

Turkey and the EU: A Tug of War Relationship

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The decline in both the rule of law and the adherence to democratic norms in Turkey has made it easier for the EU to keep Ankara at a distance than was previously the case. Talks of future EU accession have become altogether symbolic and the substance of even the so-called “privileged partnership” is being hollowed out to cover limited areas of strategic significance. However, neither side is willing or able to abandon the other entirely. The existence of both pull and the push factors in Turkey-EU relations can explain why there are seeming overriding contradictions in each entity’s approach to the other.

In an interview with the *BBC* in July 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that “if the EU bluntly says ‘We will not be able to accept Turkey into the EU,’ this will be comforting for us. We will then initiate our plan B and C.”¹ This statement can be seen as indicative of an all-time low point in Turkey-EU relations. While Turkey’s EU accession process is still formally open, it has been clear for some time that both sides have lost faith that this final goal will be achieved. In 2017 Kati Piri, the Turkey rapporteur of the European Parliament, seemed to endorse a shift in EU policy, by openly calling for the suspension of the accession negotiations.² However, in April 2017, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini said that she still wants Turkey to join the bloc, and that negotiation between Ankara and Brussels have not been suspended. Similarly, former German Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel

said that “it does not improve things to cancel something before we have something new to offer.”³ Thus, so far neither Turkey nor the EU appears willing to be the side that cancels the Turkish EU accession process. Indeed, the symbolic significance of formal suspension should not be underestimated: it would dispel the convenient fiction of accession, nurtured by both sides as a justification for strategic cooperation on matters of mutual interest.

One explanation for the current state of affairs is that significant pull and push factors shape the EU-Turkey relationship, with these opposing factors generating the ostensibly contradictory policies of the actors. This article will address several of the push factors (Erdogan’s authoritarian tendencies, Islamophobia, the Turkish diaspora) and the pull factors (migration, security, and the economy). The concluding section will offer policy recommendations for bringing Turkey-EU relations back to a more positive track.

Push Factors

Erdogan’s Authoritarian Tendencies and the End of the Turkish Model

The challenges posed by Turkey’s domestic democratic decay and the rising authoritarianism of President Erdogan are at the core of growing friction between Turkey and the EU. With the violent crackdown on the Gezi Park protests in 2013, Turkey’s AKP government forfeited its reputation as a possible model for bridging democracy and moderate political Islam.⁴ Moreover, the sweeping purges and arrests following the July 2016 failed coup attempt consolidated Turkey’s authoritarian reputation among the European public and the political level.⁵ Diplomatic confrontations over the arrests of foreign journalists and damning reports about gross human rights violations and the disappearance of press freedoms have made Turkey a toxic counterpart for the EU. The issue of human rights was raised during Erdogan’s meetings with senior EU officials in Brussels in May 2017, and while talking with reporters in Berlin in July 2017, former Foreign Minister Gabriel said: “We need to be clearer than we have been until now, so that those responsible in Ankara understand that such policies are not without consequences.”⁶

Islamophobia

Mounting allegations of European Islamophobia are another significant factor fueling tensions between the EU and Turkey. Islamophobia can be considered as a form of anti-Muslim racism, which attributes a constructed,

negative Muslim identity to all Muslims.⁷ Political reluctance to incorporate Turkey's large Muslim population adversely effected Turkey's EU accession negotiations as early as 2005.⁸ Furthermore, in light of rising migration from Muslim majority countries and a series of terror attacks across Europe attributed to sympathizers of the Islamic State, popular Islamophobia increased markedly. Islamophobia is manifested in the resurgence of far right parties across Europe, which capitalize on anti-Muslim sentiment. Similarly, Europe faces rising both anti-Muslim crime and polled public opinion, which reveals an overwhelming rejection of any further immigration from Muslim majority countries.⁹ Such sentiments nurture a perception of cultural incompatibility between Turkey and the EU, particularly as Erdogan actively encourages further the Islamization of Turkey. This seeming cultural incompatibility is illustrated by the coexistence of Erdogan's overt attempts to entrench Islamist discourse and conservative Islamic values in Turkish society with the radical secularism of the European Court of Justice, as exemplified by a ruling that European employers could dismiss a woman for refusing to remove her hijab.¹⁰ Instead of seeking to deescalate such tensions, President Erdogan used charges of Islamophobia to deflect European criticism of Turkey's human rights record, often suggesting that a clear break from Europe would give Turkey welcome clarity.¹¹

The Turkish Diaspora

The Turkish diaspora in Western Europe (numbering 5.5 million, according to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs)¹² might potentially have been a bridge between Turkey and the EU, but has, in recent times, become a point of contention. First, there were accusations in Germany that clerics, sent to the country by the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey, were spying for the Turkish government. Specific targets were alleged links of Turkish citizens residing in Germany with the Gulen movement, which, according to the Turkish government, was behind the failed coup attempt of July 2016.¹³ Moreover, since 2012, the Turkish diaspora can vote from abroad, and is thus courted by Turkish politicians. Diplomatic confrontations over the refusal of certain West European states to allow Turkish politicians to speak at political rallies organized for members of the diaspora triggered a crisis between Turkey and these states.¹⁴ Such crises perhaps also contributed to strong support among the diaspora for the AKP position in the April 16, 2017 constitutional referendum – in Germany, 63 percent voted in favor of

the referendum; in Austria, 73 percent; and in the Netherlands, support for the referendum reached 71 percent.¹⁵ This support for the AKP from the Turkish diaspora has only added to concerns regarding their integration in Europe, and to questions whether certain members of the diaspora have not fully internalized the liberal values of their host states.

Pull Factors

Migration

The March 2016 Joint Action Plan, known as the Turkey-EU migrant deal, amplified the de facto interdependence of both entities. The EU relies on Turkey, which hosts over three and a half million refugees, to stop the flow of migrants from Turkey via the Aegean to the Greek islands.¹⁶ In return, Turkey negotiated a promise of visa free travel for its citizens in the Schengen area and three billion euros of financial support to address its domestic refugee situation (added to the three billion euros already promised in November 2015).¹⁷ The deal has been the object of criticism from all sides: human rights groups have attacked Turkey's human rights record and Europe's willingness to put its own needs before universal values. Turkey expressed frustration over delays in the provision of EU financial support and the seemingly indefinite postponement of visa free travel for Turkish citizens.¹⁸ Simultaneously, the migrant deal erodes the EU's ability to apply normative pressure on Turkey by making the EU dependent on Turkey to contain the European "migrant crisis." Elizabeth Collett of the Migration Policy Institute suggests that the deal transformed the migration challenge from a situation of "intolerable dysfunction to tolerable dysfunction," leaving Europe vulnerable to an abrogation of the agreement.¹⁹ Precisely such an abrogation was threatened by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in spats surrounding campaigning for Turkey's controversial constitutional referendum.²⁰ Nonetheless, contrary to the aggressive rhetoric from both sides, the Joint Action Plan has become "too big to fail,"²¹ as further evidenced by the European Commission's apparent willingness to provide the next tranche of three billion euros in 2018.²² While six billion euros pale compared to the twenty-five billion euros the Turkish government claimed in 2017 to have spent on migrants, it is nonetheless significant for Turkey, as is the elusive promise of visa-free travel.²³ Similarly, the challenges of migration

persist for both Turkey and the EU, and Europe has invested too much into the success of the migrant deal to simply walk away.

Security

In many respects Turkey is seen as a bulwark against the threats emerging from the Middle East. In addition, Turkey's role in the Black Sea region and against Russia is seen as critical. The EU cannot ignore Turkey's important role in NATO, and it is impossible to disentangle the EU-Turkey relations from Turkey's position within NATO. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated in April 2017, "NATO would undoubtedly be weaker without Turkey." Former Danish Prime Minister and former NATO Secretary General, Andres Fogh Rasmussen remarked in June 2017, "I would argue from a security point of view that we need Turkey as much as Turkey needs us."²⁴ In 2016, Turkey adhered to the NATO guideline of attributing more than 20 percent for procurement and R&D of military equipment as part of its defense budget. Turkey is also above the NATO median on defense spending (and in previous years even met the NATO guideline of the defense budget being at least 2 percent of the country's GDP).²⁵

Yet despite the benefits of Turkey as a strategic ally, there are growing concerns about its credibility. Turkey's continued position within NATO is questioned, albeit cautiously, and Turkey is not deemed a reliable partner. This skepticism is not only attributed to the fact that some of its policies are not aligned with those of NATO, but also to the purges in the army, which included many officers that were in charge of the coordination between NATO and Turkey. Many such officers have been replaced with others who are seen as less capable.²⁶

Economy

The importance of trade in the relations between Turkey and the EU cannot be overstated. Turkey is the EU's fourth largest export market and fifth largest partner for imports. The EU is both Turkey's number one import and export partner.²⁷ The 1995 Customs Union agreement has been one of the cornerstones of these trade relations, but there are calls both from Turkey and from the EU to update it, and initial talks have begun on this issue. The Turkish Economic Minister said in April 2017 that "the Customs Union right now contains only industrial products. When the Customs Union is extended to include food, agriculture, electronics and public procurements,

it will put Turkey in a position to provide net contributions to the total growth of Europe.”²⁸ In 2015, Germany was the number one source of foreign visitors to Turkey, accounting for 15 percent of tourists to Turkey.²⁹ This figure dropped to 11 percent in 2016, though Germans still topped the list.³⁰ This percentage declined further due to a travel advisory issued in July 2017, warning German tourists to exercise caution while traveling to Turkey due to the arrest of German journalists and human rights activists in Turkey.³¹ Nonetheless, a recent recovery in the number of German tourists to Turkey and softer rhetoric by German politicians regarding Turkey’s tourism destinations contribute to making it highly unlikely that in the long run, Turkey will sacrifice this important market.

Conclusion

Given the significance of the EU for Turkey’s economy, the EU should link the strong incentives associated with economic cooperation through the Customs Union with normative values. The prospect of expanding cooperation within the Customs Union can be used as leverage to ensure that the fundamental pillars of democracy in Turkey are maintained. This strategy entails seeking assurances from Turkey that it will end the suspension of the European Convention on Human Rights. Similarly, the EU should insist that Turkey strengthen the rule of law, separation of powers, and the freedom of speech and assembly. Ending the state of emergency and seeking a rapid conclusion of the purge of Turkish state institutions in an attempt to “clean” them of Gulen movement supporters would go a long way toward enhancing Turkey’s international legitimacy. In order to exercise any credible normative sway on Turkey, the EU must re-establish its firm commitment to universal values, including religious freedom. The EU’s normative credibility in Turkey suffered particularly from European Court of Justice rulings that seemed to specifically target Muslims and from self-serving EU decisions on migration. Thus, the EU must deliver a strong statement against Islamophobia. Given the likely opposition from Hungary and Poland, it is paramount that Germany and France lead this initiative, particularly since both countries have significant Muslim minority populations.

Notwithstanding legitimate criticism of Turkey’s human rights record, both before and after the July 2016 failed coup attempt, Turkey continues to bear a disproportionate burden in respect of challenges posed by increased migration. Unlike Jordan and Lebanon, Turkey has a large population of

almost 80 million to absorb its three million migrants. Nonetheless, Turkey is justified in insisting on increased European support with regard to the migrants, either in terms of financial aid, or by Europe itself accepting more migrants. In light of the likely persistence of increased migration pressures into Europe, it is in the EU's interest to expand cooperation with Turkey beyond the existing migrant deal. However, all funding and cooperation in the realm of migration must be made conditional on Turkey's commitment to universal human rights as suggested above.

Turkey has a significant diaspora all across Europe, which is viewed by Erdogan as a strategic asset. This diaspora often receives insufficient attention from their host nations, allowing the Turkish state to establish powerful networks within European states that back Ankara's positions. Instead of banning these AKP affiliated institutions, European nations must invest in alternative networks and community centers for the Turkish diaspora. In this way EU member states can create new fora for the promotion of the EU's normative values.

Notes

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 - 15 These numbers should be compared to the final result of the referendum in which 51% voted in favor. See “Why Many Turkish Citizens in Europe Rallied Behind the ‘Yes’ Vote,” *TRT World*, April 21, 2017, <https://goo.gl/RqWZYy>.
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