

IKV BRIEF

JUNE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND POSITIVE AGENDA IN TURKEY-EU RELATIONS: IS THERE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

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Currently, the EU and Turkey are engaged with the promotion of a positive agenda in their relations with a view to instigating a mutually beneficial and interest-oriented relationship. According to public opinion polls conducted by IKV each year between 2015 and 2019 (with TEPAV in 2019), support for EU membership among the population ranges between 60% to 78% while the expectation regarding the probability of accession in the near future is much lower -between 20% and 30% (IKV 2020, <https://www.ikv.org.tr/images/files/kamuoyu%20aras%CC%A7t%C4%B1rmasI%CC%87.pdf>). This situation is caused by a generally shared conviction that EU membership will be beneficial for Turkey and its citizens especially in terms of democratisation, economic welfare and right to move and reside in the EU. However despite the high level of support for EU membership, there is considerable disappointment and lack of trust that Turkey will be able to become a member of the EU in the near future. The stalemate in Turkey's accession process and decline of the credibility of the EU enlargement perspective are responsible for this downturn. In addition, Turkey's diversion from the EU reform path has led to further deterioration in the accession perspective and also contributed to growing estrangement between the parties.

Background: Turkey's Perception among the European Public

In order to assess the feasibility of the positive agenda that is being conceived in Turkey-EU relations at the moment, we need to look at background factors which will impact on future of the relations. Although Turkey is officially a candidate country "destined to join the Union under the same conditions as the other candidate countries" –as expressed in the Helsinki European Council of 1999-, it has recently been described in many other ways by the EU and its leaders. Turkey is generally referred to as a "neighbouring country", a "regional actor" even as a "threat" or "rival" for European security interests.

A survey conducted by the ECFR reveals that 41% of the respondents see Turkey either as a rival (15%) or adversary (26%), while 25% view Turkey as a necessary partner. Only 4% said that they regard Turkey as an ally which shares European values and interests. Another interesting result of the survey is that 30% of the respondents said they did not know, meaning that they did not have an idea about how to position Turkey (ECFR, 09.06.2021. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/crisis-of-confidence-how-europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world/>). Based on these results it could be said that there is still a chance to mend ties between Turkey and the EU based on the existence of those who see Turkey as a necessary partner and those who are not yet decided about Turkey's vocation in Europe.



Comparing the results of the survey for China and Russia with the results for Turkey, it is found that 25% of the respondents view China as a rival and 12% view the country as an adversary while 18% regard Russia as a rival and 17% as an adversary. Hence the proportion of those who view Turkey as an adversary is greater than those who view either Russia or China as an adversary. These results are quite alarming for the Turkey-EU relationship and Turkey's vocation in Europe in general. Turkey is a candidate to join the EU, a member of the Council of Europe since its foundation and a member of NATO that has served a vital role in the defence of the transatlantic area during the Cold War. Turkey is still serving a vital purpose in the fight against terrorist organisations such as ISIS, and hosting nearly 4 million refugees who would otherwise seek to find refuge in other countries including EU Member States.

This situation attests to the fact that there is a discrepancy between the formal status of Turkey in European institutions and organisations as a member or candidate country and the growing tension and strife in its perception in the eyes of Europeans, be it at the level of elites or the general public. This discrepancy in turn creates complications in defining the contours of the relationship which is very clearly manifested in the current status of Turkey-EU relations. The positive agenda has been an attempt by the EU to resolve such complications in the relations and lay the basis for a restructured relationship. However, the EU's effort to lay Turkey's membership perspective to rest and replace it with a partnership model still runs counter to Turkey's resolve not to abandon the membership target. A candidate country which fails to ignite the reform process towards EU criteria is also a contradiction in terms and results in a loss of credibility and persuasiveness.

The lack of harmony between deeds and words is a problem both for individual candidate countries but also and at a larger scale for the EU as well. In the case of Turkey's candidacy process, such ambiguities as "open-ended nature of accession process", wasting the opportunity to reunite Cyprus on the basis of the Annan Plan during the 2004 enlargement of the EU, suspending eight chapters in accession negotiations due to the Cyprus issue and questioning of Turkey's European credentials by leaders such as President Sarkozy of France could be interpreted as a lack of integrity on the part of the EU and may attest to a fundamental contestation in defining Europe and its borders.

The Positive Agenda as a *Panacea* for Turkey-EU Relations?

Relations with Turkey were again on the agenda of the European Council which met on 24 June 2021. In the previous European Council meeting which convened online on 25 March, the strategy towards Turkey was defined as being "phased, proportionate and reversible" and aiming to "enhance cooperation in a number of areas of common interest". The leaders stated that they would return to the issue in their June Summit. The 24 June Conclusions included a reference to the "EU's readiness to engage with Turkey" based on the conditionalities set out in the March European Council. They also welcomed the "de-escalation" in Eastern Mediterranean which was propelled by Turkey's withdrawal of its vessels from the contested waters and restart of exploratory



talks and high-level visits between Turkey and Greece and also underlined the need to sustain this situation.

Customs Union modernisation: Can it be the low-hanging fruit?

Expectations regarding the start of talks on the modernisation of the Turkey-EU Customs Union were running high as the European Council in March referred to the June Summit to take further action on the positive agenda. While the matter was deliberated among the leaders, it became evident that the time to finalize the mandate to start negotiations was still not ripe. The Council conclusions stated that the Council “takes note of the start of work at technical level towards a mandate for the modernisation of the EU-Turkey Customs Union and recalls the need to address current difficulties in the implementation of the Customs Union, ensuring its effective application to all Member States”. Hence, technical talks between Turkey and the EU would need to continue with a view to resolving the current trade irritants in the Customs Union while at the same time, preparations for a mandate for the modernisation of the Customs Union would be pursued.

This mandate could be adopted by the Council “subject to additional guidance by the European Council”. This quite tricky expression implied that the European Council would have to specifically task the Council to go ahead with the mandate, a process which would again bring about bargaining and compromise among the Member states at the highest level. Taking into account the critical and sanctions-oriented approaches towards Turkey espoused by some Member States, deliberations on whether or not to task the Council to finalize the mandate to start modernisation talks could be quite cumbersome and would depend upon the progress of technical work between the parties regarding the resolution of current difficulties in the functioning of the Customs Union. Whether or not the Cyprus issue would still be utilized to prevent the start of the modernisation process is quite ambiguously formulated in the Conclusions and not yet clear.

Engagement at the highest level: Window dressing or sincere exchange?

While the “jewel in the crown” of the positive agenda can be denoted as the Customs Union modernisation, refugee cooperation, restart of high level dialogues and people-to-people contacts –which was omitted from the June 24 Conclusions- are the other components. The European Council noted that preparatory work was ongoing with regard to the high level dialogues on “issues of mutual interest, such as migration, public health, climate, counterterrorism and regional issues”. This seems to be a more easily attainable part of the positive agenda and despite the lack of high stakes involved due to the absence of an integration perspective, it may turn out to be a useful tool for engagement between the parties. Taking into account that high level dialogues will address very relevant issues such as climate, public health and counterterrorism, both Turkey and the EU may use this platform to coordinate their respective policies and strategies and engage in meaningful cooperation.



Refugee cooperation as a trigger for closer relations?

Last but not least, refugee cooperation remains as the most critical issue on the agenda of Turkey-EU relations especially from the point of view of the EU which finds it difficult to develop a coherent migration policy based on equitable burden sharing. The most concrete step has been taken by the European Council in this issue area by calling on the Commission “to put forward without delay formal proposals for the continuation of financing for Syrian refugees and host communities in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and other parts of the region”. However, refugee cooperation between Turkey and the EU is part of a larger framework of the EU’s support to Syrian refugees and host communities in the region and is not directly linked to the other aspects of Turkey-EU relations. In this respect, it cannot be seen as a continuation of the 18 March 2016 Turkey-EU Statement which included a more general perspective on Turkey-EU relations including targets such as opening of chapters in accession negotiations, visa liberalisation and Customs Union modernisation.

The enduring shadow of the Cyprus issue

The Cyprus issue remained a primary concern of the European Council which creates a flash point in Turkey-EU relations due to the differing positions of the parties. The European Council noted its support for a comprehensive settlement of the problem “on the basis of a bicomunal, bizonal federation with political equality, in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions”. It also referred to the informal meeting which took place in Geneva in April and noted its regret that the meeting did not lead to the resumption of formal negotiations. The Council aimed to continue to play an active role in the process which seems to be quite challenging since the Turkish side expressed its preference for a two-state solution on the island.

Continuing relevance of values as the basis of common interests

The elephant in the room was political criteria that the EU criticized Turkey for failing to implement in recent regular reports and declarations. The European Parliament has been quite vocal in this respect calling for the suspension of the accession negotiations due to failure to fulfil the political aspects of the Copenhagen criteria. The European Council included the political criteria in its new strategy towards Turkey, yet avoided to attribute priority to this issue area. Reference to rule of law and fundamental rights as a key concern came towards the end of the part on Turkey in the conclusions of the June European Council. It was noted that dialogue in these issues remains “an integral part of the EU-Turkey relationship”.

The positive agenda was earlier devised by the EU in 2020 mostly in connection with the rising tension in the Eastern Mediterranean and contain Turkey with the promise of a revitalisation of the relations. The membership perspective is absent and hence the political criteria for membership are placed on the back burner. The relevance of democratic and good governance issues for Turkey-EU relations not only in the



accession perspective but also in the other areas of the positive agenda should be taken into account. It is impossible to conceive a durable cooperation between Turkey and the EU based only on interests since coinciding of interests is closely linked with shared values and world views.

The Conclusions ended with a note on “shared interest of the EU and Turkey in regional peace and stability” and statement that Turkey and all actors are expected to contribute to the resolution of regional crises. While this statement may be seen as a routine formulation, it still provides an idea about the evasive approach the EU displays towards regional crises in the neighbourhood. While the EU fails to make a strong impact for conflict resolution in this region, it also does not appear to appreciate that concrete action should accompany discursive statements in foreign and security policy.

The Way Forward

In a nutshell, it may be concluded that there is still some way to go in the implementation of the positive agenda. Preparations are underway regarding the current problems in the Customs Union and convening of high level dialogues while a decision has already been taken to continue financial support to Syrian refugees in Turkey. The issue of people-to-people contacts is not clarified at this point due mostly to the restraining effects of COVID-19 and the unpopularity of visa liberalisation issue. It should also be added that 6 out of 72 criteria embodied in the visa liberalisation roadmap are yet to be fulfilled by Turkey.

As supporters of Turkey’s integration to the EU, we very much look forward to an effective implementation of the positive agenda, most prominently the modernisation of the Turkey-EU Customs Union as a way to revitalize Turkey-EU relations, accelerate harmonisation and convergence in such areas as good governance, circular economy, digitalisation and Green Deal, and contribute to the final goal of membership to the Union. To answer the question posed in the title of the brief note, it could be said that there is light at the end of the tunnel but it is up to Turkey and the EU’s resolve to make sure that this light is not just a flicker of a candle but a powerful light source that will shine over the future of the relations and clarify any ambiguities and misunderstandings between the parties.

