

In Brief: The recent EU-Turkey Summit may have revitalized EU-Turkish relations after years of inertia, but initial reactions in pro-EU circles have been tepid. There is instead an air of suspicion since the EU has broken promises before. The debate on the future form of the EU is heating up. Turkey is being reinvented as the guardian of the Western borders in exchange for financial aid and certain privileges, which is a major concern for all those who wish to see Turkey as a full member of a meaningful union with consistent values.

A New Episode in EU-Turkish Relations: Why so Much Bitterness?

by Özgehan Şenyuva and Çiğdem Üstün

The EU-Turkey Summit on November 29, 2015 has been described as a revitalization of EU-Turkish relations after years of inertia. Some very promising, concrete actions with associated timelines are mentioned in the summit conclusions, such as regular high-level meetings, the opening of new chapters, further dialogue in energy cooperation, and the upgrading of the customs union. The most attention is paid to the possibility of visa-free travel for Turkish citizens as early as 2016. This could be hailed as a new era in EU-Turkish relations, an end to the divergence period that began in 2004 and a new period of convergence that would bring the two parties together.

One would expect that such a major breakthrough would be greeted with enthusiasm in pro-EU circles in Turkey. But the initial reactions were tepid. There is an air of suspicion and disappointment among the most devoted Turkish advocates of Turkey's membership to the EU.

The promising outcomes of the summit are not a return to the concrete reforms Turkey undertook in recent years, or the improvements in Turkey's record of striving to meet membership requirements. On the contrary, the European Commission documented its criticism of Turkey's backsliding on fundamental issues such as human rights, freedom of speech,

and transparency in its 2015 progress report. Such a reboot is clearly not intended as an anchor for Turkey's democracy either, as it is utilizing conditionality moderately. Nor is it a result of the EU member states unified vision on the future of Europe. Certain members are reluctant about or even outright hostile to Turkey's membership.

Turkey has witnessed politics overtaking promises before. Therefore, there is a sense of doubt regarding both the opening of new chapters and the visa-free travel. The opening of new chapters is a token gesture if they cannot ever be closed because of the Cyprus issue. Also, there is no sign that member states such as France, which earlier vetoed Turkey's membership, has changed its mind. Visa liberalization, a grand gesture for many Turkish citizens, also has prerequisites, including Turkey lifting its geographical limitation to its ratification of the 1951 U.N. Convention on the Status of Refugees ("Refugee Convention"), which gives refugee status to those fleeing "events occurring in Europe." This is a clear deal breaker for Turkey, and is officially linked to the condition of full membership.¹

Turkey has witnessed politics overtaking promises before.

Security in Exchange for What?

Armed conflicts in some African countries, Afghanistan, and Iraq have sent migrants flowing into the European Union countries. Over the last two years, this situation has veered out of control with additional Syrian refugees trying to make it to Europe. The EU might find a solution by including and mobilizing Turkey.

1 An official document from the EU Ministry of Turkey clearly states that the geographical limitation will be lifted only after full EU membership is achieved. See T.C. AB Bakanlığı, Vize Serbestisi Diyalogu, <http://www.ab.gov.tr/files/stib/TR-ABVizeSerbestisi.pdf>

Although neither side has said so, the deal would be defined as the "triumph of the realpolitik."² It has been also argued that 2015 has been the year in which issues such as regional security, terrorism, and the flow of refugees heightened strategic thinking, a wake-up call to realism.³

In Turkey's relations with the West, the United States has been seen as the strategic partner while the EU has been more sensitive to human rights issues as well as democratization.⁴ However, the latest deal between the EU and Turkey highlights the importance of strategic geopolitics. Turkey's geopolitical significance has been the determining factor of Turkish foreign policy, except for the EU membership talks in which respect for human rights, freedom of speech, and minority rights have been the exigent items on the agenda. However, the following events have undermined the EU's role in Turkey's democratization process and disappointed EU supporters in the country: the postponement of the critical 2015 Progress Report until after Turkish parliamentary elections; German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Ankara before the elections to talk about a deal on refugees; and the obvious tit-for-tat strategy regarding the refugee crisis.

The statements of some EU officials have made matters worse. Take for example "This is what comes of political panic. We went to him on our knees, and now he is playing us."⁵ In his speech at the European Parliament, European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker highlighted the importance of strategic thinking by telling parliamentarians that the EU can harp on human rights and democratization issues in

2 Jean de Ruyt, "The EU - Turkey Summit of 29 November 2015: A 'Re-Energised' Relationship," <http://www.globalpolicywatch.com/2015/12/the-eu-turkey-summit-of-29-november-2015-a-re-energised-relationship/>

3 Samuel Doveri Vesterbye, "EU-Turkey: A Timely Starting Point," <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/eu-turkey-timely-starting-point-319604>

4 Michael Pizzi, "Turkey Compromise Signals EU 'Desperation' Over Refugees," <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/11/30/turkey-compromise-signals-eu-desperation-over-refugees.html>

5 Marc Pierini, former EU ambassador to Turkey, as quoted in Alex Barker, "Brussels Bows Deeply to Erdogan to Relieve Migrant Crisis," <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0410ec50-9113-11e5-bd82-c1fb87bef7af.html#axzz3sIHwMK1m>

Turkey “but we need to involve Turkey in our initiatives. We want to ensure that no more refugees come from Turkey into the European Union.”⁶

As Turkey is struggling in its relations with its southern neighbors and Russia (in which it put a lot of effort to increase trade, economic, and social ties as well as political relations in the last 15 years), the EU is once again a viable partner. However, under pressure from the economic and financial crisis together with the migration flow to Europe, the EU wants Turkey to act as the buffer zone to at least stop the migrants entering the EU borders. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party government are clearly willing to instrumentalize the migration card (and succeeding to a degree) as a leverage to improve the relations with the EU.⁷ However, while such initiatives put the EU back on the Turkish political agenda, they appear to be rather ineffective at consolidating and supporting democratization efforts in the country.

Debate on the Future of Europe and Turkey

Turkey’s role in the refugee crisis today may be compared to its role as a buffer zone within NATO during the Cold War. The summit conclusions indicate that Turkey is an important periphery country since the refugee inflow has caught the EU at a bad time. On one hand, the British are demanding EU reforms; on the other, further economic integration needs are putting the EU in a very difficult position regarding the future of the “ever closer union.” EU members also differ on how to deal with Russia regarding Ukraine and sharing the burden of refugees.

In this political and economic setting, the debate on the future form of the EU is heating up. Turkey

⁶ Raziye Akkoc, “EU Should Not ‘Harp On’ at Turkey about Human Rights, Says Jean-Claude Juncker,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11957432/EU-should-not-harp-on-at-Turkey-about-human-rights-says-Jean-Claude-Juncker.html>

⁷ Aykan Erdemir, “Erdoğan Gags Turkey,” <http://www.politico.eu/article/erdogan-gags-turkey-weapons-nationalist/>

is being reinvented as the guardian of the Western borders in exchange for financial aid and certain privileges, which is a major concern for all those who wish to see Turkey as a full member of a meaningful union with consistent values.

Emphasizing strategic threats and relations with regional countries has found its place in the EU’s new security strategy endeavors. The European Commission’s DG External Relations office highlights widespread conflicts, terrorism, infrastructural threats, and climate change as the main security threats for Europe in their report, *Towards a New European Security Strategy? Assessing the impact of changes in the global security environment*.⁸ The same document also calls for the EU to fully adapt to this volatile strategic environment and identifiable future threats. The EU’s new security strategy is expected to emphasize cooperation with NATO more than ever. These changing security concerns, together with possible structural changes in the EU, could point to a strategic partnership between Turkey and the EU instead of full membership.

Changing security concerns, together with possible structural changes in the EU, could point to a strategic partnership between Turkey and the EU instead of full membership.

It is believed that anything less than full membership would not be able to push for the conditionality clause, while strategic partnerships do not necessarily need democratization as a precondition. Turkey, as a

⁸ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/534989/EXPO_STU\(2015\)534989_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/534989/EXPO_STU(2015)534989_EN.pdf)

loyal NATO ally with geostrategic importance and the host of more than 2 million Syrian refugees, can easily be turned into a strategic partner at the periphery. The concerns about human rights and democracy in Turkey could become secondary as long as Turkey performs well as a partner in security, just as was the case during the Cold War when even military regimes were tolerated by the United States.

One has to understand the skepticism of those who treat the summit conclusions as a bitter pill coated with sugar. Losing the EU anchor at a time when it is so needed is a serious blow.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

About the Authors

Özgehan Şenyuva is an associate professor in the International Relations Department at Middle East Technical University, Ankara, where he works extensively on public opinion, Turkey-European relations and the politics of European football. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Çiğdem Üstün currently works in the Political Science and Public Administration Department of Gediz University, İzmir. She received her Ph.D. degree from Limerick University, Ireland.

About the On Turkey Series

GMF's On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and U.S. writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at www.gmfus.org/turkey.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org