

TURKEY-EU RELATIONS: WHERE DO WE STAND TODAY?

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Turkey has been knocking on Europe's door for over half a century now. Since the opening of membership talks in 2005, very little progress has been made in the accession negotiations. Despite reasonably successful democratization efforts at the beginning of Erdoğan's rule, today's Turkey seems to be drifting away from Europe. Making progress in the negotiations will largely depend on the Turkish government's willingness to stay true to its long-term strategic goal of EU membership.

A long path towards EU membership

EU-Turkey relations are almost as old as the European Union itself. 2013 marked the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Ankara agreement, which provided the basis of Turkey's economic, political and institutional relations with the then European Economic Community.

Although not part of the EU, Turkey is a member of all the other important European organizations such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Turkey has also been a NATO member since 1952.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, was the initiator of the largest Western-inspired reforms. He abolished the

Sharia, replaced the Arabic alphabet with the Latin, proclaimed the secular state and granted voting rights to women.

For Turkey, the EU accession process remains the most important modernization project to date. Turkey applied for full membership in 1987. After 18 years after, in 2005, the European Council decided to start accession negotiations with Turkey.

During its early years, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) promoted internal reforms in accordance with the EU *acquis* making Turkey more democratic. However, in recent years the Turkish government has gradually abandoned its political commitment to the EU.

After having achieved an indisputable political dominance in the country, there is indeed little incentive for the AKP to continue with EU driven reforms. Continuing with the reform path would mean, for instance, to reduce the 10 % election threshold, the highest in Europe, as well as securing the independence of the judiciary and assuring media pluralism.

...and still a long way to go

EU-Turkey relations have been in deadlock for a considerably long time. After the enlargement waves of 2004 and 2007 (in which 12 new countries joined the EU), some voices argued that it would take time to digest the newcomers before even thinking to make the EU a bigger family.

In addition to this, the effects of the economic crisis have notably aggravated enlargement fatigue. For the time being, enlargement is no longer in the EU's list of priorities. Actually, the new European Commission president, Jean-

Claude Juncker, has made sufficiently explicit that “no further enlargement will take place over the next five years”. As regards to Turkey, Juncker has stated that “a government that blocks Twitter is certainly not ready for accession.”

Turkey has found itself increasingly frustrated by the lack of EU committed to move Turkey’s accession process forward. Since the beginning of membership talks in 2005, only 14 chapters of the 35 has been opened, with merely one provisionally closed. Six chapters are subject to political veto by Cyprus, due to the ongoing dispute between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and France blocks four other.

Moreover, in 2006, the European Council decided to block eight chapters due to Turkey’s failure to fulfill its obligation of implementing the Ankara Agreement to all Member States, notably Cyprus, as Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus and its government.

The second half of 2012 was especially tense for relations between the EU and Turkey. On July 2012, Turkey decided to refrain from any meeting and contact with the Cypriot presidency of the EU. In order to prevent collapse during the Cypriot presidency of the EU and keep alive the accession process, the European Commission decided to create a «New Positive Agenda» with an aim to enhance cooperation in areas of joint interest.

Despite limited success, the best way to ensure that the EU remains the benchmark for reforms in Turkey is the opening of negotiation chapters. After three years without a chapter being opened, in November 2013 chapter 22 on regional policy was opened after France lifted its veto.

Last year Erdoğan declared that 2014 would be the ‘Year of the European Union’. However, in the past few months, Turkey has increasingly moved away from EU values and norms.

Following the mishandling of the protests over the demolition of Gezi Park by the Turkish government, some Member States casted doubts over the suitability for continuing talks with Turkey.

The European Parliament harshly condemned police violence against protesters recalling that freedom of assembly, freedom of expression (including social media) and freedom of press are fundamental principles of the European Union.

The EU has also voiced serious concerns over the response of the Turkish government following allegations of corruption in December 2013. Recently adopted legislation as it is the case of the law on the Internet or the law on the Turkish intelligence service has raised serious concerns as regards judicial independence and impartiality, separation of powers and rule of law.

Freedom of expression has generally also been at risk following attempts to ban social media and pressures on the press, which have led to a widespread self-censorship by media-owners and journalists.

In light of all of this, the European Commission has repeatedly stressed the importance for the EU to enhance its engagement with Turkey on rule of law issues. It is in the interest of both Turkey and the EU that the opening benchmarks for chapters 23 on –Judiciary and Fundamental Rights- and 24 on –Justice, Freedom and Security- are agreed upon and communicated to Turkey as soon as possible.

Yet these two chapters are currently blocked by Cyprus.

Cyprus: a perennial conflict

A renewed round of negotiations to find a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus dispute started in early 2014. However, the prospect of finding a solution to the Cyprus problem any time soon looks very unlikely due to ongoing disputes regarding hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation activities in the Eastern Mediterranean region involving the Greek and Turkish Cypriots and Turkey.

As a result, peace talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriots have been suspended and the Cypriot government has threatened to block Turkey’s EU bid by not giving its consent to the opening of any new chapter in Turkey’s accession process.

At this point, one thing is clear; until there is no move on the Cyprus issue, there will be no advancement in Turkey’s EU membership process.

As Turkey’s membership largely depends on resolving the “Cyprus Problem”, Turkey is therefore expected to make a greater effort to promote a solution to the conflict. Resolving the

Cyprus issue would also allow all sides –including the EU- to benefit from the exploitation of oil and gas resources recently discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean sea.

Despite the gloomy weather some positive signs have emerged

In December 2013, the European Commission launched a visa liberalization dialogue with Turkey. Turkey is the only candidate country whose citizens are required to apply for a visa to enter the EU. Even non-candidate countries, such as Ukraine and Moldova, are currently negotiating the removal of the visa regime with the EU.

In October 2014, the Commission presented its first report on the progress made by Turkey in fulfilling the requirements set in its visa liberalization roadmap. According to the report, Turkey is heading in the right direction.

Turkish public support for joining the EU has declined ever since the start of accession negotiations. However, for the first time in years, a majority of Turks now think that EU membership would be a good thing for Turkey.

At the same time, the Turkish government has taken measures to improve Turkey's image in the EU and has recently adopted a 'European Union Strategy' intended to re-invigorate its accession process.

Likewise, Turkey's new EU Minister and Chief Negotiator, Volkan Bozkır, has differed from his predecessor Egemen Bağış (caught up in the December 17 scandal) and has brought a change in rhetoric from the Turkish government on the EU.

Last but not least, the EU has also welcomed the emergence of a vibrant and diverse civil society in Turkey that embraces democracy and freedoms for all.

Only Turkey can redress the impasse in its relationship with the EU

It has become imperative that the Turkish government seriously addresses the shortcomings regarding the rule of law and fundamental rights.

The AKP government should concentrate its efforts to write a new modern, civilian and participatory constitution, which guarantee the fundamental rights and freedoms of all citizens.

Equally, renewed impetus to a peaceful

settlement of the Kurdish issue should also continue.

We shouldn't forget that EU's reform process has made Turkey more democratic, stable and prosperous.

In this regard, the accession process should remain an anchor for Turkey's economic and political reforms, and should not be replaced with other forms of association.

While the accession process is at a standstill, cooperation between Turkey and the EU should be enhanced in crucial areas:

- The Customs Union, one of the main achievements of the Ankara Agreement, needs to be updated and enlarged, following the recommendations of the World Bank report.
- Political dialogue on foreign policy issues –in particular in Syria and Iraq- should be strengthened, improving counterterrorism cooperation and devising new modalities for humanitarian aid to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis.
- Energy is another topic of key interest in EU-Turkey relations. Turkey's further development as an energy bridge and potential energy hub will benefit both Turkey and the EU, helping to reduce energy dependency from Russia.

Let me reiterate once again that the most suitable framework for exploiting the full potential of EU-Turkey relations remains to be active and credible accession negotiations.

However, in order to give a new momentum to the relations between Turkey and the EU, the Turkish government needs to show first its willingness and credibility in respecting and enforcing all the standards and values of the EU.

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