

WHY ARE THE EU AND TURKEY MOVING AWAY FROM EACH OTHER?

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 Analysis

A potential major conflict among the European states is undoubtedly not over yet. However, what we know from the European and world history is that conflicts have never brought peace and prosperity except for the political elites.

In the new century, no power is allied with another one until the end. Cooperation and competition are as closely intertwined more than we can imagine among political units. Despite all political frailty, it is not possible to move forward without the collaboration of political and non-governmental actors for the sake of people's welfare.

Today, the idea of a *United Europe* stands as a remarkable blueprint of a regional integration in the international system. There is no doubt that the European Union [EU] has taken its place as a spectacular collaboration practice in political history. But, nowadays the wind of populism seems to be the greatest test of the EU, as it is in many other countries all over the world.

While populist politicians fueled their idea of conflict and separation in order to consolidate their privileged positions, they are also undermining the motivations of EU member and candidate countries. Furthermore, the Union has many problems beyond populism such as its foreign policy, budget deficits management, Europhobia, NATO-dependency, migration, enlargement fatigue, populist elites and far-right movements. In fact, Turkey's situation is no different from the European Union.

Turkey has also faced many challenges especially in the last decade. All these issues have caused Turkey and the EU to focus on their own internal issues and have subdued their interest in each other. Today, neither Turkey is focusing on the EU membership process nor the EU is concerned about Turkey's membership motivation.

After 2013, Turkey's security concerns, government's election-based legitimacy efforts



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and economic depression dominated Turkey's main problems that need solving. Besides, the European Union had gradually lost its credibility with its candidate countries in the last decade. During Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission president (2014-2019)'s term, the EU seemed to be too busy to motivate the membership of its candidate countries. Moreover, the Commission criticism against Turkey has become increasingly politicized, while the EU agents must adhere to the technical *acquis communautaire* accession process.

Security Challenges in Turkey

The European Union - Turkey relations have a memory of 60 years. In the accession period, the parties have witnessed many ups and downs, but the best period of relation was between 1999 and 2005. During this period, Turkey signed a number of reforms within the framework of the EU membership process. One-third of Turkish constitution was amended and the anti-democratic laws were eliminated from the Constitution. Between 1999 and 2005, the European Union was the dynamic foundation of Turkey's political and institutional transformation; and Turkey made a remarkable progress in the field of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In 2005, Turkey formally became a candidate country of the EU. However, Turkey's EU membership prospect worried the Turcophobic wings and Turkey's opponents began putting the Cyprus and Armenian issues on the table. Paradoxically, despite Turkey's EU candidate status, political obstacles like the Cyprus and the Armenian issues locked down the EU membership process and as a result Turkey gradually moved away from gaining its EU membership. At this point, the breakdown of the Cyprus and Armenian issue has caused both sides to focus on their own paths since 2006.

Turkey's foreign policy turned her face to the Arab uprisings that began in late 2011, but could not pin point what to expect from the people's demands of freedom. Turkey also focused

primarily on its security challenges since 2013. In May 2013, hundreds of thousands of people protested Erdogan administration's unilateral policies in Gezi Park, Taksim, and the movement spread all over the country. Despite international criticisms against excessive use of power by the police, the government considered the protests as a threat to its existence and took survival security measures against the protesters.

The second issue was corruption allegations especially against four government ministers in the last month of 2013. In the morning of December 17 and 25, Istanbul and Ankara public prosecutors, who were alleged to be the members of the Gulen Movement or FETO – decreed as an illegal organization following the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey - arrested about 130 people on charges of corruption. The government viewed the arrests as a jurisdiction coup attempt and began to take measures against the FETO structure in Turkey. The crisis then escalated between the government officials and the Gulen Movement participants and dominated Turkey's domestic policy until mid 2014. The National Security Council adopted fourteen different decrees and declared the Gülenist Terrorist Organization/Parallel State Structure [FETÖ/PDY] organization as a terror threat to Turkey's national security of in the period of February 2014 to May 2016.¹

The third critical security challenge of Turkey was FETÖ/PDY-led coup attempt on July 15, 2016. The infiltrators within Turkey's military attempted to suspend the Constitution, impose martial law and enforce a nationwide curfew. As troops and tanks blocked the traffic from Asia to Europe over the Bosphorus Bridge, Istanbul, a number of government buildings including the Parliament, the Presidential Palace and the intelligence headquarters were heavily assaulted.²

The July 15 coup plotters not only targeted politicians and government institutions, they also did not spare the life of innocent civilians who took to the streets to protect the democratically elected government.³ Unlike

other coups in Turkey, the July 15 coup attempt failed, thanks to the resistance of the Turkish people. But this had to be paid dearly with so many human lives. As much as 249 people were martyred and 2.195 others wounded in the bloodiest coup attempt. The failure of the coup proved two important dynamics of Turkey. First is the current presence of the Turkish society as a prohibiting power against the coup. Second is the ability of the Turkish people to unite under the circumstance. The July 15 was a rare global case where civilians could stop a carefully planned military coup attempt.⁴

After the failed coup the Turkish government declared a state of emergency to take action against FETO as the leading group of the coup. The state of emergency lasted for two years and during this period many people were detained in Turkey. Although EU officials felicitated the overcoming of the coup, it criticized the unjust arrests and human rights violations that followed.

According to EU Commission, many decrees issued during the state of emergency were constraining certain civil and political rights. Since the introduction of the state of emergency, over 150.000 people have been taken into custody, 78.000 were arrested and over 110.000 civil servants were dismissed.⁵ The 2019 EU Commission report underlines the broad scale and collective nature of measures taken since the attempted coup under the state of emergency, such as widespread dismissals, arrests and detentions, which continued to raise very serious concerns.⁶

The July 15 coup attempt has been an important breaking point between the European Union and Turkey. The European Union officials did not respond immediately and made any formal visit to Turkey or publish an official statement condemning the coup attempt. The hypocrisy of the EU on the coup attempt caused it to lose its credibility on democracy rhetoric of Turkey. Besides, Turkey's post-coup extreme security measures have led Turkey to gradually move away from the EU norms.

Free-Fall of the Lira and Election Fatigue

As the economy deteriorated since 2016, Turkey began to focus more on its domestic issues and put its foreign policy on the side. The Turkish lira fell as much as %50 percent against the US dollar and it was the world's worst performing currency in 2018.⁷ The purchasing power of the Turkish people has fallen by half and the ruling party had to respond to public criticism.

This has led Turkey to move away from export-based production and increase the country's dependency on imported goods. Policy makers failed to carry out economic reforms in time and construction-based investments did not produce value-added results. The shrinking economy caused the citizens to focus on only bringing home the bread.

Besides, within this period, the ruling party decided to go to the ballot box 9 times in the last 5 years [2013-2019] to consolidate its political legitimacy. The frequent elections and referendums were important for democracy, but while decision makers should find solutions to Turkey's economic problems, focusing on elections has developed negative public reactions against politicians and created the *election fatigue effect* in the country.

Deepening Challenges of the European Union

The reasons for the gradual neglect from pursuing the European Union membership target are not only due to Turkey's challenges, but because the European Union is also responsible in dampening the motivation of the candidates. Two of the most important reasons for the failing membership motivation are the EU's enlargement fatigue and absorption capacity.

In 2004, the accession of 10 new members to the European Union brought a great burden for liabilities of member states. Enlargement fatigue is defined simply as a reason for the unwillingness of some Union members to

admit new countries or as a symptom that the willingness was fading.⁸ Besides, the capacity of the EU's internal market and Eurozone were not strong enough to absorb new member states.

In 2014, the EU Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker made the following statement in his speech, that "No Western Balkans country will join the EU in the next 5 years." Juncker did not even mention about Turkey's membership in his speech. The European Union was an important factor of stability in the Western Balkans especially in the early 2010, as well as the dynamism for political reforms in Turkey. Focusing on the EU's own self-absorption capacity has especially driven Turkey away from the very Union.

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In addition, the rise of populism, Euro skepticism, Xenophobia, and racism were seen as the renewed challenges of Europe. The continent was particularly exposed to a large influx in 2015, and the migration triggered *phobias* within the borders. Unfortunately,

the EU's full membership approach towards Turkey has changed in the struggle with the Middle East and North Africa migration flow and the Council has put Turkey in a secondary instrumental position. Turkey also used Syrian immigrants discourse as a trump card against the European Union.

Conclusion: Quo Vadis EU-Turkey Relations?

Democracy, the rule of law, human rights and other fundamental norms can no longer be considered as alien values of the international community aside from our own. The European Union is also believed to play the role of discourse platform for the humanitarian values, whether the member states comply with it or not. For Turkey, the European Union is a kind *league* preference. In order to become a remarkable actor in international relations, Turkey has to consider the norms, policies and rules established by international and supranational organizations.

As for the EU, they should address its Commission's progress reports from increasingly becoming politicized and deviated from its objective. All in all, both parties should focus on common interests and values rather than a disjunctive rhetoric.

In the short term, no progress is possible unless political actors on both sides change, and no activity will happen until chronic issues are resolved in the Turkey - EU relations. The Armenian and Cyprus issue have iconic statuses for Turkey's EU membership accession. So, if the European Union wants to repair its relation with Turkey, it should definitely refrain from putting the Cyprus and the Armenian issue as a political obstacle for Turkey.

Today, there is no alternative supranational organization for Turkey aside from the EU. So if both sides want to advance in a win-win relationship, they should pay attention to their political sensitivities and look for new ways to realize Turkey's EU membership.

Endnotes

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