

Analysis

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Summary: While France has decided to lift its veto on one of the chapters of EU accession negotiations with Turkey, chances are that the Turkey-EU relationship will continue to remain in a limbo. As a matter of fact, as the accession process restarts, narratives and trends shifting attention away from the nuts and bolts of membership talks may continue being developed. This may be the beginning of a promising new cycle, but not necessarily be any closer to Turkey becoming a member of the EU.

Turkey-EU Relations: Back to Basics?

by *Emiliano Alessandri*

Introduction

France's recent decision to lift the veto on one of the chapters of accession negotiations with Turkey which was previously unilaterally blocked — Chapter 22 on “regional policy” — has rightly raised many expectations. If followed by other gestures, such as a much-anticipated visit of President François Hollande to Turkey and the opening of further chapters, a sense of trust and constructive engagement between the European Union and Turkey could be reestablished.

Chances are, however, that even this long-awaited development will not fully return this complex relationship to what should have become its appropriate context since 2005: the accession process with its built-in demands, codified procedures, and clearly defined objectives. In recent years, the relationship has evidently developed above and beyond the confines of EU-related reforms, while at the same time, however, a conclusive and shared answer was not found to the underlying fundamental question of whether Turkey fully “belongs to Europe.”

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talks may keep being developed. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's recent visit to Turkey, for instance, powerfully expressed a willingness to re-engage with Turkey but equally left the German position unclear as to the final relationship between Turkey and Europe. We may be at the beginning of a promising new cycle, but not necessarily be any closer to Turkey becoming a member of the EU.

Evolving Narratives

As a result of the stalemate of accession negotiations and more meaningful developments in other areas, the debate on Turkey-EU relations has taken several detours since the late 2000s, becoming at once more political and less focused on the actual requirements and necessary conditions for membership.

Some interpreted deeper Turkish engagement in the Arab world, including with some of its most controversial actors, as Turkey shifting its axis, effectively turning its back on Europe and the West for the sake of new alliances and markets. For others, on the contrary, Ankara's activism in the Middle East provided evidence of its strategic value for Europe. The idea was indeed floated that Turkey's

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foreign policy assets could act as a catalyst for accession negotiations as a whole, and that a strategic imperative could somehow allow for a fast track to membership.

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The eurocrisis brought with it its own debates on Turkey-EU relations. A Turkish leadership faced with a domestic public opinion turned cold toward Brussels and ever more bullish about the country's own economic achievements did not resist underscoring a seeming historical nemesis: no longer Europe's sick man, Turkey had become its best hope. A narrative was proposed contrasting European decline with Turkish economic and strategic ascent. Conclusions drawn from this reading, however, were conflicting.

Some argued that Turkey simply did not need the EU anymore, non-membership having become almost a blessing in the face of European economic turmoil. Others instead contended that only Turkey could save the EU and the case for membership was never more compelling. While noting Turkey's fast growth, including an impressive bounce after the 2008-09 world's financial crisis, European friends of Turkey and Turkey-skeptics alike were alarmed by the almost hubristic new tone of the Turkish leadership, which seemed to have become unaware of the still significant interdependencies between the Turkish and European economies (much of trade and most of foreign investment remain EU-driven).

The eurocrisis also allowed for a new debate on possible alternatives to Turkey's EU membership, at least as traditionally understood. The prospect of an increasingly multi-tiered EU, with a tighter core headed toward fiscal integration under German leadership and a larger group of more loosely integrated members, led some to argue that Turkey could find a place in the latter grouping of this new EU.

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In a similar vein, the scenario of a British exit from the EU, or "Brexit," led some to imagine a future in which both the U.K. and Turkey — two allegedly not fully European countries with deep ties to the United States and an ambition to play a distinctive foreign policy role — would act almost as "gate keepers" respectively to Europe's West and East, participating in the common market but little of the rest. According to creative new formulas, both could become "virtual" or "associate" members of a reshaped EU.

Incidentally, these debates more or less inadvertently revived the notion of a "privileged partnership" between the EU and Turkey, a prospect that had been firmly rejected as offensive and unfair by Ankara after the start of membership talks.

Elusive Choices

Indeed, each of the above views and scenarios reflect salient realities of Turkey-EU engagement. Their contradictory elements and conflicting prescriptions powerfully reveal the essence of the relationship, which also happens to be its soft spot: its still largely unsettled character.

When it comes to EU countries, the question that is still without a firm answer is whether Turkey will have at least the option to become a full member of the EU provided that relevant conditions are met. Regardless of future EU governance structures or trajectories of rise and decline, EU member states would owe Turkey a response to the basic question of whether they would ever grant it the full benefits of European integration if such was the request.

This clarity is what all other nations that have become EU members have been given. EU members that have not joined the common currency, for instance, either could not meet the criteria or did not want to embark on the process. The level of their integration with the EU ultimately rested with objective parameters or national decisions, not other countries' preferences.

In the case of Turkey, EU member states have been split and seem to remain conflicted about it. Some, like Italy and Spain as well as the same U.K., have raised no major objections. Others, such as Germany, have focused on meeting the relevant legal criteria, emphasizing that *pacta sunt servanda*, while at the same time political elites remained divided, even sometimes within the same party



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or coalition of parties, about the final relationship between Germany and Turkey, and Turkey and the EU. Others still, in particular France, have had objections about the prospect of Turkey ever joining. Issues of identity (“Is Turkey European?”), power (“Will Turkey’s entry alter the EU’s internal balances to the detriment of earlier members”), and interest (the influence of Armenian communities in France) have all contributed to these reservations.

In this respect, the recent French decision to inject some new life into the accession negotiations is not yet in itself a strategic shift, although it undoubtedly signals an important change of policy not to be overlooked. It is reported that while not sharing the same negative views held by his predecessor, President Hollande has yet to fully make up his mind about Turkey. The idea for now, conveyed also by Merkel in her recent visit to Turkey, seems to be to create a new positive dynamic, largely to signal that the relationship with Turkey is too important for the EU to lose its influence on developments taking place within it, without committing to or prejudging any outcome.

In other words, the reactivation of accession talks does not seem to represent the culmination of a process of re-commitment on the part of leading Turkey skeptic EU members to the prospect of Turkey’s EU membership, but it is seen as contributing to help with this process to start and develop.

Much is said to depend not only on future dynamics in the EU, from the influence of Armenian Diasporas in the run up to the 100th anniversary of the massacre of Ottoman Armenians to possible evolutions in the Cyprus issue as Greek Cypriots go through leadership changes, but also on Turkey’s reaction, from the way EU membership could be reprioritized to the determination that could be shown toward resuming a EU-oriented reform process.

Mixed Signals

What has seemed to be increasingly missing in Turkey, however, is precisely a wide-felt sense that the EU remains if not the key driver, at least a central reference, for Turkey’s transformation. As a matter of fact, Turkey has showed signs of uneasiness with the idea of “Europeanization” in recent years.

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Although progress has been made in several areas, Turkey’s process of alignment with EU laws and standards is still very incomplete and interest in this goal seems to have weakened as political forces that once embraced the goal have become stronger and more self-reliant. Turkey is still finding its way, more often emphasizing a national Turkish way, including when it comes to the fundamental question of the nature of its political regime. In this respect, ongoing plans to overhaul the 1982 Constitution dating back to military rule are a key national as well as international test for Turkey.

As this issue is addressed, however, there are reasons for concern about which direction Turkey will take. Many have noted with alarm the weakening of checks and balances — a process that has resulted in ever more arbitrary and personalized rule of Turkish government leaders. Even though Turkey was able to resist the return of authoritarian tendencies that have marked much of its past, a not-so unlikely scenario could be a Republic that never fully develops into a pluralistic type of democracy firmly based on the separation of powers and the rule of law. This could create problems for Turkey’s European perspective. More critically, this increasingly self-absorbed Turkey could see little value in integrating into the EU even if it was given a chance.

As reforms may move Turkey forward but not necessarily closer to EU standards, political discourse is sending mixed, but for now mainly negative, signs. Turkey’s real or perceived rise has overall fed a more nationalistic spirit in recent years. Most recent difficulties, from a slowing economy to an aggravation of the Kurdish issue, from growing instability in the Arab neighborhood to more tense relations with Iran, is leading to some correction of course. But will a sense of greater vulnerability lead Turkey to a full reevaluation of the relationship with the EU? For now, the already significant strategic dialogue with the United States has been strengthened, but the EU connection has not been seen as equally essential. And even if this attitude were to change, the new engagement could be limited to foreign



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policy cooperation instead of fully encompassing the question of accession Turkey-EU re-engagement on Turkey's domestic reforms may simply not square with Turkish leaders' power ambitions, which could clash with European expectations about the requirements of Turkey's democratization.

As a matter of fact, what the recent French decision may hope to achieve is to kick the ball in Turkey's court, putting new pressure towards some form of clarification. But as domestic developments will continue to drive Turkey's international orientations, and as the attention of Turkish leaders focus on the upcoming presidential elections — the first ones to take place through popular vote — it seems far from certain that any of Turkey's major players will see the EU has a key concern or an important source of support. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's main preoccupation seems now to transform the Kurdish threat into an opportunity to consolidate and expand the coalition supporting its candidacy next year. That he will need the EU along that path is not to be fully excluded but far from clear either.

Optimists point to a possible alignment of stars whereby, in a not too distant future, changing attitudes within the EU, a re-appreciation of the "EU anchor" in Turkey, and, more critically, progress on the Cyprus issue could lead to a completely new context, finally conducive to Turkey's membership. For the time being, however, even as accession talks are re-activated, the relationship may not leave the limbo where it has been now for years. We may be indeed entering a time of intensified engagement between Turkey and the EU without by this effectively moving any closer to Turkey's EU integration.

About the Author

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