

RESETTING THE TURKEY-EU RELATIONSHIP

Turkey-EU relations are going through a difficult period, which is not a new feature per se as they have been through many different stages. However, the present situation is unsustainable. The accession process continues to stall due to political obstacles and can proceed only if the Cyprus issue is resolved. As accession is the dominant feature, this situation poisons the overall relationship. While the migration crisis brought the two sides closer, the July 15th coup attempt in Turkey and its aftermath again caused consternation. In a world with a multitude of challenges, the two sides need each other and should build their relationship on trust and realistic expectations.

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How can one describe the relationship between Turkey and the European Union (EU) – one that has gone through so many variations? At present, we are going through another difficult phase. This is not new, as there have been highs and lows throughout the years. Turkey and the EU are so intrinsically connected that it is close to impossible to untangle the relationship. Yet, relations are at a crossroads, and the way in which the relationship will develop in the upcoming period is crucial.



Turkey has been very patient in its quest for membership. Although first contact with the EU happened more than 50 years ago, membership was formally applied for 30 years prior, in 1987. Even then, Germany not so quietly advised against it. Two years later, however, the European Commission published its opinion observation. According to the European Commission, Turkey was not ready economically and the EU was not prepared for enlargement at the time, as it had to concentrate its efforts on the Single Market. Thus, Turkey and the EU focused on establishing a Customs Union, which was already envisaged in the 1963 Ankara Agreement.

However, even establishing the Customs Union was a short-lived success. Two years after it was founded – when the EU was deciding on countries' candidacy status – the former Communist countries were first in line, yet Turkey was excluded. This resulted in a cessation of political dialogue and left the relationship mostly in limbo for the next two years. The EU faced a dilemma: With no unity amongst members, how should Turkey be handled? This dilemma was eventually overcome with a change of government in some key EU member states, and Turkey was finally given candidacy status at the European Council meeting in Helsinki in December 1999.

Candidacy

Although lagging at the onset, Turkey made important strides towards fulfilling the necessary conditions to open accession negotiations. Nevertheless, there were still certain hurdles to overcome. Although Turkey was convinced that it fulfilled the necessary conditions to open negotiations in 2002, the EU disagreed and delayed

the decision for another two years. The lingering issue was Cyprus which, albeit a divided island, had become an EU member and would use as much as possible to extract concessions from Turkey. As Turkey wanted to open accession talks, the Greek Cypriots tried to use their membership to gain recognition among other demands. Naturally, this led to problems. In December 2004, after much difficulty for both sides, the EU decided to open negotiations in October 2005. However, even achieving this took quite a lot of effort, although the troublesome member at the time was Austria.

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Yet again, the good feeling of opening and even closing a chapter (chapter 25, Science and Research) in 2006 led to a hard turn when the EU froze eight chapters due to the Cyprus issue.¹ The change of governments in Germany in 2005 and France in 2007 soon disturbed relations further between Turkey and the EU. Former French President Nicholas Sarkozy, for example, decided to block five chapters. The relationship suffered even more when the Greek Cypriots unilaterally blocked six chapters in 2009. In addition to these setbacks, from 2004 onwards, Turkey – along with the other candidate countries – was no longer invited to EU summits, nor to other high-level meetings. When one considers that Turkey was present at the EU Constitution signing ceremony in Rome, this development becomes all the more disturbing.

All this happened at a time when Turkey was rapidly undergoing reforms in all areas and was visibly developing economically and opening up its markets to the world. It was ironic to see the EU push Turkey away at a time when it should have been doing the opposite.

Turkey’s Westernization Decision

Here was a country that, more than eight decades ago, decided to become a modern, westernized nation – and did everything in its power to achieve this goal. Turkey was determined to reverse the adversarial relationship the Ottoman Empire had had with the West, and made a strategic and revolutionary decision to become part of the established civilization. Turkey believed that it had been accepted in this new role as it became part of all major western institutions during the Cold War.

¹ There are 35 chapters in the negotiating process.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and a new world order came into being, Turkey found itself in a very different situation. It could no longer count on its strategic geographic positioning as a bulwark against communism; the world had changed and Turkey had to adapt. The first sign was when the former communist countries became EU candidates, while Turkey was left out. This was hard to swallow. It became a rude awakening as Turkey realized for the first time that it had never fully been accepted into the “European family.” Turkey understood that the relationship was mostly transactional – as was needed during the Cold War – and was subsequently excluded when the threat was over. Thus, Turkey had to adjust its policies accordingly.

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Nevertheless, with the Turkish economy developing and the subsequent reforms required within the framework of the accession process, Turkey started to be more assertive and open to its surroundings. There are two things needed

for active diplomacy: means and opportunities. Like many other countries, Turkey had them in limited supply during the Cold War. Since the bipolar international order had disintegrated, there were now opportunities to develop new ties without hindrances. Turkey slowly developed the means to accomplish this as it became an emerging market, a member of the G20, and a leader in development aid.

Preserving the Relationship

As the EU was working toward more consolidation through enlargement, the single currency, and the free movement of people, Turkey was being pushed away. This strange situation continued for some time. Nevertheless, despite the cool political atmosphere, interaction in other areas between the two sides continued. With 40 percent of its trade going to the EU, the Union is Turkey’s foremost commercial partner and its number one investor. Turkey is currently the EU’s sixth largest trade partner.

However, the driving force of any candidacy lies in the accession process for membership. By mid-2010, the possible remaining negotiating chapters that could be opened ran out due to political obstacles. As the guardian of the treaties and commitments of the member states, the European Commission tried its best to come up with a plan to keep the flame alive. It finally proposed the so-called “positive agenda,” which Turkey accepted. This agenda entailed the proceeding of talks on the chapters on a technical level, in order to prepare Turkey for the possibility of starting negotiations quickly as soon as the political situation changed.

Developments gained traction with the new European Commission and Council in late 2014. The EU was struggling to have a balanced footing on Turkey. The relationship was mired in political obstacles and there was no consensus on how to proceed. Furthermore, when European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker spelled out that there would be no enlargement of the Union until the end of the Commission's mandate in 2019, it dampened not only Turkey's aspiration, but all other candidates' as well. Efforts were made to revitalize the relationship but nothing substantial presented itself.

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The game changer was the migration crisis. Although Turkey was already in the throes of dealing with millions of Syrians and others fleeing the civil war in Syria, there was little international assistance – despite the stream of visitors congratulating Turkey on its efforts. When the numbers of migrants streaming into the EU became a torrent, the EU reached out to Turkey – albeit initially very timidly – to resolve the matter. The EU was facing a crisis that was not of its own making and required third party assistance. This was seen by Turkey as an opportunity to reassess the relationship and bring it back on track.

The period between September 2015 and June 2016 was exceptional as contact on all levels became common place. This situation increased dialogue between the two parties. In just four months, three Summits with all 28 members were realized. The German Chancellor visited Turkey several times and even came to the Turkish Permanent Delegation in Brussels to reach a deal with the Turkish Prime Minister on the migration crisis.

What was achieved by this deal has been criticized by many as being immoral, unethical, and unlawful. What is forgotten is that it succeeded in stemming the flow of refugees, and, most importantly, lives were saved that would otherwise have been lost in perilous sea journeys.

The EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016 was not restricted to the issue of migration, but encompassed a wide range of areas for cooperation and progress, including the accession process. The result is a mixed picture, as the EU has not been able to deliver on most of its promises. Although two chapters (that had been previously

blocked by France) have been opened and some preparation on others have taken place, political obstacles remained. Furthermore, financial assistance from the EU aimed at the Syrian refugees in Turkey has been slow in dispersal. It was decided that once the irregular crossings ended or were substantially and sustainably reduced, the voluntary resettlement scheme envisaged would begin. However, one year on, this has still not been realized.

The two sides also agreed to upgrade the Customs Union so that it would include services, public procurement, and agricultural goods. Both sides have expectations, and negotiations are expected to start this year – although they will take a number of years to complete. The prospects are such that the trade volume between Turkey and the EU could double.

The Aftermath of the Failed Coup

Just as the migration deal brought the two sides closer, the failed coup attempt of July 15th and its aftermath had an unfortunate cooling effect. Firstly, the impression was that the EU was by and large waiting for the outcome before it reacted; this initial hesitation did not sit well with Turkey. The first high level visit from the EU came after about two months by the president of the European Parliament. Certain EU leaders did offer initial support, but overall it seemed tepid and the perception did not change.

Secondly, just as Turkey was ready to turn a page, the EU's reaction towards Turkey's measures to those who took part in the coup attempt or supported the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) further strained the relationship. The European Parliament went so far as to call to halt the already moribund accession talks. The slow slide towards a fracture was thus gaining speed. There were also harsh talks between the two sides in the preceding weeks before the Constitutional referendum in Turkey as elections took place in some EU countries.

Thus, we are at a juncture in which the two sides need to have an honest discussion on how to proceed. Both parties need each other although at times this is forgotten. However, the most important development rests in resolving the perennial Cyprus problem. The two communities on the island have never been closer to a settlement. This opportunity should not be lost and the current momentum should be preserved by both sides. The resolution of the Cyprus problem would be a genuine game changer in every respect. It would positively affect not only the people of the island as a whole, but also Turkish-Greek relations, the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey-EU relations, as well as EU-NATO relations. We all need a success story. This is especially true for the EU.

The Future of the EU and Turkey

The EU – facing one crisis after another – needs to re-establish its brand name, which until recently was considered forward looking, successful, and an attraction for many countries in the region. The power the Commission held in days’ past was not only on trade issues, but was also able to admonish member states if they were deemed to move away from democracy. In effect, the EU was upholding universal values at many levels.

When we look back at the success of the Single Market, the establishment of the single currency, the free circulation of people, and enlargement, we now see that they are all being challenged. The EU should not look inward but at the bigger picture. The UK’s expected departure has

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dented the EU’s image, and for the first time enlargement is in reverse gear. In addition, enlargement has exacerbated the existing structures with unforeseen consequences. Academic talk of “multi speed” or “variable geometry” among member states is now becoming a real possibility. The cliché that the EU gets stronger after each crisis may have been true when there was one crisis at a time. However, in the past few years the challenges have come from a multitude of areas in which the EU has little or no control: the US financial crisis which spilled over to the Euro crisis and still continues in Greece, the migration crisis, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and incursions into Ukraine. These have taxed the EU at a time when it needs to get its house in order.

These challenges will continue for the foreseeable future and others may arise such as the position of Russia regarding its neighbors; the migration conundrum; the never ending Middle East situation; the fight against terrorism; and the rise of the extreme right. All these require closer cooperation amongst members. The fact that there are growing signs of disunity does not auger well. In addition to the members closing ranks, there is a need for firmer relations with candidates.

As a candidate country, Turkey still believes in the EU ideal. It is a strategic choice that has been supported by past and present Turkish governments. Yet times change and neither Turkey nor the EU are the same as they were even 10 years ago. The EU will concentrate on Brexit for the next two years, while Turkey is facing multiple challenges in its neighborhood and beyond. However, the dictum that both need each other is all too real. So it is high time to sit down and assess – without blaming one another – how to overcome the increasing mistrust, reach an understanding that would be devoid of pressure, and avoid unrealistic expectations.