkey enjoys economic relations with every part of the world. This is why Turkey wishes to be a full member of the EU but has not expressed an interest in membership of the Eurozone and the Schengen area. Hence, a membership in which Turkey fully joins in the EU's political and security institutions and the EU's single market while it remains outside the Eurozone and the Schengen area seems to constitute the ideal type of membership for Turkey. This is a flexible mode of full membership that is different from that of the core EU member states.

A flexible and differentiated full membership model that is similar to the experiences of Sweden and Poland is more suitable for Turkey. Flexible institutional arrangements should go together with

a strong political commitment from both sides. Although the British model is sometimes underlined as the prime example for Turkey, the analogy may carry certain risks for Turkey's future membership of the EU. This is mainly due to two reasons. One relates to the former point we made earlier regarding the need for Turkey to refrain from a fully instrumentalist outlook in its relations with the EU. It is of utmost importance for the sake of Turkish democracy and modernity that Turkey is fully embedded in EU norms and values through membership. The current debates in Britain on the EU suggest weak and purely instrumental links, which would not be a useful precedent for Turkey. The second reason is the fact that Britain may leave the EU altogether, which would then leave Turkey alone in its search for an alternative model of membership. Thus we believe that the Swedish or the Polish cases, where a strong commitment to Europe goes hand in hand with more flexible institutional arrangements should be further discussed as a potential model for Turkey's membership. This would also move the debate away from a "privileged partnership", where Turkey would be only loosely associated with the EU without strong political commitments from both sides.

We should thus discuss and work on what type of full membership for Turkey would be both possible and desirable in the years ahead. Turkey should be actively engaged in the debates over various possible models of integration and the EU should ensure that any future cooperation model with Turkey besides full membership would treat the country as an equal partner enjoying more than a mere "privileged partnership". However, before doing that, we first need to revitalize Turkey-EU relations in 2013. The EU bears an important responsibility in this respect. France is expected to soften its categorical opposition to Turkey's accession under the Presidency of François Hollande, who has announced the lifting of one negotiation chapter. This would not only represent a breath of fresh air in the negotiation process, but would also help reinvigorate French-Turkish relations that have turned largely acrimonious under President Sarkozy. Positive developments may also be expected on the horizon for the Cyprus issue with the election of to the Cypriot presidency of Nicos Anastasiades, who has in the past been a supporter of the Annan Plan. Short-term institutional measures are also expected to generate some dynamism in relations, such as the "positive agenda" introduced by the European Commission in May 2012, which involves enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the EU on political reform, economics, foreign policy and visa facilitation. On the Turkish side, both Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu have expressed their will to revitalize relations in 2013. We can only hope that they will stand by their words and take the necessary steps after a long period of inaction.