

Analysis

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Summary: Both the Turkish public and politicians seems to be more interested in joining the European Union in recent months. At the same time, Europe is skeptical of Turkey's overtures and waits to see if words will translate into actions in terms of political reforms. Turkish opposition leaders should use this opportunity to press forward on these reforms.

Turkey's Turn Toward the EU: Superficial or Real?

by *Diba Nigar Göksel*

Introduction

The *Transatlantic Trends 2014* survey reflects a swell of support for the EU in Turkish society. Meanwhile, in the last days of August, the top echelon of Ankara's ruling party also made more positive statements about Turkey's commitment to EU accession than they had in years. It seems the EU is making a comeback in Turkey. The reasons why will be decisive in whether Ankara merely takes cosmetic steps toward reforms, or accepts EU-style checks and balances. On the other hand, given the rise of Turko-skepticism in Europe, whether Turkey will be able to make a comeback in EU is an open question. In any case, it will be important to take advantage of this swell in Turkish support for the EU to temper Ankara's illiberal proclivities.

The EU is Back on the Turkish Agenda, but for the Right Reasons?

When he took the post of president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underlined that Turkey's march toward the EU would henceforth be more decisive. The cabinet announced on August 28 seems to reflect this intention too. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the new foreign minister, had been EU minister since December 2013. Prior to that, he was the president of the Parliamentary

Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). Volkan Bozkır, who took on the post of EU minister, is a former diplomat who served as permanent representative to the EU in Brussels. Bozkır gave all the right messages in his inauguration speech, pointing to the fact that Turkey needs to overcome its own deficiencies and internalize the *acquis* because the related prescriptions are beneficial to the Turkish people in every area of daily life. The program of the new government, announced by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, underlines the goal of EU membership more strongly than the previous government program had.

The intention of the government to improve relations with the EU corresponds with a more positive approach to EU membership among the Turkish public. For the first time in the past four years, which is the range of time *Transatlantic Trends* offers comparisons, more than half of Turkish citizens, 53 percent, say that Turkey's EU membership would be a good thing. The percentage of Turks with a favorable opinion of the EU, which was hovering in the mid 30s for the last few years, is 45 percent this year.

One reason for the interest in pursuing the EU track, both in the government

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and public opinion, is likely the realization that Turkey's leadership within the Muslim Middle East, a region now embroiled in sectarian conflict, cannot fulfil its expected promise. Security is a concern the public appears to share with authorities, as evidenced by the survey results. Of all the countries included in *Transatlantic Trends*, Turkey is the only one where terrorism tops the list of issues deemed most important for the country. (Twenty-four percent of Turks say this, while the next highest country, the United States, is at 4 percent). Moreover, this year's results had the highest number of Turks saying NATO is essential for Turkey since 2005 (49 percent). Needless to say, the support of Western partners is crucial to protect Turkey from the hard security threats in the neighborhood. This year's increase in Turks' interest in cooperating with EU countries on international matters is likely related to this. While a plurality still prefers that Turkey act alone, 28 percent now opt for cooperating with the EU; over the past five years, the highest percentage reached in response to this question was 22.

From the perspective of the ruling elite, the returns of stoking division in society and bashing the EU have maxed out. To restore investor confidence in Turkey's direction, and thus sustain economic growth, commitment to a predictable EU accession course is important. Moreover, it will be necessary to gain approval from a broader segment of society than just the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKParty) constituency in order to pass a new constitution next year.

This year, 50 percent of respondents who said that they do not approve of the government's foreign policy also said that EU membership would be a good thing for Turkey, up from 38 percent last year. The correlation of disapproval for

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the government's foreign policies and the increase in the support for EU membership suggests that support for EU membership has risen more among government critics. For Turkish citizens worried about the ever-lessening checks and balances in the country, EU conditionality is essentially the only force left to perform this role.

As long as the government and its critics can unite around the objective of EU membership, do the reasons even matter? And can Ankara's top team convince cynical constituencies that they have turned over a new leaf — yet again?

Commitment to the EU track entails accepting a Western/liberal democracy, not simply voting arithmetic. This commitment includes curbs on executive power, judiciary independence, transparency in public spending and public procurement, and freedom of speech — not only on paper, but also in practice. Pro-European statements emanating from Ankara are still drowned out by the echo of the accusations voiced by the now-president against his critics, so skepticism abounds.

The European Perspective — Can Turkey Make a Comeback?

EU member state publics were never very welcoming of Turkey's membership, but *Transatlantic Trends* results depict a further drop in Turkey's favorability among EU societies. Turkey's favorability is 10 points lower this year in the EU9 (31 percent) than it was on average for the past four years. This is not surprising given that Europeans have watched an angry Turkish leader bash the EU consistently, and yet receive more than half the votes. Notably in Germany, while 46 percent told *Transatlantic Trends* that they were either favorable or somewhat favorable of Turkey last year, this figure was down to 23 percent in the 2014 survey.

Trust of Ankara among European leaders has also arguably deteriorated. Incidents in the eastern and southern neighborhoods have consolidated doubts. The Ankara leadership has not spoken up for European values in the wider Black Sea region, and in the south, it has left the impression of prioritizing the Muslim brotherhood cause above all other solidarities.



Analysis

There has been relative quiet on the European side about Turkey in the past year. Most noticeably, Turks have not heard negative statements about Turkey's membership prospects from the leaders of Germany and France. This may have helped boost EU-related morale in Turkey. But this quiet on the EU front cannot necessarily be attributed to more positive proclivities regarding Turkey's inclusion in the EU. The incentive to voice negative positions about Turkey may have dipped because European leaders have been consumed with regional problems such as those emanating from Moscow, intimidated by the potential of erratic reactions of Ankara politicians, and faced with fewer internal EU arguments in favor of Turkey's membership that they need to react to.

In moving forward, when presented with a more soft-spoken Turkish government and a president speaking of the virtues of a new constitution and a solution to the Kurdish problem, will hearts and minds in Europe shift in Turkey's favor?

While Ankara can boast that Turkey is now a power that has to be reckoned with, being a power that can be trusted is another story. It will also not go unnoticed that the support for acting with the EU or with the United States in international affairs among Turkish society is almost as low as that within Russian society, according to *Transatlantic Trends*.

Of course, its Western partners will encourage Turkey to take the steps required for EU membership, to solve the Kurdish problem, and to remain a part of transatlantic structures rather than adventuring into alliances with other powers in its region. But, like critics in Turkey, Europeans are also wary of the fact that embracing the EU today could very well be a tactical move on the part of a Turkish government that needs to reduce tension and restore confidence now, but that this embrace could be followed by a slap when circumstances shift.

Conclusion

For the first decade of AKParty rule, European supporters of Turkey gave the benefit of the doubt to the Turkish government at every critical juncture. Now, the AKParty cadres do not have this. More than ever since negotiations for membership began, Turks with legitimate concerns about their government have the ear of European counterparts. A reinvigoration of the EU process can thus empower

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human rights activists, excluded minorities, investigative journalists, victims of selective justice, and those targeted by politically motivated witch-hunts. The lessening of vulnerability felt by such segments of society will be a litmus test for the EU in evaluating Ankara's commitment to turning a new page.

However, this will not yield results unless the EU offers enough for the Turkish leadership and majority to gain from. There needs to be a viable membership prospect, conditioned on performance. A visa-free travel regime and more extensive student exchange programs can also help to spread the appeal of the EU, which will increase pressure on Turkish authorities to stick to the necessary reform process.

Recent elections in Turkey have revealed that the main opposition party needs a positive agenda to mobilize the public. The Republican People's Party (CHP) is arguably the party that has been left without cohesive turf on the playing field of Turkish politics over the past decade. The EU acquis offers a concise roadmap for CHP to adopt as its guiding principle. The CHP should appoint a shadow EU negotiator, and consistently hold the government accountable for EU prescriptions that are not met. This will put the government in a position to actually deliver on its promise of stepping up EU accession, and appeal to the Turkish constituencies who obviously carry this expectation.



Analysis

Critics suspect that embracing more positive leanings toward the EU could very well be merely a stepping stone for the ruling authorities in Turkey to restore imperial Turkic and Ottoman glory, or a tactical move to further consolidate their power for the extension of their immunity. Reasons aside, it is up to opposition parties and the EU to use this opportunity to lock Turkey into the implementation of reforms for sustainable Europeanization.

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About the Author

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