

Analysis

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Beyond Enlargement? European Skepticism, Turkish Cynicism, and the Uncertain Future of EU-Turkey Relations*

by *Emiliano Alessandri*

The uncertain evolution of EU-Turkey relations has seen a potentially critical development in recent years: a new Turkish cynicism has been added to the more traditional skepticism of European elites and publics. The accession process, already stalling because of the unsolved Cyprus issue and the French unilateral veto on several chapters of negotiations, also risks losing all its remaining steam because, as openly admitted by an ever larger number of Turks themselves, Turkey no longer sees European integration as a destiny, but at best as an option whose viability and value have to both be verified.

The notion that is rapidly becoming dominant is that sustained internal development and the transformation of the international system in place since the end of the Cold War have put Turkey at the center of a wide area of the globe (including the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa), which is increasingly critical to larger international power balances, and of which Ankara may aspire to lead. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has coined a name for it: “Afro-Eurasia.” Out of hypocrisy, this notion seems to suggest that Turkey’s newly

gained centrality makes the EU less important to Ankara’s vision and less relevant to Turkey’s future.

The dice, however, are not cast — at least not yet. The position of the Turkish government remains pro-EU membership. Turkish President Abdullah Gül himself has recently affirmed that even in the new circumstances European integration remains a strategic priority for Ankara. In fact, the prospect of a Turkish about-face seems to have been hinted at so far also as a way to regain attention and respect among Europeans. If one line of argument is that “new Turkey,” an emerging power, does not need (and could actually lose from) integration into a politically divided and economically weak EU, a slightly different one is that Turkey can be the solution to many of Europe’s problems in several ways. The latter is the provocative thesis advanced by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself in a recent article in *Foreign Policy*: once “Europe’s sick man,” Turkey can now help re-energize a faltering EU thanks to its dynamic economy and strategic assets. Self-pride, wishful thinking, and need for



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recognition, all these elements come together in this new fashionable stance.

For now only hinted at, the prospect of an “independentist turn” of Turkey has become increasingly realistic. In fact, a lively debate has already opened on the subject, focusing on the actual viability and long-term sustainability, as well as the larger strategic implications of this development if it were to take place. Broadly speaking, the elements of risk of this course stand out. Would the end of the enlargement perspective lead at least in a first phase to something resembling a real divorce between the EU and Turkey, with the consequent deterioration of Turkish-European relations more broadly? Will Turkey be able to continue to project itself as a rising power if integration into the larger European market would stop? Will Turkey’s regional appeal and newly gained international influence diminish as a result of its lost connection with the EU? And what about the impact of the end of Turkey’s Europeanization on its still incomplete process of democratization?

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These are all very legitimate concerns that would be very dangerous for both the EU and Turkey disregard. It seems equally mistaken, however, to embrace an alarmism that selectively concentrates on the dangers failing to recognize the opportunities opened by a different course. Recent developments in North Africa and the Middle East seem to

create the possibility for Turkey to further extend its clout in the region, not acting on the EU’s behalf, but by mobilizing its own resources and using its own legacies to address the demand for change and influence some of the ongoing transitions. Moreover, Turkey’s economic ties with the EU, including its customs union, could be preserved even in the case of an interruption of the accession process, thus leaving intact many of the current bilateral relationships with EU countries that have a clear economic rationale. The issue of the future of Turkish democratization is undoubtedly a serious one. There is no small arrogance and parochialism, however, in the position of those in the EU who argue that if Turkey loses the “EU anchor,” it will *ipso facto* forego its chance to fully democratize.

The irony of the most recent debate on Turkey, at least as the EU side of it is concerned, is precisely that overemphasizing the dangers of a Turkey-EU divorce does not seem to have directly reinforced the case for enlargement. European supporters of Turkey’s EU membership, increasingly forced on the defensive, have embraced the line of argument that if EU leaders take no action in order to prevent Turkey from “drifting,” they will be left with both a weaker EU and a more problematic Turkey. The flaw with this argument is not that it makes no sense: from a number of different angles it does. What weakens it almost to the point of serving the opposite of its intended purpose is that the more Turkey is presented by its very supporters as in the midst of an uncertain transition — that is, a country that is not yet fully democratic, fully developed, “fully European” — the easier it becomes for Europe’s many Turkey-skeptics to further dramatize the uncertainties and risks of Turkey’s European integration. In sum, as long as Turkey is presented as a factor of risk, it is doomed to remain a problem for Europe.

The other frequently-heard argument, that the value of the Turkey-EU relationship is already on full display today if one takes into account the important role that Turkey plays as an energy hub and as a vector of influence in the EU’s neighborhood, has a clear weakness as well. Inadvertently, it indirectly supports the case embraced by those EU member states, such as Sarkozy’s France, that have insisted for years that a privileged partnership between the EU and Turkey could maximize existing strategic cooperation while avoiding the costs and uncertainties of full integration through membership.



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Is the case for enlargement therefore irremediably lost? It is still premature to conclude so and much will, of course, depend not just on the evolving position of EU member states (many of which remain officially supportive of Turkey's EU membership), but also on how Turkey will choose to define its interests as the international environment evolves and its strategic ambition develops. In this context, the mere acknowledgment that the relationship has already undergone a significant transformation — at least as far as mutual perceptions are concerned — could probably help both Turkey and EU move beyond the current impasse and open a new honest dialogue on the respective stakes in the new context.

The idea of a “strategic dialogue” with Turkey was indeed launched last year by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, and has since then attracted an ever-larger number of supporters. As Ankara's position on Iran and its fraying relationship with Israel have not stopped causing concerns in Western capitals, a high-level discussion between the EU and Turkey on their respective strategic interests in the Middle East looks increasingly valuable. The current reshuffling of the regional order in North Africa and in the Middle East, moreover, only highlights the potential of a new EU-Turkey engagement aimed at coordinating diplomatic efforts to support the democratic transitions and identifying possible joint initiatives on the ground. This is an area in which the United States itself has a clear stake in seeing the maximum level possible of trilateral cooperation.

Unless this strategic dialogue manages to stimulate also a common broader reflection on the future of Europe, leading in time to a shared vision of the EU of tomorrow, it is very unlikely to re-energize the accession process. In fact, the dialogue could end up reinforcing the emerging view that the EU and Turkey have separate roles and interests, however convergent these may be in some cases, and that their paths will often cross but might never fully merge.

The risk is real that by engaging in a strategic dialogue the EU and Turkey will end up burying the accession process and consider each other as just partners. But are there any real alternatives at this point? It is becoming ever more apparent that through a complex interplay of moves and countermoves, the EU and Turkey have eventually arrived at an inescapable crossroads. The only way to see what lies beyond it is to try to cross it.

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