

Turkey-EU Relations:

Agency, Expectations, and the Need for a Healthier Discourse

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(Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

There is a vertigo of information that exists on the subject of European Union (EU) – Turkey relations, and a pressing need to foster constructive dialogue against those that seek to do otherwise. In this commentary, points of change and continuity are discussed in order to help foster a more thoughtful dialogue. The EU’s membership mechanism and the principle of political solidarity, as well as Turkey’s long-established motivations, are some of the main points considered in this brief overview.

Introduction: Change and Continuity

There is a vertigo of information that exists on the subject of European Union (EU) – Turkey relations, and a pressing need to foster constructive dialogue against those that seek to do otherwise. It is prudent too to seek historical precedent and reflexive assessments to be able to best judge the nature of the contemporary state of affairs and to improve relations. The EU's relationship with Turkey is most-often seen through the prism of its membership accession process, which has been made all the more difficult by developments that lie beyond the remit of the negotiations but nevertheless come back to affect them. The on-going but now more internationalised Cyprus Problem, the various and in some cases heightened geopolitical rivalries and competitions of both Turkey and certain EU members that inescapably inform the wider EU-Turkey relationship, as well domestic dynamics both in Turkey and the Union itself, are all points of significance to be considered. There are numerous moving pieces, and it is certainly difficult to find a winning alignment all-round. However, rather than resigning ourselves to "[running around in circles](#)" and expressing frustration without solutions, there is a need to highlight fundamentals that will need to change for differing results. In other words, expectation management is key.

For example, due to the membership set-up of the EU, the principle of political solidarity will always be there to be honoured between EU member states. Thus, for the EU as an "impartial broker", as Turkey would like when it comes to Greece and the Greek-Cypriots will most likely falter, especially when it comes to public displays of solidarity. Embitterment on the Turkish side emboldens those sceptical of the Union when the situation is perceived as an unconditional carte blanche for members of the EU, where membership implies the duality of a member state being entirely right, and the opposing non-EU member being entirely wrong. This view is then promulgated in the public sphere, whereas in reality conflicts and disagreements are never that simple. Responsibility always lies with both sides. To portray otherwise emboldens one side over the other, reducing the space for compromise. Behind closed doors, the reality of the conflict may indeed be well known, but any public reprimand may then be understood and interpreted through the rhetoric of EU division and internal weakness. Still, the EU has also said that as it concerns the maritime boundary dispute between Turkey and Greece, that it has never subscribed to any map, and has always called for bilateral discussions and solutions to maritime boundary issues. It is therefore prudent for Turkey to be aware of the structural bind the EU may find itself in, although one certainly wishes that member states would not utilise the principle of solidarity in a manner that may perpetuate a conflict and cause public embitterment on the other side.

This paper attempts to elucidate such points of change and continuity to help assess and to effectively prescribe policy-making endeavours going forward. This in turn may help to ground discussions in more thoughtful, contemplative discourse with an equally more measured public diplomacy free of anger, fear, and frustration, incited in respective publics. Bearing in mind that there will likely always be some resistance to Turkey's EU accession, the eye must be kept on the prize, where enhanced and sustained relations would be a major geopolitical investment for both Turkey and the EU, crystallised if ever Turkey finally joined the Union. In any case, the interrelationship between the two will always be there, their geographies, pasts, and futures will be intertwined in numerous ways, and so it is up to the most responsible and prudent voices to lead the way.

Strands of Continuity

The EU is a great power of our age. the Union remains enviable across a number of developmental indicators and to where Turkey's own quest with regards to development, modernisation, and democratisation, to a degree, has often been hinged. Though not a direct reference to the Union itself, the Turkish President has [recently expressed](#) that "We see ourselves in Europe, not anywhere else, and we want to build our future with Europe". At the same time, echoing similar rhetoric that Turkish statespersons have said before, the President expressed that "we cannot afford to turn our back on either the East or the West". Discourse should not be limited to such grand and static spatial categories that tend to obscure both the continuity and change between them, amplifying perhaps at times difference while minimising similarity. Turkey is a rising middle power that enjoys a unique geostrategic position in the world which can be both a position of strength and a point of weakness. Turkey has also been presented with challenges that no member of the EU, no country on the European continent, and no member of NATO, faces. Turkish democracy will have to continue to develop and mature, despite the challenges it faces and the bemusement, sometimes even the hostility, of those who do not quite believe the reality of the trials the Republic has faced, such as the struggle against the PKK, in which then, in turn, will have repercussions on governance and policy-making that may seem wholly incomprehensible from the outside. The denial of Turkey's agency and points of contestation in the past that display long-standing currents within Turkish political discourse, in favour of a statist conception of the country possibly helped by notions of isolationism associated with the early Republic, help to stutter a more constructive reading of the country. As illuminated briefly by [Pope and Göksel](#) (2020) for Chatham House, and drawing on an otherwise interesting article from the [Texas National Security Review](#) perhaps let down by what could have been a more direct acknowledgement of the role the Gülen cult in the 2016 coup, (a fact nigh-on wholly acknowledged across the Turkish political spectrum), there are plenty of points that both Turkish and EU officials can ponder upon a more

effective reading of dominant perceptions, as well as expectations going forward.

There are then interesting parallels with the discursive pool used in both Turkish domestic and foreign policy to consider, with concepts that in their essence stretch back to the recorded history of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century. How much of that discourse associated with geopolitical reality then reflects the introspection within Turkish geopolitics today, given an EU-accession process many have been given reason to be sceptical of, is worthy of attention. Take for example the global geopolitical turmoil at the end of the Cold War understood to have led to “an intense period of soul-searching, assessing alternative geostrategic options such as pan-Turkism or regional leadership in the Middle East”, as [Narbone and Tocci](#) (2007) assert. These discourses are not new. Notions of “pan-Ottomanism, Pan-Islamism, Pan-Turkism, and Westernism” ([Demirdağ 2005](#)), were prevalent in 19th Century Ottoman discourse, variously mobilised and valued by different sections of society with an eye to the geopolitical developments of the day, especially when the Ottoman Empire felt on the back foot or felt the potential for development was to be found elsewhere.

It seems also that the idea of the “terrible Turk” that was prevalent for centuries sometimes seems as though it has never gone away. The idea of the Turk who is prone to wanton violence and cruelty has been around for many years, during the Crusades from the 11th Century, through the years of the Ottoman Empire, when parts of Christian Europe seemed to live in fear of an attack by the Turks and subjugation by Muslims. The idea is still around today. In a speech made in July this year by the EU’s top diplomat Josep Borrell, while addressing the members of the European Parliament during a discussion about current disputes with Turkey, Borrell said that: “On this floor today a somewhat bellicose dimension has flown over, at some point I almost seemed to see the reappearance of Pope Pius V calling on the Holy Alliance against Turkey and mobilizing the fleets of Christendom to face the Ottoman invasion. I do not have the vocation of [Neville] Chamberlain [former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom] or [Édouard] Daladier [former Prime Minister of France], but neither of Don Juan de Austria [admiral of the Holy Alliance fleet at the Battle of Lepanto]. If you are looking for a Juan de Austria do not look at me, because that belongs to another era in history”. It has often been easier to view disputes involving Turkey - such as Libya, Cyprus or hydrocarbons in the East Mediterranean - in those terms, a sort of uncontrollable desire for war and to expand rather than looking at the details of the issues in question.

At the same time, no state or supranational structure is a mutually exclusive power container, and there will inevitably be relations beyond borders that are entirely innoc-

uous, commercial and civilian, and need not be immediately and always received cynically as an insidious form of power projection, revisionism, justified or otherwise. The reasons for such subjectivity need to be elucidated as and when they arise. That is not to say that Turkey, or any country for that matter, pursues its interests as a matter of statecraft. What does need to happen is for those interests to be best served under an EU or enhanced US-Turkey relationship, and for any construction of the “other side” as the perfect aggressor to be probed for the interests that are served by such discourse.

In an interview with officials from the Turkish Foreign Ministry – Directorate of EU Affairs, it was explained that:

“From a wider perspective, the relations between Turkey and the EU are going far beyond the accession process. Having a close relationship with the EU is one of the fundamental aspects of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey is a part of Europe and member of almost all European institutions including among many others the Council of Europe and the NATO. Thus, and naturally, Turkey, as a part of Europe, has to be in the EU. However, the vision of Turkish foreign policy has a global view of all the regions and partners around us. While keeping our main path to the West, we are not limiting our external relations to specific geographies. Turkey has developed a globally extensive network of cooperation. Turkey maintains close ties with the countries in the Balkans, Middle East, North Africa, Southern Caucasus and South and Central Asia as well as deepening African partnership policy and expanding the scope of its outreach policies to Latin America, the Caribbean and the Asia-Pacific. In this context, Turkey follows a responsible, constructive, and multidimensional foreign policy”¹.

“Westernism” has a long history in the Turkish Republic, however, today it should perhaps be understood as being synonymous with the drive to enter the European Union. Though, as an official from the Turkish Directorate for EU Affairs said in an interview that “for a while, we [have been] going through a period of stagnation in negotiations but this we believe is a temporary situation. Still, the EU membership goal is Turkey’s strategic priority. Turkey is determined to proceed with the accession process despite all setbacks”². Throughout history since “[...] even at the most difficult moments” assert Narbone and Tocci (2007), “Turkey never abandoned its rhetorical goal of moving closer to the Community [European Economic Community - (EEC)]. The object of that rhetoric is now, of course, the EU rather than the EEC, with some success yet many obstacles in the process. It suffices to say that a cyclical relationship has existed across time between Turkey and the EU, the exact drivers of which merit clear reckoning. Consequentially, “EU decisions have profoundly affected the pace and form of Turkey’s domestic developments”, which is not to distract in the slightest from what Turkey

¹ Interview with an official from the Turkish Foreign Ministry – Directorate for EU Affairs (16/09/20).

² (ibid.).

can and should do in what is a two-way street, a complex interrelationship often the target of rhetorical spats and knee-jerk conjectures. EU decisions can also “unwittingly legitimise conservative and nationalist forces, by awakening dormant Turkish fears about the EU’s unwillingness to accept Turkey into its club” (ibid.), which may then slow or reverse desired reforms.

Then, of course, are developments that go beyond the accession process themselves but come back to inform it, such as the Cyprus Problem. In an interview, Turkish officials have reasoned that:

“Turkey’s EU accession process has not proceeded as it ought to be. The process has been facing resistance, led particularly by certain member states for their own national interests against common European interests. Even when relations were at their best, half of the chapters were blocked for purely political reasons. Today 14 chapters are still blocked due to the Cyprus Problem, inherited by the EU in 2004 and for the same reason, no chapter can be closed. [...]. From our perspective, the Cyprus issue and Turkey’s EU accession process are two separate issues³”.

Domestic Terrorism

During the 1980s and 90s, when discussions regarding Turkish membership in the EU began to intensify, one of the main concerns of Brussels was that the political system in Turkey was too dominated by an overbearing military prone to intervening according to its own dictates. Following the failed coup in 2016, and a reorganisation of the military, very few people are likely to argue the military is still in the same position of power now, whereas before the military would routinely engage in coup d’états, and whence, in the run-up to the coup, infiltration of the military by the Gülen cult (FETÖ) occurred. But it is also clear that the current system in Turkey, where the military is no longer dominant, and the President has become the head of state and government, is still not satisfactory to the EU given the various issues of the Presidential system in the eyes of its critics however justified it was to its supporters. And even though the military no longer has its dominant position, it still has not changed how Turkey views the PKK. The issue of the PKK and how it is dealt with is not specific to President Erdogan. It has been the aim of many Turkish governments over the years to ‘finish’ the PKK for good.

Turkey is also in a situation where it feels it is regularly criticised by EU politicians about its PKK operations but is not really offered any solutions. The PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by the EU, and there are annual reports by Europol, the EU’s law enforcement agency, giving details of the PKK’s operations in Europe. However, Ankara feels that Brussels is doing little to stop it. This year’s Europol report says: “Europe continues to be used by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as a base to support its activities in Turkey”.

In tandem, one of the major disputes of recent years has been the issue of visa liberalisation. The EU and Turkey started talks on the issue in 2013, intending to try to eliminate the need for Turks to acquire a visa if they want to travel to the Schengen area (which largely corresponds with the EU) for short visits. According to the refugee deal (or statement) between the two sides in March 2016, the process was to be accelerated with the aim of lifting the visa requirements by the end of June that year. Turkey has been criticised by European politicians for its anti-terrorism laws being too wide and draconian. As such, Turkey has also been under pressure in recent years to change its anti-terrorism laws. A Visa Liberalisation Roadmap was started with the EU in 2013 whereby Turks would be able to obtain Schengen visas to visit Europe, as long as Turkey was able to satisfy 72 conditions relating mainly to government policy and laws. The EU says six have still not been satisfied, the most well-known of which is: “Turkey needs to revise its legislation and practices on terrorism in line with European standards, notably by better aligning the definition of terrorism in order to narrow the scope”. However, in an online discussion organised by Turkey’s Foreign Economic Relations Board earlier this year, the Turkish government’s director of EU affairs, Faruk Kaymakcı, made a plea for understanding. “Turkey cannot be expected to have the same anti-terrorism laws as Luxembourg”, he said. Turkey is currently battling both the PKK and Daesh, both terrorist groups recognised by the EU, and also FETÖ; a situation which Luxembourg clearly is not.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has frequently said that no other NATO ally has suffered more terrorist attacks than Turkey. Ankara is also trying to deal with the Gülen cult, known in Turkey as FETÖ, which is held responsible for the failed coup attempt of 2016. The EU does not recognise it as a terrorist group, another point of difference between the two sides.

2016 Onwards

The March 2016 refugee deal raised hopes in Turkey that progress could be made on certain issues, namely visa liberalisation and the accession process. The deal effectively made sure that Europe could park the refugee issue in Turkey. This was not a vote winner in Turkey. When Turkey’s then prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu signed a refugee deal with the EU in March 2016, it looked like it might signal the start of a new period of relations. Turkish officials considered the 18 March 2016 statement to be a useful framework to revive accession negotiations and to put Turkey-EU relations back on track⁴. Turkey agreed to continue looking after Syrian refugees, to stop them crossing the border to Europe and in return Ankara was to get more than six billion dollars to help alleviate the plight of the refugees in the country, as well as what looked like a rejuvenation of its EU membership bid. It included an ac-

³ (ibid.).

⁴ Interview with an official from the Turkish Foreign Ministry – Directorate for EU Affairs (16/09/20).

celeration of the visa liberalisation roadmap so Turkish citizens could easily visit Europe, the opening of new chapters in its membership bid and new hope for an update of the Customs Union, a major trade treaty between the two sides from 1995. However, four months later on July 15, the failed coup attempt happened - and relations still have not recovered. By 2018, the EU declared: "Turkey's accession negotiations have therefore effectively come to a standstill and no further chapters can be considered for opening or closing and no further work towards the modernisation of the EU-Turkey Customs Union is foreseen." The EU's top diplomat at the time, Federica Mogherini, posted a tweet in which it was not immediately clear which side she was on. "In constant contact with EU Delegation in Ankara and Brussels from Mongolia. Call for restraint and respect for democratic institutions", she said. It was four hours later and her third tweet on the subject before there was full support for the "democratically-elected government of Turkey". A few days later there was a statement from the EU saying it fully expects the Turkish authorities to respect, under any circumstances, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, a statement that Turkey has come to consider as a hindrance to its efforts to round up members of the Gülen cult, a group that had managed over the years to infiltrate large numbers of positions in the state bureaucracy and military. It is not difficult to see how something which has been labelled 'Sevres Syndrome' might come into play during this heated situation. This is the feeling in Turkey that dates back to the 1920 Treaty of Sevres when the victorious countries in the First World War effectively carved up most of what is modern-day Turkey between themselves. It was only overturned in 1923 following the War of Independence, where the Turkish forces were led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The idea that other countries are out to undermine Turkey is something that is still commonly held in Turkey to this day. But this so-called syndrome is not something peculiar to the Turkish president - it has been present in Turkey in one form or another for the past 100 years.

Toward a Conclusion: The Need to Curtail a Toxic Discourse

There is no better way to misread or misconstrue something as complex as an entire country, its domestic and foreign policies, its history, culture, and possible future trajectory than to reduce and abstract it all to any form of singularity. A leader may accentuate certain predilections or well-established discourses, embody them, become the face of them, and that is where the debate can and should lie. However, all of this must be carefully weighed against the issues that utterly transcend any particular leader at any given moment in time. Major examples include the history of Turkey's EU accession process, the Cyprus Problem (which is at least half a century old) or matters of existen-

tial concern to the Turkish state itself which tend to unite the country in the realm of foreign policy despite domestic polarisation.

In [an interview with TRT World](#) this year, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said from his experience there were countries in the EU that did not want Turkey to become a member - but they never said that to its face. From our own conversations with officials, it is clear that some EU representatives do not get along with the current Turkish government and are unwilling to reach out. Instead, they appear to be sitting tight and waiting for a government more to their liking to come along. But some of the issues are not specific to President Erdogan, like Cyprus and the East Mediterranean, or the PKK. They have been around long before he came to power and after he is gone, they could still be around. And by that time, the EU may still not have got Turkish government that is more to their liking, or we enter into another cycle that may or may not be advantageous for all in the long run.

"[Negotiations with Turkey should not be ended](#)", wrote the former German Ambassador to Turkey Martin Erdmann, at a time of high tension when both the Cyprus Problem, the encroachment of Middle East geopolitics into the Cyprus question and thereon the European Union, coupled with the proliferation of maritime boundary disputes further West between Greece and Turkey. "We may want to activate them a few years later, but it will not be possible then." Elsewhere, Mr. Erdman had little to say in a laundry list of accusations [published elsewhere](#), that would do little to foster any form of mutual understanding. Gunboat diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean can be criticised, but the process unto why gunboat diplomacy was used would be the wiser realm of critique, coupled with a reckoning between the weaponisation of refugees, or the generator of the refugees themselves in Syria and the lack of European action on that front. The critique of what Erdmann has called a "bizarre one-sided drawing of sea borders in violation of the international law of the sea in the Eastern Mediterranean", is Turkey's general complaint from its perspective, and one might hope the realisation that a shared grievance (related to frustration at the impression that one side of the other is being wholly unreasonable for example), is present might help foster a modicum of sympathy. As Mr. Erdmann suggests, the list goes on, but for Turkey too. The very heartfelt sense of ostracisation (not to be dismissed as mere "perception"), and the weaponization of both natural gas at the negotiating table in Cyprus and with regards to EU membership, have helped create a crisis. For Turkey, the one positive result was the recent rebuttals by both European and American authorities of the so-called "Seville Map" earlier this year, to the effect that the map is "not the official document of the EU", and where the US "does not consider the Seville Map to have any legal significance". The war of words, however, is not over yet, with implicit binaries to the effect that one side has always



Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu (R) meets with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias (L) within the "Turkey's Role in Regional and Global Security" panel of the Bratislava Global Security Forum (GLOBSEC) in Bratislava, Slovakia on October 08, 2020. (Fatih Aktaş - Anadolu Agency)

been conciliatory and the other side wholly unreasonable and intransigent liable to be implied. If it were indeed the case that one side had never explicitly or implicitly stood by what are now clarified as "initial" claims in the Eastern Mediterranean, as if they had been unalterable assertions over the years, (given also the high public passions and use of such claims to deride other stakeholders), if indeed the language was always conciliatory, then the conflict over contested maritime boundaries would never have escalated to the degree that it has. The counter-maps created by Turkey are now under the spotlight, and not the genealogy of the conflict that problematises binaries between light and dark, good and evil, in their various forms.

"The Cyprus issue continues to be one of the main obstacles in Turkey's accession negotiations. 14 chapters are still blocked due to the Cyprus problem and for the same reason, no chapter can be closed. Moreover, the Cyprus issue negatively spills over the promising areas of Turkey-EU co-operation like foreign policy, energy, security, and economy. [...] It is also true that some circles prefer to hide behind the Greek Cypriot veto against Turkey. But this minority cannot stand against a Turkey which fulfils the membership criteria and come close to membership point⁵".

Recent rhetoric from French President Macron only served to unite Turkey, and the failure to read the country's more transcendent concerns, issues that concern the state and its interests no matter who is at the helm, only fosters further unity especially in the foreign policy sphere. All of this can easily be brushed aside simply as "the propaganda story of the Ankara leadership about the 'enemies of Turkey'",

to a mind that can dismiss wholesale otherwise legitimate points of concern perhaps overshadowed at times by the general emotive atmosphere of mistrust.

From a logical standpoint, if there are transcendent concerns they will not end with a change in leadership. The definition of problems in this way can perhaps encourage a longer-term outlook, but at the same time reductive focus on leadership has the potential to be counterproductive. If the various tit-for-tats that have been seen are also driven by deeper geopolitical rifts, historical divisions, and pathologies of fear and mistrust, it is best to have the international community induce partners such as Greece and Turkey to finally sit down at the negotiating table and solve the bilateral dispute sooner rather than later.

Rather like the Cyprus Problem, to wait and see for favourable developments is the path of least resistance that may very well drag out the process or encourage bolder action. Turkey will remain "our neighbour, partner, and anchor of stability in one of the most restless regions of the world", and one may bank on a honeymoon period to come. This would then be another high in the very cyclical relationship that has existed between Turkey and the EU, hence the need for both enhanced but sustained relations. At the very least, the public that must suffer the geopolitical theatre may console themselves amidst whatever heightened tensions may come. Instead, the best relief would come in the form of progress now, one that would not enhance the perception that a cyclical relationship with snail-paced progress and reform awaits before the next round of alienation.

⁵ Interview with an official from the Turkish Foreign Ministry – Directorate for EU Affairs (16/09/20).