



Turkey–EU Relations: Dysfunctional Framework, Status Anxiety

By Galip Dalay

Not a day goes by without a news article or public comment on the weakening of Turkey–European relations. Debates surrounding the topic have moved into a space where feelings are high and logic is largely withdrawn. Now, we need to define the root causes behind this crisis, taking into account both the Europe-centric and the Turkey-centric views that attempt to explain the deterioration of the relations. Examining these two accounts and adopting a larger view of the relations reveals that the framework of Turkey–EU relations are dysfunctional, and also inter-twined with Turkey’s relationship with the West as a whole.

In European capitals, negative or hostile attitudes toward Turkey have been legitimized on the basis of a regression in the quality of Turkish democracy and deterioration of its human rights record. This view does not only problematize developments in Turkey’s domestic political context but it also chastises its foreign policy trajectory. Turkey’s foreign policy preferences or decisions have not been analyzed within the geopolitical context of the country or its realpolitik imperatives. Rather, there is a tendency that overemphasizes the role of identity — the Islamic identity — in driving Turkish foreign policy. Most of Turkey’s foreign policy decisions that are arguably motivated by factors other than identity have been portrayed as Turkey’s search for a new geopolitical identity and positioning, which is implicitly or explicitly understood as Turkey turning away from its centuries-old European — Western orientation. In such a reading, the multipolar nature

of the Turkish foreign policy is being simply framed as a shift of axis for the country. The shift of axis has come to represent a shift of Turkey’s identity away from Europe and the West. This approach is problematic and reductionist.

On the other hand, if we put historical and ideological justifications/animosity to one side, the anti-Western sentiment that has risen in Turkey over recent years has been based on the perception that the West is continually carrying out operations against Turkey. Most Turks believe that the West (meaning the United States and NATO) had a hand in the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. This perception cuts across sociopolitical lines at the societal level. Turkish government circles regard the West and Europe as being free from compassion when it comes to the security challenges and threats it is facing from neighboring Syria and Iraq, and in confronting the multiple terrorist groups within and outside of its borders. Western apathy toward Turkey or its inability to show solidarity with its people in the aftermath of coup attempt has only deepened public suspicion of the West. This has reduced the ability for Europe to have the moral high ground and credibility to criticize Turkey for its post-coup policies and purges — particularly in response to the ongoing state of emergency.

Though containing some elements of truth, these two approaches gloss over the fundamental issue that has rendered these relations very tense: the framework of the relationships. From this perspective, both



readings are the product of reductionist viewpoints. Democracy and secularism have been the important glue for relations between Turkey and the West, and an integral part of the evolution of relations. These two aspects allowed political and values-based common ground. They also played an important role in the development of joint conceptual sets and the formation of common reference points.

However, Turkish–Western relations cannot be confined to the debate on or dispute over the quality and health of Turkish democracy and secularism. They are the core ingredient for Turkey’s relations with the West, particularly with Europe, but apparently not sufficient factors to solve the underlying simmering tensions in these relations. The fact that Turkey has glaringly failed on these necessary conditions in recent years has rendered the debate on the sufficient factors and conditions to deal with the root-cause of this tension as frivolous. Moreover, the political picture that has emerged recently has obscured the view of the fundamental factors that have tainted the state of Turkish–European relations.

This does not free Turkey of blame for the deterioration in Turkish–European relations. It is clear that Turkey is regressing on all issues of democratization, reform, good governance, transparency, and institutionalization. For the West, Turkey’s geopolitical position has always been as important as, if not more important than, its secular and democratic character. On many instances, Turkey’s real estate value has trumped its adherence to democracy and fundamental freedoms. Some positive momentum in this area could reduce the level of tensions, but will not solve the framework problem.

In the reverse of this picture, the attempt to account for the deterioration of Turkish–European relations only in terms of democratic backsliding will have difficulty in answering why Turkey’s EU membership process ran aground around 2005–2007. Pundits and analysts on Turkey–EU relations tend to depict 2002–2007 as the golden period of the relations, whereas recent years are presented as the period during which Turkey’s EU prospects more or less

came to an end. The first part of this depiction is largely true, while the second part is problematic at best.

AK Party’s first term in power, 2002–2007, can comfortably be depicted as one of the most reformist eras in the history of the Turkish Republic. This reformism was rewarded by the EU by starting the membership negotiations with Turkey in 2005. But joy for a new phase in relations soon fizzled out after German Chancellor Merkel and then French President Sarkozy came to power. Instead of Turkey’s democratic deficiency, both leaders rejected the prospect of Turkey’s EU membership from an identity-centric perspective. Therefore, putting Turkey’s democracy back on track would reduce tension, but it is unlikely to have any real impact on Turkey’s EU membership process

The issue of framework is also tightly linked with Turkey’s status anxiety in its engagement with Europe, which almost continuously triggers crises in the relations. Starting from the later periods of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has a nearly 200-year history of seeing the West as a reference point. Following the World War II, these relations also began taking on a strong institutional basis. Turkey has always tried to find a place in both intergovernmental and supranational Western institutions. This was not merely an attempt based on normative considerations: there were very real economic, security, and political reasons. However, during this process there was a very well-defined quality to the relationships, which took place in the form of a teacher (West) and student (Turkey) relationship. The systematic and hierarchical nature of the “emulator” and the model “to be emulated” was always clear. This obviously created a hierarchy in Turkish–Western relations. For a long time, Turkey implicitly or explicitly accepted this for several reasons. First, Turkey (or Ottoman Empire in its later period) felt and was weak vis-à-vis the West. Second, during this period, Turkey saw the world as being almost exclusively Western-centric. Third, Turkey saw the West as its normative as well as material destination. Fourth, acceptance of a relationship of hierarchy came with a package of benefits for Turkey in the form of providing security and economic advantages. Fifth, acceptance and

compliance meant further rewarding which seemed to be credible back then, as was the case with Turkey's NATO membership.

This has changed in recent decades. First, Turkey thinks that to some extent the gap in the asymmetry of power between the sides has relatively declined. Second, Turkish political elites, rightly or wrongly, do not seem to regard the West as the center of power, rather seeing it as one center of power among the emergence of many others. Turkish government circles believe that this increases the prospect of autonomy for Turkey in international affairs, but particularly in its relations with the West. Third, the West's ability to set norms is decreasing. The Western double standards internally and externally have had their fair share in such a weakening of the West's global normative standings. Fourth, further compliance with the EU acquis does not guarantee the ultimate and final prize of membership (as was the case with Turkey's NATO membership). Such a lack of credibility lessens the influence of the EU over Turkey.

As a corollary, Turkey has sought parity with major European powers (Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) in recent years, if not decades. The current framework of relations does not seem to be conducive for addressing Turkey's status anxiety in Europe or vis-à-vis major European powers.

The Western alliance is still the most important and strongest alliance system for Turkey. None of the other networks of relations that Turkey has contain the potential to replace it. However, for these relationships to be placed back on a healthy track, Turkey's quest for status must be solved within an appropriate functioning framework. Although, the recently fashionable transactionalism – particularly which immediately denotes the downgrading of the importance of political and democratic aspects or requirements of the relations – is not fit to sort out the crisis of framework in Turkish–European relations. In addition to being feasible and tangible, any new framework should still be meaningful and comprehensive, and include a strong political and democratic component to it. However, it does not

seem possible to devise such a functional framework anytime soon that will also satisfy Turkey's status anxiety.

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