

Guest Editorial

Revisiting Turkey-EU Relations: An Untapped Potential for the Future of EU

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Turkey's association with the European Union (EU) dates back to the Ankara Agreement of 1963 that aims 'to promote the continuous and balanced strengthening of trade and economic relations between the Parties'. Following a period of ups and downs, Turkey and the EU were connected by a Customs Union in 1996. The Customs Union between Turkey and the EU created the closest economic relationship between the EU and a non-member country. After the Helsinki Summit of 1999, at which Turkey was officially declared a candidate country, the accession negotiations opened in 2005 to mark a turning point in relations.

However since 2006, while the bonds created in 1963 are solid, Turkey-EU relationship has suffered from a highly politicized course of accession negotiations that was supposed to be technical in nature. Indeed politically blocked and 'artificially prolonged' accession negotiations have raised questions on the future of Turkey-EU relations. Over the last decade, the EU has long entered into an enlargement fatigue with little, if any, enthusiasm in the case of Turkey's EU membership. This gives rise to legitimate questions regarding the sustainability and development of the course of Turkey-EU relationship in its current form. I should admit that there is a quite mixed picture, so one can develop valid arguments for both pessimist and optimist future scenarios. Let me put it clearly from the beginning: I have an optimistic view about the issue.

There is no question that Turkey-EU relations are currently going through 'another' challenging and critical period. However, there are no insurmountable structural problems between the parties. On the contrary, Turkey-EU cooperation is more strategically important now than it was in the past.

From a longer historical perspective, these are extraordinary times where we witness a dramatic transformation of political, economic and social environment at both global and national level. Turkey-EU relations are also not immune from

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these developments. Just as the Cold War and sub-sequent developments were a determining factor in the past, today it is impossible to consider Turkey-EU relations as separate from the increasingly multipolar nature of the international system, the latest developments in our region, and the crises being faced by the EU. Rather, international conjuncture has always been a third actor in Turkey-EU relations. Therefore, as the wind of change is shaking all forms of establishments and status quo, Turkey-EU relations are at the crossroads as well.

Therefore, it is important to analyse changes in the international conjuncture and the challenges that the EU is facing before addressing the fundamental dynamics of Turkey-EU relations.

1 GLOBAL CONTEXT IN TURBULENCE

Today not only the post-World War II order but also the post-Cold War order is rapidly crumbling. The Western-led liberal world order that emerged at the dawn of the 1990s is now experiencing multifaceted transformations. There are many developments revealing this transformation but especially three of them are crucial for the future of Turkey-EU relations.

First of all the post-war liberal order which relies on the principle of rule-based multilateralism is under threat. Today, promoting multilateralism is increasingly challenging as a result of the rise of unilateral/bilateral orientations among major actors. However multilateralism is an 'existential issue' for the EU. Thus, current challenges call on the EU to counter balance destabilizing forces and the risk of protectionism by further engaging with its partners.

Secondly, global challenges such as cybercrime, irregular migration, terrorism, radicalization, climate change have proliferated, which creates an environment of uncertainties and instabilities with a widespread sense of insecurity. The world has begun to be less 'liberal', less 'international' and less 'in order.' The Union should not remain indifferent to these global developments but instead act on the basis of common values with an awareness of its global responsibility. Indeed in order to be a global actor, the EU must become stronger and facilitate coalitions and partnerships with other actors.

Thirdly, inequalities have flourished leading to the emergence of unsatisfied masses as a new phenomenon all over the world. Consequently, populism and authoritarian tendencies are on constant rise, which in turn threatens the founding principles of the EU. In this respect, the EU needs to place the concept of 'social inclusion' at the centre of its domestic and foreign policy. Currently, one of the most important threats to the very foundation of the European integration is introverted policies based on fear and hate.

2 EUROPEAN CONTEXT UNDER QUESTION

While the international system is experiencing a period of turbulent change, the EU is not immune to these developments. Today, the EU faces multi-dimensional challenges not only on the international front but also in the domestic realm.

Rise of far right and populism has become a major threat for even the veteran democracies of the old continent. While the Euro crisis has uncovered economic disputes among Member States, the migration crisis contributed to the spread of scepticism and extremism. Moreover, Brexit has become a great examination for the unity of the Union. All these challenges have not only deepened the fault lines between Member States but also undermined the EU's claim to be a centre of attraction. Thus, European people's trust in the EU is replaced by the question of its legitimacy.

Today in order to overcome the current crisis of the European integration, the EU needs to articulate a new *raison d'être* by determining a fresh and ambitious vision to face the challenges ahead. As historian Timothy Garton Ash rightly puts it, Europe's success of the past fifty years came from within Europe, however Europe's success in the next fifty years would heavily depend on its reaction to outside challenges. In this respect, the vision of the new EU leadership is very important and the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen has promising statements. She has underlined that the Commission 'will be a geopolitical Commission committed to sustainable policies' and emphasized that 'the EU should be the guardian of multilateralism'.

As the Deputy Foreign Minister and Director for EU Affairs of Turkey, I also believe that the EU needs to strengthen itself, its existing partnerships and create new mechanisms of cooperation and dialogue more than ever. In this respect, the agenda of the new EU leadership seems to be more preoccupied with foreign and security policy as well as enlargement and neighbourhood. Thus it is high time to revisit Turkey-EU relations.

3 TURKEY'S ACCESSION: A POTENTIAL YET TO BE EXPLOITED

Unfortunately we are going through a difficult period in Turkey-EU relations, though this is not something new. Indeed Turkey-EU relations have been characterized by peaks and troughs since its inception. Membership of the EU is a strategic objective for Turkey and as the European Commission has itself put it, we believe that 'the full potential of the EU-Turkey relationship is best fulfilled within the framework of an active and credible accession process.' However Turkey's EU accession process is not proceeding as it ought to. The process has been facing resistance, led particularly by certain Member States for their own national interests against the general interests of the EU. Even when relations were at their best, half

of the chapters were blocked for purely political reasons. Fourteen chapters are still blocked due to the Cyprus problem, inherited by the EU in 2004 and for the same reason, no chapter can be closed.

Moreover due to the ‘nationalization of the enlargement policy’, in other words, some Member States abusing their EU membership for their own interests against candidate countries, not only in accession negotiations, but also in other areas we are losing our ground for cooperation. Some Member States misuse Turkey’s accession process for domestic political purposes. The 15 July 2019 measures – less dialogue with Turkey – of the EU Foreign Affairs Council is a typical example of how the EU has been taken hostage by some Member States especially Southern Cyprus.

However, despite the fact that Greek Cypriots destroyed the partnership state of Cyprus of 1960; rejected the EU backed UN Annan Plan of 2004 and jeopardized the Crans Montana negotiations continue to refuse political equality with co-owner Turkish Cypriots on the island and are still allowed first to join the EU and then to abuse their EU membership on the basis of EU solidarity against candidate Turkey.

Against this background, Turkey continues its efforts towards accession to the EU, which is its strategic choice in terms of its historical background and future vision. We are leaving behind the difficult times that followed the 15 July 2016 attempted coup. Following the lifting of the State of Emergency, Turkey is back on track with its reform agenda. After a break of two and a half years, we reconvened the Reform Action Group, composed of key ministers, with the objective of rejuvenating political reforms. The Reform Action Group convened three times during the course of last twelve months and the latest meeting was under the chairmanship of our President reaffirmed the strong political will to revitalize the reform process. Particular attention is given to the areas of judiciary and fundamental rights and freedoms. Corollary, the new Judicial Reform Strategy was announced on 30 May 2019. Meanwhile, the movement to the presidential system of government has brought faster decision-making and less bureaucracy, allowing reforms to be accelerated.

Despite the difficulties of keeping the right balance between freedoms and security in one of the world’s most unstable regions, Turkey has been relentlessly seeking to consolidate its democracy, with higher standards in all areas covered by the EU acquis. Indeed, Turkey has adopted more than 2,000 pieces of legislation in line with the EU acquis in the last decade – despite the scourge of terrorism, heavy burdens of irregular migration and a bloody coup attempt. In order to pave the way for more reforms, the EU should overcome the anchor-credibility dilemma, which means the EU should display a credible anchorship towards

Turkey, with an encouraging discourse, as it does towards other candidate countries.

Turkey is the most important partner of the EU on key issues the EU faces. We have seen the concrete and positive results of Turkey-EU cooperation and joint actions both in the refugee crisis and in the fight against terrorism. By hosting more than 4 million refugees and halting the flow of thousands via the Aegean Sea, Turkey has prevented a major humanitarian crisis in Europe. Closer partnership between Turkey and the EU in the security and defence policy bears a significant potential. Cooperation in the field of energy is very promising as well because Turkey is located at the crossroads of most of the existing and potential pipeline projects, which are vital for the EU. In the economic and commercial areas, there is no question that updating 1996 Turkey-EU Customs Union will bring enormous benefits for both sides. In fact, delaying the Customs Union update would be misreading of the global developments that I have mentioned.

In this context, it is really discouraging to hear echoes from the rest of Europe claiming that Turkey is 'too big, too poor and Muslim' to join the EU. Before anything else, I think those narrow-minded circles cannot grasp the dynamics of the current international system and European integration. Yes, Turkey is big both by population and area, but it is an asset for the EU rather than liability. Turkey's bigness is an asset at the NATO and at the Council of Europe and it will be a huge contribution, when Turkey joins the EU. Indeed, Turkey's bigness in economy, in population, in surface area will enable the EU to become a real global actor. On the other hand, yes, Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country; but Turkish Republic is a secular, democratic and social state governed by the rule of law. I strongly believe that the possible membership of Turkey to the EU will contribute to the 'unity in diversity' in the EU. Moreover, an EU with Turkey can reach out the Islamic world and could better integrate its own Muslim population in the European societies. Last but not least is 'poverty'. On this issue I cannot say 'yes, Turkey is poor'. This is the image of Turkey in 1960s or 1970s. Today Turkey has reached the GDP level of some of the EU Member States with higher economic growth rates. By the time Turkey becomes an EU member, Turkish agriculture and cohesion policies will overcome EU's budget concerns. As a result, these three factors can be quiet positive in contrary to what it evokes in some people's mind.

4 CONCLUSION

Reinvigorating Turkey-EU relations is a win-win-win situation which would bring important achievements not only for Turkey and the EU but also for the region and for the international system. To put it frankly, there is a huge untapped

potential regarding Turkey-EU cooperation that can only be fully exploited with the eventual membership of Turkey to the Union.

There is no question that 'geopolitics is back' and we need to be side by side. As the most strategically important candidate country, Turkey deserves more understanding, empathy and dialogue in its relations with the EU. At this juncture it is vital that the EU should respond properly to Turkey's determination with a view to reassess its handling of the accession talks and adopt a fair approach towards Turkey. This will also demonstrate that the Union is still capable of constructing a wider vision for Europe and for the world.

I strongly believe that the EU can be an agent of change in the world, a trend-setter, not just a passive witness. In this respect, Turkey's membership offers great opportunity. No other membership of the EU, including the previous and future ones, would be more beneficial and meaningful than Turkey's accession to the EU. Turkey offers weight, influence and capacity to the EU with its geostrategic location, young and dynamic population, economic might, military and defence capacity as well as its role in the energy and connectivity areas. It is now high time to place Turkish-EU relations in a new realm with a clearer accession perspective and to steer the wheel of change to the benefit of both sides.