

# A NEW ERA IN TURKEY-EU RELATIONS

*New leaderships in Ankara and Brussels have the opportunity to pave the way for the strengthening and deepening of Turkey-EU relations, the resurgence of Turkey's EU accession process, and the opportunity to cooperate on regional matters that are of strategic importance to both. The author emphasizes the significant transformation Turkey has undergone in regards to its democratic and human rights record and points to the three pillars of Turkey's new EU Strategy – determination in the political reform process, continuity in socio-economic transformation, and effectiveness in communication – as important steps towards complying with EU standards.*

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**T**urkey'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, which came into force on 31 December 1995. 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 declared a candidate country, the accession negotiations opened in 2005 to mark a turning point in relations.



While the bonds created in 1963 are solid, recently the EU-Turkey relationship has suffered from a highly politicized course of negotiations that was supposed to be technical in nature. However, in 2014 a new era began for both Turkey and the EU. Following the European parliamentary elections in May, new EU leadership came into office. In Turkey, the president was elected by the people for the first time and a new government took office. Thus with "New Turkey" and the "New EU" a new period has begun with unique challenges and opportunities.

### *A New Era and a New Discourse...*

The new President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has underlined that the new Commission "will be political not technocratic." It is apparent from this that the new management of the European Commission has a priority of replacing its technocratic image by reinforcing political leadership of the Union. I am certain that the deadlock in Turkey's accession negotiations as well as today's international challenges can only be tackled with a political vision. Therefore, President Juncker's statement is of particular importance for Turkey.

Moreover, strengthening the global role of the EU is among the ten priorities of the European Commission for the 2014-19 period. Meanwhile, the strategic importance of Turkey-EU relations has increased in parallel with the rapid changes in international and regional relations. Recent dramatic events, from Syria to Ukraine and the Middle East to North Africa, require Turkey and the EU to act jointly against global and regional threats. The EU definitely needs to adopt a vision that suits its

global power rather than inward-facing policies, while furthering enlargement negotiations and pursuing a harmonious neighborhood policy.

On the other hand, Turkey's over half-century-long EU process is the most important modernization project since the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey, as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has indicated. Thus EU accession is a strategic goal for the new Turkish government, which is strongly committed to the EU process and to the transformation of Turkey.

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The EU accession process has gained even greater strategic significance with a “New Turkey” perspective. The “New Turkey” discourse depicts a stronger, more prosperous, respected, and democratic country, which is used as a role model in the region for its economy, science and technology, politics, and social and cultural policies. The EU accession process is undeniably an indispensable part of this goal.

Turkey has been experiencing a spectacular transformation over the last 12 years thanks to the consolidation of democracy, improvements in freedoms, economic restoration in tune with the global economy, and active foreign policy. The essential dynamics of Turkey's EU policy are enhancing democracy and human rights, institutionalizing a free market economy, and promoting modern living standards in all areas. Ongoing accession negotiations with the EU make Turkey unique in its region. With substantial improvements in terms of democratization and human rights, Turkey has adopted a “citizen-oriented” approach based on rights and freedoms. Therefore, the EU process is one of the essential dynamics of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy vision.

### *A New Strategy...*

Turkey's New EU Strategy, announced on 18 September 2014, is based on three pillars: determination in the political reform process, continuity in socio-economic transformation, and effectiveness in communication.

The strategy mainly aims at achieving EU standards in all areas through an accelerated reform process, determining issues of priority related to the negotiation chapters, and implementing a powerful communication plan that reveals the significance and potential of Turkey-EU cooperation.

### *Political Reform Process*

The EU membership objective has been a significant motivator in accelerating political reforms, which served to further improve the living standards of citizens and deepened the rule of law as well as democratization. The priority of this process is to guarantee the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens, and to remove all limitations on the use of these rights and freedoms without discrimination. Although fundamental laws and legislation have already been repealed or amended, all legislation bearing the imprint of the military coup of 12 September 1980 will be reviewed in detail during the work toward a new constitution. The next wave of political reforms will definitely reinforce the foundation of democracy.

### *Socio-economic Transformation in the Accession Process*

As another important step, a “National Action Plan for EU Accession” was prepared in collaboration with all ministries and public institutions under the coordination of the Ministry for European Union Affairs. Adopting an accession-oriented approach, the Action Plan focuses on key priorities, including the opening and closing of benchmarks, and aims to strengthen administrative capacity for implementation. Accordingly, it is an updated roadmap for EU harmonization work and will help to determine the priorities of Turkey in various areas.

The “National Action Plan for EU Accession” will be implemented in two phases: the first phase covers November 2014-June 2015 and the second phase covers June 2015-June 2019. The objective of this plan is to steer EU harmonization efforts and to accelerate the work in all chapters, whether politically blocked or not.



### *The EU Communication Strategy*

It is of great importance to support the political and socio-economic reforms that have changed Turkey's outlook through the use of tailored communication efforts. A successful communication strategy not only assists the internalization of reforms by society, but also serves to close the gap between perception and facts regarding Turkey.

The new EU Communication Strategy will serve this purpose through two dimensions: the first one is communication at home, which aims to solidify the domestic perception of the EU process as a modernization project that improves the living standards of our people. Such a perception will definitely ensure support of all segments of so-

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ciety for adoption and proper implementation of the reforms. The second dimension of the strategy addresses the international community in order to demonstrate facts about Turkey. This dimension will help establish mutual trust in terms of Turkey's commitment as well as Turkey's confidence in the EU process.

### *Conclusion*

Turkey-EU relations are strong and sustainable, as they are based on a “win-win” strategy. Turkey and the EU share mutual benefits in many areas, ranging from foreign policy, economic and trade relations, energy supply, and security to border management, employment, and migration policies. Civil wars and conflicts in our region attest that Turkey is key to the EU's political and economic stability, and that EU membership is significant to Turkey's stability. Turkey will in turn contribute to the EU in various areas thanks to its socio-economic transformation, dynamic social structure, growing economy, and regional power. Consequently, the increasing interdependence mandates the construction of a common future.

Today, the EU is encountering serious challenges at the regional and global level. The strategic importance of Turkey-EU relations has increased in parallel with the rapid changes in international and regional relations. In this respect, Turkey will continue to pursue its objective of membership. In turn, it is necessary that the EU adopt a solid vision that suits its global aspirations. Turkey's accession to the EU should be a part of this vision.