

# **TURKEY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES OF A RESILIENT RELATIONSHIP**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The accession of Turkey to the European Union is undoubtedly the most complex and throughout all processes of enlargement of the bloc. Turkey is the country that waited longer to enter the European Union, always threatening to quit, but never actually leaving. What is sought to explain here are not only the reasons for such complexity, but the reason for the persistence of this relationship that has lasted over 50 years.*

**Key words:** *EU-Turkey Relationship; International relations; Entering EU*

**JEL Codes:** *F15, F50, F53, N44*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The relations between Turkey and the European Union (EU) began in 1959, when Turkey applied for the first time its membership as an associate member of the then European Economic Community. Since then, the relationship has been marked by many ruptures and new beginnings. What explains the continuity of this relationship despite the numerous obstacles faced and what are the prognoses for this relationship regarded as problematic?

The argument that is advanced here is that joining the European Union has become a state policy in Turkey, not due to the internalization of the merits of becoming a block member, but because of the interpretation, by all the main country political actors, of the meaning of a possible acceptance of Turkey by the European Union. In other words, being accepted became more important than actually participate in the integration project.

This particular interpretation is due to the historical relations between Turkey and Europe, prior to the application for membership as an associate member in 1959 and that, in fact, before the creation of the Republic in 1923. So, what will be arguing is that, despite the

many mishaps that mark the relations between these two actors, the negotiation for accession should continue to be pursued by Turkey, regardless of the political party that governs the country.

To explain this argument, it will first be provided a history of the European Union-Turkey relations, with emphasis on the post-2005 period, when the accession negotiations have been initiated. Then, the internal factors to the European Union and Turkey that are complicating this fragile relationship since 2005 will be analyzed. Throughout the article, we will demonstrate as a possible acceptance of the country by the European Union has become so crucial domestically. Finally, there will be an analysis of the potential for cooperation between Turkey and the European Union foreign policy as a result of the Arab Spring.

## **2. A RESILIENT RELATIONSHIP**

In 1963, the process started in 1959 was completed and Turkey became associate member of the European Economic Community. The then Prime Minister Ismet Inonu, at the time of signature of the Ankara Agreement, said that "being a member of the Western world, and in view of our system, from the beginning we were enthusiasts of the European Economic Community. We want to be part of the community "(Bozdaglioglu, 2003, p. 69). Likewise, the then Vice Prime Minister argued that "the desire of Turkey to join the European Economic Community as associate member was not based only on a simple short-term calculation. [Participate in the community] confirms that Turkey shares the same fate with the free West and the borders of Europe are drawn to the east and south of Turkey (Turhan Fevzioglu, in Bozdaglioglu 2003, p. 69).

The then Minister of Foreign Affairs acknowledged that the agreement was "essentially an economic agreement, "but emphasized that" confirmed and approved the Turkey's desire to be part of Europe "(Bozdaglioglu, 2003, p. 70). This desire to be accepted as part of Europe and, more deeply, have its identity confirmed as an European country is the product of the dynamic relations between Turkey and its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire and the European continent.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire from the 18th century was caused, among other factors, by nationalist movements, some of which were supported by Europe and military defeats, many of them to European countries. To Ottoman leaders, Europe has to be considered a direct threat - to defeat the Empire on the battlefield - or indirect – feeding the discontent among people under Ottoman rule. In order to prevent the decline and ultimately survive, the empire adopted a strategy that later would exert a great impact on the world view by the Ottoman elites and after by the republican elites: the modernization according to European standards to be recognized as equal.

First, having known the administrative and the military superiority of Europe, a modernization program of the Armed Forces and public administration was adopted from 1839 to 1876. Second, the Empire tried to be recognized as part of the European states system (Karaosmanoglu, 2000, p. 203). Despite the Treaty of Paris (1856) apparently grant such recognition, the issue that the capitulations system have not been abandoned shows that the Empire was not considered a full member, and its sovereignty continued to be disrespected (Bilgin, 2009, p. 116). So, at first, being accepted as a member of Europe was a survival strategy.

The Ottoman Empire finally collapsed after the First World War and, in addition to having lost all territories located outside of Anatolia, the territory of modern Turkey was divided among the winners of the conflict. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which formalized the shares, came to represent the culmination of European plans to disintegrate the Empire and exacerbated the already present fear of bad European intentions towards the Turks.

After the founding of the Republic in 1923, the modernizing and westernizing reforms started in the 19th century and continued by Young Turks (1908-1918), were retaken by the government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. However, the reforms promoted by Atatürk were even more profound: the goal was not only modernize the country to be recognized as a partner on an equal footing in order to survive. The Atatürk reforms longed for a complete break with the Ottoman and Islamic past and reorienting Turkey towards "European civilization". In view of Mustafa Kemal, Turkey should be a modern, Western, secular and homogeneous country (despite the heterogeneity of the population).

Over time, to be recognized as equal was no longer just a survival strategy and has become crucial to confirm the construction of Turkish identity as Western. The recognition and acceptance of Europe became particularly coveted, given the fragility of this construction internally. The Attempt during the Republican period to instill in the population this particular construction of identity - through the educational system and military service; control, marginalization and oppression of resistant groups like religious conservatives (*muhafazakarlar*), Kurds and religious minorities or not Turkish as Alevites, Armenians, Greeks and Jews - was not successful. The heterogeneity of the population, with different conceptions of identity, persisted.

Therefore, for the Republican elite - which historically populated the judiciary, the military and political parties such as the CHP (People's Republican Party) - the acceptance and recognition by Europe was seen as a key element of a strategy to ensure a precarious and fragile identity, subject to violent contestations (and suppressed with more violence).

Interestingly, however, Europe becomes at the same time, admired and feared. The distrust of Europe, a result of the so called "Sèvres Syndrome" (referring to the above Treaty) it is particularly visible in the position adopted by the republican elites in regarding the accession to the European Union. Despite the desire to become a member of block to have the Western identity of Turkey confirmed, there is a rejection of the conditions that must be met during the accession process. Republican elites are quite sensitive about the sovereignty of the country, since a violation of sovereignty is interpreted as a possible first step to disintegration of the country. Thus, European demands for the transfer of more rights to minorities like the Kurds are filtered by the Syndrome of Sevres and perceived as the latest European attempt to disintegrate the country. Therefore, despite the acceptance as a member of the European Union is a goal of these elites, participate in the integration process, which involves the delegation of certain powers to Brussels, is seen as problematic.

During the Cold War, Turkey has continued to approach the West, in general, and the European Community in particular and, in 1987, the country requested accession as a full member. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vahit Halefoğlu, explained that the request was "a result of our objective to integrate Turkey to Western civilization since the establishment of the Republic (Bozdaglioglu, 2003, p. 70).

In 1999, the European Union finally gave the country the candidate status to become a block member. A series of reforms was conducted, first the coalition government led by Bulent Ecevit from 1999 to 2002, and then by the Justice and Development Party government (AKP) led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. As a result of the reform program, the EU decided that Turkey had fulfilled the criteria of Copenhagen and that the accession negotiations could be initiated in 2005.

Since then, only one of the 35 chapters of the “*acquis communautaire*” has been completed and only 13 are being negotiated. Most of the remaining chapters are blocked by Cyprus, France or the European Council. In Turkey, the pace of reforms has slowed. Between 2010 and 2013 no chapter was open to negotiate. That is, since 2005, the year that seemed to crown a tortuous but resilient relationship between Turkey and the European Union, the membership possibility became more remote. The reasons concern the internal affairs of the European Union and Turkey.

Since the start of negotiations, some European leaders, notably the Austria and Germany, spoke in favor of an alternative arrangement for accession to Turkey. The proposal in general turned around a “*privileged partnership*”, which would exclude the country's decision-making process and would offer little advantages over what Turkey already enjoys as an associate member and a member of the customs union (which is part since 1995). France and Austria also indicated that the potential Turkish membership should be approved in national referendums. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, opposed openly to the country's entry into the bloc.

This type of discourse and attitudes provided ammunition to euro sceptics in Turkey and caused frustration in the population. The general perception has become that country, despite all the reforms already made and in progress to accommodate the “*acquis communautaire*”, would never be accepted by a European Union who did not fulfill their promises. A dramatic drop in support for entering the EU followed: in 2004, 73% of the population declared in favor of accession; from 2007, this ratio ranged between 34 and 48% (Independent Commission on Turkey, 2004, p. 9).

Moreover, the economic and financial crisis in which the European Union plunged since 2008 has resulted in an increase in opposition of European populations to the accession of a predominantly Muslim country.

This opposition is not restricted to Turkey, but is part of a wider debate on the (lack of) integration of immigrant populations in Europe made in local, national and European elections, and that, is partly responsible for the rise of far-right parties in several European countries. However, the presence of about 9 million Turks and descendants in European territory intensified rejection. In short, one Europe in crisis seems unwilling to welcome new members, particularly a populous country and mostly Muslim like Turkey.

In Turkey, this growing opposition from Europe reinforced the lack of government's determination to proceed with the reforms demanded by accession process - some of them quite painful. The lack of commitment by the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was also partly the result of internal problems faced: alleged plans to overthrow the government, a process by the Constitutional Court to close the party and a threat of intervention by the military. From 2007 the pace of reforms has slowed considerably.

Still, the government has made important changes, notably with respect to the balance of power between civil and military and question of the Kurds.

It is interesting to explain, despite the deceleration in the pace of reforms the reasons why the party with Islamic roots took to himself the goal of accession. This question becomes relevant since, historically Turkish parties with Islamic tilt leading up to and influenced the AKP, such as those led by Necmettin Erbakan, opposed the accession to European Union.

The parties led by Erbakan were contrary to European and western orientation in terms of foreign policy and favored a country leadership role in the Muslim world. For Erbakan, the European Union was no more than a plan to assimilate the Muslim Turkey in a Christian marriage (Bozdagliolu, 2008, p. 65- 66).

But the AKP, rather than adopting a speech "Islam versus West" came to power in 2002 by favoring the country's entry into the European Union; a turn surprising in the foreign policy of the party.

For the opposition, the AKP has embraced the cause of accession for instrumental reasons: reduce the power of the military and strengthen their own political power. Although it is clear that the accession process benefited the AKP, since their opponents have been weakened and the balance between civilian and military now hangs in favor of the former, it is argued here that the AKP inherited the republican elites the desire to be accepted by the European Union.

In the case of the AKP, the reason is not having a Western identity confirmed since the construction of the Turkish identity by AKP favors the multi-civilizational appearance - with emphasis on Sunni component. The conservative elites, represented by the AKP, pursue membership as a matter of prestige. The party leaders' speeches often emphasize that despite reforms not implemented yet, Turkey is already in same level as Europe.

In an article entitled "The Robust Man of Europe", the then Prime Minister Erdogan noted that "Turkey is a regional player, an international actor with a range of expanding soft power and considerable savings and resilient. [...] Sometimes I wonder if the power of Turkey is a deterrent its accession ". The Prime Minister added: "for more than half a century that Turkey knocked on Europe's door [...] Turkey today is different. We are not a country that expects more in the EU door as docile applicant [...] Europe has no real alternative to Turkey. Especially in a global order in which the balance of power is changing, the European Union needs Turkey to become even stronger, rich, inclusive and safe. I hope it's not too late for our European friends discover it "(Erdogan 2011, Newsweek p. n / d).

That is, the idea that Turkey should be accepted as one European member, first formulated as a survival strategy and then transformed into a need of confirmation of western identity of the country, is reversed. In AKP's discourse, is Europe that needs Turkey. Turkey is now an equal partner and Europe must recognize this fact. Suat Kiniklioglu, deputy chairman of the AKP for foreign affairs, points for the "inability [of the block] to treat Turkey as a strategic partner rather than just as any candidate country [...] Turkey is not happy with a fragile, unfair and unequal relationship with Europe. The country seeks a proper position,

respectful and dignified. "(Kiniklioglu, 2011 p. 66-68). That is, the conservative elite represented by the AKP continues to pursue a possible acceptance by the European Union. However, in this case, this acceptance is required as a matter of prestige, pride and dignity.

The APK and their constituents also share an ambivalent view on Europe with the republican elites and as a result they are also sensitive to any kind of action interpreted as meddling in the sovereignty of the country. Therefore, despite the worldview and foreign policy of the republican and conservative elites being considered antithetical, both pursue the goal to be accepted as a full member of the European Union without it meaning interference in the country's sovereignty - which, of course, is not a realistic goal.

After a period in which almost no progress has been reached, relations between Turkey and the European Union seemed to improve in 2013. François Hollande, elected president of France in 2012, moderated the opposition to Turkey membership and unblocked the opening of Chapter 22 (Regional Policy and Coordination Regional Instruments); one of which had been unilaterally vetoed by France and the first to be opened in three years.

Negotiations on this chapter started in November 2013 and in January 2014, President Hollande visited Turkey. In the same month Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan made his first visit to Brussels in five years. In Germany, the new coalition government abandoned the use of the term "privileged partnership". Despite the rhetoric change does not signal a shift position, a more moderate speech signals more cautious approach. However, despite these advances seen since early 2013 in relations between Turkey and the European Union, obstacles persist.

Internally, Turkey continues to face a number of problems and still need to conduct a series of reforms to suit the European acquis. The difficult transformation of the country into a democracy that respects freedoms and fundamental rights is partly explained by the polarization between the main domestic political actors. With less concrete membership perspective due to the lack of commitment by the European Union, political groups and civil society that were joined in 1999-2005 period, lost the common cause on the basis of which they put aside their differences.

This bias can be seen more clearly in two episodes: the Gezi protests of June 2013 and the corruption scandals that involved AKP members in late 2013 and early 2014 (Independent Commission on Turkey, 2014, p.21).

Demonstrations against the destruction of Gezi Park in Istanbul for the construction of a shopping center in June 2013 demonstrated quite clearly the polarization between the government and civil society. The brutal police response to the initial demonstrations swelled protests. They spread to other cities and began to put together a very heterogeneous group including environmentalists, socialists, secular, Kemalist, anarchists, Kurdish, anti-capitalist, Muslims, the GLBT movement and feminist, academic, fans of football teams and nationalists. Despite having various demands, these groups were able to unite against the overreaction of police and the growing authoritarianism and interference in the population lifestyle by the Erdogan government.

The corruption scandal that emerged over the end of 2013 and early 2014 highlighted the growing rift between the former AKP allies and the movement led by Fethullah Gulen. For the AKP, the infiltration of the police, the judiciary and the media by members of the movement has become a nuisance. For the movement, the style of government increasingly authoritarian of Prime Minister Erdogan is intolerable.

This growing polarization, combined with setbacks in freedom of expression - including but not limited to ban temporary Twitter and YouTube - and the judicial reforms – historically marked by structural weaknesses and increasingly subject to political interference - cast doubt on the ability and political will of the country to follow with the necessary reforms to become EU member European.

One possible loophole to approach would be in the framework of foreign policy.

The AKP government aspired to transform Turkey into a regional leader with autonomous foreign policy. Since 2007, when Turkey lined almost 100% of the declarations of the Foreign Policy and Common Security, the rate of compatibility continuously declined: in 2013, the rate was only 46% (European Commission, 2007 and 2013).

However, the confidence of the country was deeply shaken by the Spring Arab and as a result, the "pride" seen in the West in general and the EU in particular was moderate. Turkey began to seek more collaboration with western countries, as seen in the decision to accept in Turkish territory the installation of radars for a NATO missile shield and participate in the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 after initial hesitation. This approach may ultimately also benefit the relationship between Turkey and the European Union, at least in the field of foreign policy.

The ties that Turkey had been building with Middle Eastern countries since 2002, as part of the policy of "zero problems with neighbors" were progressively worn. The overthrow of the government of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt, made Turkey harshly criticized the military regime, which away not only from Cairo government but also Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The conflict in Syria had even more serious consequences for Turkey both domestically and at the regional level. Initially, Turkey sent delegations to the country to assist the regime of Bashar al-Assad to prepare democratic reforms that settled down the demands of the opposition. After being ignored, Erdogan's government began to support the rebels, including military aid, which undermined Turkey's relations with Iraq also and Iran. Turkey still have to deal with more than 1 million Syrians refugees in their territory, with the rise of Kurds in Syria and the growing influence of radical Islamic groups in Syria and Iraq.

These new dynamics and complications that arise in region due to Arab Spring, particularly the radicalization of the civil war in Syria and refugee crisis may create incentives for Turkey and the European Union align their foreign policies and jointly deal with challenges in the Middle East.

And indeed, the European Union and Turkey, since 2010, have been participating in regular dialogues to discuss foreign policy issues, even in a period in which the accession process was still asleep. The high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoglu, have met frequently to discuss issues related to the Balkans, North Africa, Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia.

That is, foreign policy could become a "gateway" to reset this so problematic relationship. Turkey to be included in the discussions concerning their neighborhood, would feel treated as a regional power and as a result tend to behave in a more conciliatory way. Already, the European Union would benefit from the experience of an actor with important interests at stake in the region.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

In short, what is sought to explain here was the persistence of the relationship between Turkey and the European Union, despite all the obstacles. With regard to Turkey, one can say that as a result of the history of relations between these two actors since the 19th century, the main political and social groups of the country target a possible acceptance as a full member of the block, despite the ambivalent view of the European Union and the sensitivity regarding the country's sovereignty. Therefore, although analyzes that predict otherwise, the path of Turkey towards the European Union should continue, independent of the government in question.



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