

## Viewpoint

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### **MOVING THE TURKEY – EU RELATIONSHIP FORWARD**

The relationship between Turkey and the EU has always been what can be described as delicate. For more than fifty years, the relations have swung from one end to another. While there have been instances that the two sides were getting closer, the distance never shortened. In fact, conversely, like two same poles of a magnet, the closer one got, the stronger the push factor.

When Turkey finally became a candidate twenty years ago at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, the steps that had to be taken were different from the other candidates. Turkey's path was slower and more winding. As Turkey fulfilled the criteria, the EU came up with new obstacles to lengthen the process. Nevertheless, Turkey realized the requirements and the EU had to take a decision to open accession negotiations in 2005. This was the opportunity of achieving a clear route towards membership and the closest Turkey progressed to the EU.

The next period became perilous as the newly elected French and German leaders were now opposing Turkey's adhesion. Turkish participation at EU Summits suddenly stopped. On top of that, Cyprus had become a member in 2004, without a solution to the division of the island, thus making the perennial Cyprus question another hurdle that Turkey would find in its way. Soon after accession negotiations started, this question was used as an excuse to prevent the march towards the EU. Although negotiations on some chapters were realised, the main issue was swept under the rug. This situation of foot-dragging continued up until 2015.

In 2011, the unexpected Arab popular movements began and as regimes in these countries started to crumble one after the other, the same was expected in Syria. The Syrian civil war started and thousands of people left their homes mostly to neighbouring countries. Turkey accommodated the bulk of these refugees and was being applauded for doing so. The EU was quite content with this situation. Then

suddenly in the summer of 2015, after Chancellor Merkel announced that Germany was ready to accept up to a million refugees, huge numbers of irregular migrants began to reach the shores of the EU through Turkey, notably to Greece and subsequently pouring into the mainland.

The EU then “remembered” Turkey and offered “gifts” such as advancing the accession negotiations, speeding up the visa talks, upgrading the Customs Union and financial assistance for the Syrian refugees among others, in order to stem the flow of the migrants. While the EU saw this as only a parley for stopping the refugees, Turkey considered it as an opportunity to restart the relationship. The two deals struck in November 2015 and March 2016 were negotiated to this effect.

Turkey abided by the deal and soon after the March agreement, the numbers fell dramatically. Unfortunately, the only part in which the EU managed to hold up its end of the bargain was a sluggish flow of financial assistance to the Syrians in Turkey and the opening of two negotiating chapters. The removal of visas for all Turkish citizens was stalled because Turkey had not fulfilled all the conditions (six conditions still have to be met to this day), as the coup attempt that year prevented progress in most of these areas. After the main flow was to be halted, the EU was to take in Syrian migrants legally from Turkey. The Chancellor had voiced around 150 thousand per year. As of today the number of Syrians that were allowed into some EU countries reached only 20 thousand.

The EU subsequently added more political obstacles in front of an already agreed deal which entailed the modernisation of the Customs Union. Turkey and the EU had completed a Customs Union at the end of 1995 (another example of EU procrastination which merits its own narrative). After more than 20 years, it had become necessary to upgrade it. A roadmap was agreed in 2015 with the Commission to add on public procurement, services and agriculture and resolve some outstanding issues. After the two agreements with regard to migration also called for the modernisation of the CU, the Commission asked for a mandate from the Member States at the end of 2016. The modernisation would have been a benefit for both sides. However, this purely economic and commercial deal was put on hold as the EU added political conditions to start negotiations. Thus, the EU reneged on the agreements. Once again for political expediency, the EU has shown how short-sighted its policies were.

An attempt to smooth out differences was made at a Summit in Varna, Bulgaria in March 2018, during the Bulgarian Presidency, but the EU was not ready to make any changes.

This kind of non-action by the EU further distanced the two sides and made a comeback difficult. Now because of the Cyprus issue, the EU in its latest “wisdom” added even more conditions and decided “*to suspend negotiations on the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement and agrees not to hold the Association Council and further meetings of the EU-Turkey high-level dialogues for the time being. The Council endorses the Commission’s proposal to reduce the pre-accession assistance to Turkey for 2020 and invites the European Investment Bank to review its lending activities in Turkey, notably with regard to sovereign-backed lending.*”<sup>i</sup>

The Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement has actually been on the table for years and it has been the Commission that had pushed Turkey to negotiate. The Association Council met after nearly four years for the first time last year, after overcoming Austrian obstinacy towards Turkey’s accession process. These meetings have lost their significance and currently only have a marginal value. The high level dialogues were initiated to compensate for the blocked chapters as a means of continuing to discuss the issues. Now the EU is refraining from even talking to Turkey. As for pre-accession assistance the amount provided had already diminished and was channelled to non-accession areas.

Thus, in reality these measures would not harm Turkey but drive a wedge between the two sides. To make things worse, the Council “*invited the High Representative and the Commission to continue work on options for targeted measures*”.<sup>ii</sup>

The EU is not to be held solely responsible for the present situation. Certainly Turkey needs to continue its reforms in many areas such as the judicial system and rule of law among others. The EU could have opened chapters 23 and 24 that deal with justice and fundamental rights and helped Turkey on these critical matters. On the contrary, these two chapters remain blocked.

The Cyprus question is another matter all-together. There is no need to recall the folly of accepting a divided island as a member. Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots have shown on several occasions their willingness to find a compromise. As long

as consensus remains the rule for decision making in the EU, it will be quite difficult to overcome this obstacle.

The EU's relationship with Turkey which was already fraught for some time, is now in the freezer and has very few possibilities of a recovery for the foreseeable future. The question the EU should ask itself is who benefits from this situation. The new Commission will hopefully bring a new air to the relationship. The fact that Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reached out and talked with President Erdoğan and then sent two Commissioners to Ankara was a good start. The visit of Council President Charles Michel to Istanbul, even if it was for the situation in Libya, was also a welcome departure from the lack of dialogue.

Nevertheless, it seems that the transactional kind of relationship that we have seen recently is here to stay. EU members seek out bilateral contacts with Turkey rather than through EU channels. This is not the way forward with a potential member, no matter what the situation may be today.

There are three key components that are the cornerstones of Turkey – EU relations:

- *Accession negotiations* – We cannot expect much even if the Cyprus question did not prevent any development. The EU's Regular Report's on Turkey have increased the usage of the word 'backsliding' regarding the rule of law. Thus, unless there is a major change on both sides the option of opening new chapters in the near future does not seem reasonable.
- *Visa exemption* – This issue was at the heart of what the EU promised during the negotiations on the migration settlement. The ball is in Turkey's court as it still has to meet the remaining six conditions. Yet, it is doubtful that the EU would be able to grant visa free travel to Turkish citizens even if all conditions were fulfilled. The atmosphere that was so propitious in the first half of 2016 towards Turkey has evaporated. In addition to possible obstacles from a few member states, the European Parliament needs to give its assent.
- *Upgrading the Customs Union* – The roadmap itself, which was agreed by the Commission and Turkey in 2015 for making the Customs Union up-to-date with existing free trade agreements, may have to be addressed for possible changes. Although the EU has put political obstacles to start negotiations while it would benefit both sides, this issue is the most promising in furthering the relationship.

There are many other areas of cooperation which have been successful or hold much promise. Turkey and the EU have made much progress in coordination regarding the fight against terrorism. The two sides have consulted each other several times on foreign policy. Yet, despite several decades of close collaboration there have been misunderstandings in the past and disputes have unfortunately increased in recent years.

We need a sense of realism. One cannot hope to have any change without meaningful dialogue. Both sides need each other. They should be able to trust one another once again. There is a vast potential that remains idle. The current stalemate benefits only those that are either short-sighted populists or some outside powers. Turkey has always been ready to move forward. The Turkish people still have a favourable attitude toward the Union. The EU should overcome its prejudices and act in a pragmatic manner. The new EU administration which started off in such a way could build on this positive step.

It is therefore essential to get together without delay and discuss in a comprehensive manner all the issues on the table so as to decide where the two sides would like to be in five to ten years' time.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/07/15/turkish-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-adopts-conclusions/pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9-2019-INIT/en/pdf>