

European Parliament Elections: A New Political Environment in Europe and Turkey

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ABSTRACT *Citizens of the European Union (EU) voted to elect 751 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from May 23-26, 2019, making this the second largest democratic election in the world. Resulting with the traditional mainstream center parties weakened, while anti-establishment parties, including the Greens and the far-right populists, increasing their power. The two main political groups (the European People's Party and Social Democrats), for the first time in history, had lost their combined majority in the European Parliament (EP). Despite all the discouraging signs, the new political environment in Europe can still provide opportunities to develop Turkey-EU relations.*

Elections in a Period of Change, Challenge, and Uncertainty¹

Over the years and with subsequent changes in European treaties, the EP has acquired substantial powers. Together, with the representatives of the governments of the Member States in the Council, the Parliament shapes the direction in which the European project is heading towards today. Besides the policies of the leading powers within the EU, it is the structure and balance of power within the Parliament that shapes the leadership of the EU and the Commission itself. Despite waning interest and a low level of participation in the elections, the EP is

still an important institution in Europe and plays a crucial role in relations with EU-neighboring regions, including EU candidate Turkey. The recent elections that took place from May 23-26, 2019 are unique because of the unprecedented circumstances dominated by change, challenge, and uncertainty in Europe. Serious interlinked crises, and internal and external challenges have called into question the EU's institutional structure and its future direction. The need for large-scale reform and restructuring is stronger than ever. The European project seems to have lost credibility and cohesion. The rise of the far-right, resulting from insecurity, illegal migration and thus,

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increased xenophobic tendencies, is of growing concern. Not only does it pose a threat to peaceful coexistence and social cohesion in Europe, it also erodes the EU's capacity to influence its close neighborhood and beyond. Still not fully able to overcome the Eurozone crisis, increased economic disparities, and gaps of economic performance among Member States continue. Irregular migration flows and disunity among Members on how to respond to them add a new dimension to much-needed geostrategic thinking. Terrorist attacks on European soil have raised security concerns and started a debate on how thin and delicate the line is between security and freedom. The loosening of transatlantic ties comes in a period when the rule-based economic system faces threats. Constant questioning of the idea of enlargement jeopardizes the EU's anchor role regarding candidate and potential candidate countries and weakens the greatest soft power tool the EU has ever had. Brexit, whether it will happen or not, has already changed both the UK and the EU, as well as the main pa-

rameters on which their relations are based.

The challenges our continent faces today are fundamental; how they will be addressed will have profound effects on the future. Therefore, the new EP now forming under unprecedented circumstances will also have exceptional responsibilities, particularly to address these challenges in a way that strengthens the EU as an institution as well as its regional and global role.

EP Elections: The Result of Change and the Impetus for Further Changes

The results of the recent EP elections are actually a direct consequence of the changing political environment in Europe. However, they will also be the reason for further changes to take place within the EU and in its Member States. During the last five years, the European political scene has changed dramatically. The results of national elections held across Europe show us that Europeans are asking for change, since they are not satisfied with the solutions provided by the mainstream political parties and their leaders in power. In that sense, the EP elections were a catch-up for the EU, a catch-up with what had already happened in Europe. Soon after the elections, it is already clear that these results will stimulate further changes in European politics. The balance of power is already set to change in some countries. The victory of the Greens,



Newly elected European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (L) sits alongside European Parliament President David-Maria Sassoli (R) in Strasbourg, France on July 16, 2019.

FREDERICK FLORIN / AFP / Getty Images

for example, has led to the questioning of the future of the Big Coalition in Germany. Early elections have already been conducted in Greece. In the UK, EP elections turned into a second referendum, in which support for the Brexit Party – which was lower than the “exit” vote of the June 2016 plebiscite – has led to further uncertainty.

The most striking thing about the EP elections was that turnout across Europe increased for the first time, even though it was still below the average national elections participation rate. Leaping to 51 percent, it was a positive sign for the pro-Europeans, a clear demonstration of the European public’s increasing interest in the EU. Citizens of the EU Member States are demanding solutions for their problems and the EU, as well as the governments of the other Member

States should definitely hear this clear message.

How to Manage a More Fragmented and Diversified Europe?

The results were as expected, two-thirds of voters supported pro-European parties, which topped the polls in 23 out of 28 Member States. Many voters also supported anti-European or Eurosceptic parties, whether on the left or right. However, widespread predictions of a far-right takeover of the EP proved to be exaggerated. Traditional mainstream center parties were weakened while anti-establishment parties, including the Greens and the far-right populists, increased their power. The two main political groups, namely the European People’s Party and Social Democrats, for the

first time in history, lost their combined majority in the EP. Parties on the far-right formed a new political group named “Identity and Democracy,” becoming the fifth largest group within the EP with 73 seats. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) changed its name into “Renew Europe,” as a statement of its awareness of the role the mainstream parties are expected to play in the future of Europe. The rise of the Greens will force the EU to put climate change and environmental issues on the top of the EU agenda. A political shift is undoubtedly underway.

Pessimists will claim that the EP today is more fragmented and more polarized than ever before. Optimists will argue that the EU has a more pluralistic EP today. The results of the EP elections confront the EU and Member States’ leaders with a considerable challenge: how to handle and navigate a new political environment.

The first challenge has been to agree on the leadership of the EU, namely appointing/nominating the European Council President, the President of the European Commission, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the President of the European Central Bank, as well as the Commissioners. The rule of “Spitzenkandidat” (lead candidate), which has not been codified by the European Council so far, could not apply this time. All of the top positions were considered as a “package.” The result of this big bargain reflects the new political make-up and gives us hints about

how the diversity of the new EP will be navigated.

With the overthrow of the established majority of the mainstream parties, diverse and fresh views may find more place on stage. If correctly orchestrated, a diversified EP could also lead to more democracy and inclusiveness with a wider range of voices to be heard; this would undoubtedly enrich the EU. The EP would also better play its role of forming a bridge between the EU and European citizens, while becoming an answer to the EU’s legitimacy problem.

However, this search for a new balance could also open the door to more marginal and destructive voices that could undermine the very principles which allowed them into the EP in the first place. Too much inclusiveness in the decision-making process without a balance to safeguard the principles that create the EU’s forum would be self-destructive. The EU’s principles should remain as a frame to safeguard the institution against far-right populist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic movements.

The EP’s future will be determined by the balance between old and new, mainstream and marginal, same and different, categorical and flexible – all this amid political negotiations.

What Do the EP Election Results Mean for Turkey?

Turkey, as a candidate country and a key partner to Europe in regional

and global issues, followed the EP elections closely. The EP, which has always been the most critical and outspoken EU institution vis-à-vis Turkey, can play an influential role in its accession process in different ways.

First of all, the Turkey-EU Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) is an important forum for both Turkey and the EU. Although the primary mission of the JPC is to create a common understanding among parliamentarians and further develop parliamentary relations, some MEPs have unfortunately abused this platform for their narrow-minded nationalistic or personal agenda in the past. Turkish parliamentarians hope that the new members of the JPC will show faith in a strong and diversified EU, and work to improve on Turkey-EU relations and not try to abuse the JPC.

Another tool is the yearly, legally, nonbinding but politically important EP report on Turkey. So far Turkey has taken note of every fair criticism that is constructive and consequently worked together with the EP on these areas. However, one should bear in mind that EP reports having a lot of unfair and biased elements have only fueled anti-EU sentiments within Turkish society. The EP's stance on Turkey should aim to develop Turkey-EU relations, interaction, and dialogue. EU membership is a strategic objective for Turkey. However, the call to suspend the accession negotiations, which are the core axis of Turkey-EU relations, clearly demonstrates that the EP lacks a vision-

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ary perspective and fails to respect the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* (agreements must be kept). Turkey would expect the new EP to adopt a constructive approach on Turkey-EU relations in the forthcoming period, to take qualified and objective decisions, and to promote Turkey's reform process as well as its integration with the EU.

Sustaining Turkey's EU accession process depends not only on Turkey, but also on the EU. The EU, and consequently the EP, should display a credible anchorship towards Turkey, as it does towards other candidate countries. As regards Turkey, the EP has enough tools to accomplish this, such as the Visa Liberalization Dialogue Process, modernization of the Turkey-EU Customs Union (CU) and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) funds.

Turkey attaches importance to the Visa Liberalization Dialogue Process. Work on the six remaining benchmarks still continues. We should keep in mind that this process means much more than visa liberalization



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, High Representative of the EU for FASP Federica Mogherini, and European Commissioner for ENP-EN Johannes Hahn speak in a press conference in Brussels on March 15, 2019. DURSUN AYDEMİR / AA Photo

for Turkish citizens. Progress in areas defined by the benchmarks will have positive effects on several important areas directly linked to rights and freedoms. Continued progress will also help Turkey to rebuild trust with the EU, develop people-to-people dialogue, promote business, tourism, and education exchanges, and increase employment in different fields of service.

Similarly, the belief in Turkey is that, in a period when the rule-based economic order is under constant threat, modernization of the 1996 Customs Union (CU) will surely result in a

win-win situation for all partners involved. Therefore, both Turkish and EU business circles expect negotiations for the modernization of the CU to begin as soon as possible. The EU should not further politicize this issue or cause delay in the initiation of the update talks on the CU.

Shortly, Turkey expects the EP to take a constructive and encouraging role in support of objectives such as Visa Liberalization, which will bring our people closer, update the CU, which will serve to increase our economic integration, and promote reforms toward EU membership rather

than adopting a discouraging stance against Turkey.

When it comes to the Instruments for Pre-Accession (IPA), Turkey considers them as a tool for transformation, as an opportunity to be connected to the EU at all levels from students to civil society, from local to government authorities. Thus, Turkish society, which is the main beneficiary at the end, expects the EU side not to politicize the IPA funds. The EU's decision regarding cuts is discouraging and contradicts its own purpose. The IPA funds not only speed up Turkey's alignment with the EU, but also results in a positive public perception of the EU in Turkey. Therefore, the hope is that the new EP understands better the importance of these funds for Turkey-EU relations and will act in an encouraging manner in the coming period.

Finally, the EP should realize how crucial it is to fight against terrorism. Many terrorist organizations are still using the territories of the EU Member States for their financing, indoctrination, recruitment, and propaganda activities, as well as the premises of the EP for propaganda purposes. Terrorist organizations, throughout decades, have developed and operated networks within the EU Member States. Therefore, supporting NATO ally Turkey in its fight against terrorist organizations bears utmost importance for the security not only of Turkey, but also of the EU and its Member States. It is mostly the credibility of the EU and the EP and their soft power in rela-

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tion to Turkey that are harmed when certain circles within the EP associate with affiliates or supporters of terrorist organizations, some of which are already listed as such by the EU itself.

The EP should take into account the challenges Turkey faces today. The immense security threat and the unprecedented irregular migration burden are only the most prominent of them. The EU is criticizing Turkey's effort to fight against terrorism, neglecting to recognize that these efforts are making important contributions to the security of Europe and NATO as well. The same applies for the migration issue. Hosting the world's largest refugee population (3.7 million Syrians and 1 million from other nationalities), Turkey is of the opinion that the burden sharing should continue as long as the burden is there.

We believe that the rise of populist policies and rhetoric should be a concern for all of us. The seeds of mistrust sown by some populist

politicians with short-term political gains in mind will unfortunately have effects that can last for generations. The destructive ideologies of the last century are today finding a new guise in modern concepts and terminologies. Marginal movements fueled by reactions and not guided by rational thinking are becoming the main elements of our new political system. Increased xenophobia, anti-Islamic rhetoric and intolerance call into question the very gist of the European project. We should not take peace and stability for granted.

The ultimate goal of Turkey-EU relations is EU membership. Turkey values the dialogue and cooperation mechanisms with the EU. However, the accession process remains the contractual basis of the relationship. The current “standstill position” of relations with the EU is not Turkey’s choice, but that of certain EU Member States that prefer to solve their bilateral problems with Turkey by abusing their EU membership, and membership solidarity for their own national benefits. In other words, becoming their hostage will be the EU’s own choice. However, it should be kept in mind that transforming bilateral problems into Turkey-EU problems has not served anyone,

and this will be a zero-sum game. In the face of global challenges such as terrorism, radicalization, the rise of the far-right and populism, irregular migration, protectionist and unilateral trade attempts, energy insecurity and conflicts in the neighborhood of Europe and NATO, it is in the EU’s own interest to act with a strategic vision toward Turkey’s candidacy. Turks simply expect to be treated on an equal footing with all the other candidates and want the EU perspective to remain open and get clearer, which in return will accelerate reformist paths towards EU membership.

Everybody recognizes that Turkey’s EU membership is challenging. However, when it does happen, it will be the most valuable accession ever to the EU. What is expected from the new leadership of the EU and of the EP, is to look into Turkey’s accession process from a broader perspective and consider the invaluable contributions that only Turkey can make. The huge untapped potential can only be realized through full membership. ■

Endnote

1. This commentary was written on the date of July 12, 2019.