

# Turkey and the EU: Looking Beyond the Pessimisms

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper analyses the reasons for frustration and pessimism about Turkey-EU relations. It focuses on the impact of the crisis in Europe, the 2014 EP elections and selection of Jean-Claude Juncker for the Commission President post on Turkey's EU accession process. Finally, the paper tries to answer how the current pessimism over Turkey-EU relations can be overcome.*

**F**rustration and pessimism dominate the mood in Turkey about the current status of relations with the European Union (EU) and the future of accession negotiations. The negotiations, which started in October 2005, continue at a snail's pace due to political blockages and the Cyprus issue. So far, 14 (out of 35) chapters have been opened and only one chapter provisionally closed. As a result, not least of the lessons learnt from the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, conditionality continues to evolve and accession becomes more difficult. Moreover, the EU remains consumed by debates about enlargement fatigue and integration capacity, particularly where Turkey is con-

cerned. Lingering hopes of progress have been further undermined by the ongoing economic crisis. Further negativity has gained ground owing to the increased support that anti-EU and Eurosceptic parties received in the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections, combined with the decreasing levels of popular support generally for European integration and further enlargement. Most recently, eyebrows have been raised by the call from Jean-Claude Juncker, the incoming Commission President, for a five-year break from enlargement.

Many informed observers of European integration and enlargement understand the reasons for frustra-

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tion but rarely share the feelings of outright pessimism for the future of Europe. The history of European integration is a messy history of ups and downs but with the EU muddling through crises and integrating further as a result. Despite the talk of – and in some instances wishful thinking about – disintegration, the EU has responded to the Eurozone crisis with further integration and moves towards substantive banking, fiscal, and economic union. And Croatia's accession to the EU, in July 2013, proved that debates on the death of enlargement are misplaced. So too does the progress towards the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which became possible thanks to the lure of EU membership. Moreover, Montenegro and Serbia have started accession negotiations, in June 2012 and January 2014 respectively; Albania has recently been granted candidate status; and Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have signed association agreements with the EU, an important step towards the possibility of membership.

### **The 2014 EP Election: No Good News for Turkey?**

One should not be overly pessimistic about the results of the EP elections. The vote for the mainstream parties in the EP did decline and Eurosceptic parties, especially the Front National in France and the United Kingdom Independence Party, scored remarkably well. However, despite the relative successes of Eurosceptic and far-right parties, the center-right

European People's Party (EPP) and the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats are still the dominant groupings in the EP. Between them, they secured 54.86 percent of the seats. When the seats of the Greens/European Free Alliance and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe are added, the percentage of seats for pro-EU parties in the EP rises to 70.44 percent. Moreover, the remaining Eurosceptic and anti-EU parties do not form a coherent bloc in the EP. They cannot be ignored, but their potential to impact significantly on the future of Europe debate can be – and has been – exaggerated, not least by those fearful of – and in some cases hoping for – disintegration.

The EP elections results tell us little that we do not already know: turnout remains low (42.54 percent); popular support for the EU and mainstream parties has declined; the EU suffers from a democratic deficit; and it has a persistent legitimacy problem. Following changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon and with the aim of improving the democratic legitimacy of the European Commission, EU leaders nominated the EPP's *Spitzenkandidat*, Juncker, as the next Commission President, a nomination subsequently confirmed by the EP. What have made the headlines for Juncker in Turkey are his views on enlargement. While pledging to continue accession negotiations with Turkey and others, Juncker has closed the door on further enlargement for the duration of the 2014-2019 Commission.<sup>1</sup> Concerning Turkey, and refer-

ring specifically to the Turkish government's recent Twitter ban, Juncker stated, "the country is clearly far away from EU membership." Pointedly, he did not mention Turkey in his agenda for the next Commission, but did refer to the Western Balkans and countries of the eastern neighborhood, such as Moldova and Ukraine, in his comments on enlargement.

Many scenarios for the future of Europe are too pessimistic. The same cannot be said, however, for prognoses about Turkey – EU relations. Given the state of European integration, the future remains far from bright. Moreover, irrespective of the crises the EU has been experiencing, Turkey has its own particular problems that need to be addressed if it is to progress further towards EU membership. Indeed, the Eurozone crisis, the outcome of the EP elections, and Juncker's appointment have not actually changed much in Turkey's slow-paced negotiations. The EPP's dominance in the EP is not new. And its reserved position on further enlargement, especially to include Turkey, is well known. Dominated by Christian Democratic parties, the EPP has been leading debates on offering Turkey a "privileged partnership." However, the EPP recently – and to the surprise of few – stepped up its opposition to Turkish accession and stated, "full membership is no longer our goal."<sup>2</sup> Turkey has supporters in the EU,<sup>3</sup> but for many in the EPP, it has long been considered as a permanent guest sitting in the waiting room. Opposition to Turkish accession is particularly high in Austria, France, Germany,

Luxembourg, Greece, and Cyprus. Moreover, popular support in the EU for further enlargement is very low. In 2013, only 37 percent of respondents across the EU expressed sup-

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port for more states being admitted.<sup>4</sup> Only a few member states publically express support for Turkish accession. Considering the potential for enlargement referendums in Austria and France and the possibility of non-ratification of Turkish accession by a national parliament or the EP, the future for Turkey's membership ambitions is far from promising.

### **To Admit or Not to Admit? To Join or Not to Join?**

Unlike with eastern enlargement countries, Turkey's supporters lack a strong narrative that can support their case for its accession. The narrative that accompanied the opening of accession negotiations – one presenting the EU as a norm-based community open to all European states, as long as the candidates align themselves with European norms and values – no longer enjoys the same prominence. On the contrary, many

Newly elected President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker (L) is congratulated by the European Parliament President Martin Schulz during a press conference on July 15, 2014, in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, eastern France.

AFP / Frederick Florin



of those opposing Turkish accession are strong promoters of an “existential” narrative that presents the EU as an essentially Christianity-based entity. And the accession of a formally secular but overwhelmingly Muslim Turkey is considered a threat to Europe in their imagination. For them, Christianity is an essential condition for being a member of the EU.

Before opening accession negotiations in 2005, the debates on Turkey were focused on “whether Turkey should join the EU,” “why Turkey should join” and “when to begin accession negotiations.” A less prominent then, but ever-present question is “should Turkey be admitted to the EU?” Those opposing Turkey’s accession have kept this more fundamental question alive. It was these opponents who insisted on the inclusion of a reference to the “open-ended” nature of

negotiations in the EU’s negotiating framework. In fact, all negotiations are open-ended and so the reference to the “open-ended” nature of the accession negotiations was very much a statement of fact. And it has been included in all negotiating frameworks since 2005. Yet, the fact that the insertion of the reference to “open-ended” negotiations was specifically included with Turkey in mind is an open secret in EU circles.

Amid the EU and wider criticism of the way in which Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government handled the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul and the corruption allegations of 2013-14, given also the slowdown in – or, for some, a retreat from – Europeanization, especially regarding democratic norms, and problems regarding media freedom in Turkey, proposals for a relationship short of member-

ship and the “whether” question have re-gained prominence. In proposals relating to the future of the EU that foresee more differentiated and different forms and patterns of integration based around a Eurozone core, Turkey is counted at best among the potential members of the outer rings and tiers.

Turkey has also been adding fuel to the “whether” debate. Against a backdrop of the Eurozone crisis in the EU, the notable success of the Turkish economy, and Turkish foreign policy achievements (especially in the Middle East up until the current crisis in Syria) triggered debates in Turkey on whether it could in fact dispense with the goal of EU membership. Turkish policy makers have engaged in what can be called a “who needs whom more” debate with some advocating joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and opting for a relationship with the EU akin to Norway’s at the end of accession negotiations. Even among some strong supporters of EU membership and opinion-makers, serious consideration has been given to how Turkey might fare on the periphery of an EU characterized by greater flexibility and more differentiated integration.<sup>5</sup> Such developments can be seen as signals of a decreasing commitment to “full” membership and of frustration in the face of the ongoing difficulties in furthering Turkey’s accession process. When combined with the effective stalemate in the accession negotiations and the prevailing pessimism over the prospects for accession, all this helps explain why popular support for EU

membership in Turkey had dropped to 38 percent in 2013.<sup>6</sup>

## Maintaining Some Momentum

The single biggest opportunity to overcome the mood of pessimism in Turkey – EU relations is resolution of the Cyprus problem. Such a development would be a game changer for Turkey’s accession negotiations. Incurable pessimists may beg to differ, but if the Republic of Cyprus were to lift its vetoes on key negotiating chapters, Turkey’s accession prospects would be considerably improved not least because the accession negotiations would gain momentum. The use of the conditional is intentional; the prospects of Nicosia lifting its vetoes are not encouraging. Cooperation

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between Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece is likely to bring increased dynamism to economic and political integration in southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. Here, one of the strong motivations to resolve the Cyprus issue for all parties, including the EU and the international community, is offshore gas and the discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> Turkey’s

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potential role as an energy hub in the region keeps hopes alive for Turkey – EU relations. However, optimism for progress in the Cyprus negotiations remains in short supply.<sup>8</sup>

Under the shadow of the grey clouds hovering over Turkey – EU relations and in the absence of a clear perspective of accession, and as observed by the former Turkish ambassador to the EU, Selim Kuneralp, the EU has “lost its leverage” on Turkey.<sup>9</sup> To keep the EU relevant for Turkey and to resuscitate the accession negotiations while 16 out of 35 chapters are blocked, the EU’s member states in 2012 endorsed a Commission proposal for a new “Positive Agenda” for Turkey. This involves eight working groups assisting Turkey in aligning its domestic policies and legislation with key areas of the *acquis communautaire*. The areas covered include: visas, mobility and migration, energy, trade and the customs union, political reforms, fight against terrorism, foreign policy dialogue and participation in EU programs.

A key dimension of the “Positive Agenda” is a focus on issues scheduled to be covered in the unopened Chapters 23 (judiciary and funda-

mental rights) and Chapter 24 (justice, freedom, and security) of the accession negotiations. As evident from the frameworks for negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia, the cross-cutting issues of judicial and administrative capacity and in particular anti-corruption initiatives and the maintenance of the rule of law covered by these chapters have assumed a pre-eminent status in accession negotiations. While the EU aims to address these issues from the start of negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia so as to observe a track record of implementation as well as the alignment of legislation before the negotiations are closed, both chapters are blocked in Turkey’s case. Turkey and the Commission would prefer to begin “real” negotiations in these chapters. For the moment, therefore, the “Positive Agenda” allows dialogue channels to be opened with Turkey, even if the opening benchmarks for Chapter 23 and Chapter 24 cannot – frustratingly for Turkish officials – be formally communicated to Turkey.

Regarding the “Positive Agenda,” one should not underestimate the efforts that the Commissioner for Enlargement, Štefan Füle, has made to keep the EU’s enlargement process alive during the recent crises. Coming from a “new” EU member state, Füle has been fully aware of the transformative role that enlargement can have on would-be members. He might not be as enthusiastic for enlargement as his predecessor-but-one, Günter Verheugen, who oversaw much of the eastern enlargement process, but despite all the feelings of negati-

ty towards Turkey – EU relations in recent years, he has repeatedly stated that the Commission has “no intention to ‘give up on Turkey’s EU accession’” and that Turkey and the EU are “bound to succeed together.”<sup>10</sup> As for the future of Turkey – EU relations, the Commission’s agenda-setting role on enlargement policy should not be ignored. Its regular reports and strategy documents have become a firm part of the annual cycle of its activities. Moreover, it oversees an increasingly detailed accession process.

However, enlargement is far from being high on the agenda of the incoming Commission. Its priorities of the economy, trade, and energy are nevertheless understandable given challenges the EU is currently facing. During the next five years, enlargement will not, however, be completely off the agenda. Indeed, the pause in enlargement that Juncker has called for was likely anyway. With Iceland having effectively suspended its membership bid, no candidate is going to be in a position to accede to the EU in the next five years: all are at best in the early stages of substantive negotiations, negotiations which, following the Croatian example, are likely to take at least five or six years, and after that two years are likely to be required to secure ratification of the accession treaty.

Such a scenario is clearly relevant in Turkey’s case. The pause relates to the admission of states not the progress towards enlargement. So, contrary to the media coverage in Turkey, Juncker’s opposition to enlargement

is not Turkey specific. Moreover, his criticism of the Twitter ban is widely shared among EU institutions and in the member states. Treating Juncker as if he were a new Sarkozy is to exaggerate what he has said and misunderstand the dynamics of enlargement. What is important for Turkey is who will emerge as Juncker’s Commissioner for Enlargement.

## Overcoming Pessimism

Also important, not least from a Turkish perspective, is how to overcome the pessimism that pervades discussions about Turkey’s accession process and prospects. First, there is the issue of communication. Turkey, with the support of EU member states and the Commission, needs to increase its efforts to inform public opinion in the EU about Turkey and the potential contribution of its membership to the EU. However, decreasing public support for EU membership in Turkey and ill-informed assertions about the disintegration of the EU show that communication is not only about Turkey promoting itself within the EU. The EU has an image problem in candidate countries. Turkey’s Ministry of European Integration has been informing Turkish public about the current and anticipated benefits of EU integration and membership. But this is not enough. The EU Delegation in Turkey and EU member state embassies also have to increase their efforts to inform Turkish public opinion about the dynamics of European integration and the procedural and technical realities of

enlargement. Special efforts are needed to deal with criticisms over the alleged unfairness of the accession process and the perceived lack of equal treatment of Turkey. On the EU side, however, Turkey should be included in debates and discussions over the future shape and design of European integration, just as it was during the European Convention in 2002-2003 that inspired many of the reforms ultimately contained in the Treaty of Lisbon. Assuming the commitment to EU norms and values can be demonstrated, the President and the Prime Minister of Turkey alongside the leaders of other candidates and potential candidate countries should be invited to at least gatherings in the margins of key EU meetings and included in EU family photos, as was generally the case with candidates in the lead-up to eastern enlargement.

A second issue is commitment: Turkey should renew its commitment to EU membership. In the 1980s and 1990s, Turkey was criticized for human rights issues. Considering the current issues in Turkey and evolving demands and priorities of EU conditionality, it is for sure that promotion of the rule of law and the implementation of anti-corruption initiatives and judicial reform will become prominent themes in the accession negotiations. Therefore, greater impetus should be given to the adoption and implementation of reforms in these areas. This could also trigger a “*grand débat*” about the EU in Turkey. Among the key questions for a renewed commitment that need to be answered are: “Why does



Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Turkish Grand National Assembly Volkan Bozkir, appointed as the EU Minister, speaks during a press conference on December 20, 2011 at the Turkish embassy in Paris.

AFP / Bertrand Guay

Turkey want to be a member of the EU?” And “What does *Europe* mean to Turkish citizens?”

Identity issues have traditionally dominated debates, but for many Turks and Europeans, Turkey’s EU membership needs to be presented as a high politics issue as well. Geopolitics and security considerations do matter. Equally, when it comes to accession negotiations, commitment and the adoption and implementation of reforms in all the *acquis* chapters is of paramount importance. Just focusing on the security dimension of the relationship is likely to end in something short of membership.

One important way to show Turkey’s renewed commitment for EU mem-



bership is shifting ownership of the discourse; meaning away from a “state policy” to “the people’s choice.” Romania’s Snagov Declaration in 1995

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could be an inspiration here. It proclaimed a domestic consensus on the goal of EU accession and was signed by the President, the Prime Minister, the Presidents of the Parliament’s two chambers and the leaders of 13 political parties, and supported by civil society in Romania.<sup>11</sup> To revive Turkey – EU relations, a similar document committing Turkish political parties and civil society to work for a civilian constitution and to continue the reform process in Turkey with the aim of securing EU membership could be drawn up and signed following the parliamentary elections in 2015. If such a commitment were followed by focused reforms and their implementation, the arguments of domestic and international supporters of Turkey’s EU membership would be significantly strengthened when making their case.

Thirdly, it is often suggested that the EU should offer Turkey a clear ac-

cession date to make accession a realizable goal. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey – 2023 – is rich in symbolic importance and arguably a realistic target.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Erdoğan, when Prime Minister, proposed 2023 as a date by which Turkey should become a member of the EU. Setting the year 2023 as a target to transform Turkey to an EU-ready country could act as a catalyst for reform. However, against a backdrop of “enlargement fatigue” and an agreement to avoid any early commitments on dates, EU member states, aware of Turkey’s protracted accession negotiations and the thorny political problems that accompany them, are highly unlikely to offer Turkey a date for accession in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the European Council in 2006 in its “renewed consensus” on enlargement stated quite emphatically that the EU “will refrain from setting any target dates for accession until the negotiations are close to completion.”<sup>13</sup>

The calls for setting a date for accession create unrealistic expectations in Turkish public opinion, which tends to forget that the EU has never mentioned the possibility of declaring such a date. And the EU’s potential inability to meet these expectations is likely to contribute to pessimism and frustration in Turkey. Here quick comparisons can be made with eastern enlargement, especially with Romania and Bulgaria. At the Göteborg European Council in June 2001, the EU announced the objective of admitting new member states in time for them to participate in the 2004 EP

elections. This commitment was conditional on the candidate countries' progress with a road map of reforms and concluding accession negotiations by the end of 2002. Only when negotiations had been concluded in December 2002 did the EU declare 1 May 2004 as the accession date for its first eastern enlargement. At the same time, the European Council declared its objective to welcome Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. Again the date was conditional on the accession criteria being met. Subsequent references to January 2007 entry remained conditional, and it was only in December 2004, once negotiations had been closed, that the date was fixed. Evidently, if and when the EU signals a date, it remains conditional. It is not a promise and dates are only set once accession negotiations are concluded. It is possible for the EU to note and welcome a 2023 target for Turkey's accession, but it would be naïve to expect the EU to share the same commitment. Precedent dictates this. It should also be noted that its historical importance for the post-Cold War unification of Europe meant that eastern enlargement was essentially an irreversible process. This is far less the case for Turkey and the others in the queue for membership. ■

## Endnotes

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