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Quest For New Formulas in Turkey and EU Relations (New Models Based on “Good Faith” and “Necessity”)

Nilgün Arısan Eralp

TEPAV EU Institute Director

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(New Models Based on “Good Faith” and “Necessity”)

Lately, the deadlock in Turkey's EU accession process and the interpretation of Turkey's active foreign policy as a “shift of axis” by some segments of “western world” resulted in such evaluations where one of the factors behind Turkey's new activism is presented as alienation of Turkey by the EU. Last summer this interpretation was clearly emphasized in the international media by the US Secretary of Defense Mr. Robert Gates and then the US President Mr. Barack Obama.

In order to play its part in alleviating the so called “shift of axis” worries and to benefit from the increasing global economic and strategic significance of Turkey, in their meeting on 11 December 2010 EU Foreign Ministers proposed closer relationship (“strategic dialogue”) with Turkey, while leaving aside “*problems associated with membership perspective for the moment*”. Turkish Foreign Minister Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu while voicing the first official response of Turkey to this proposal stated that given the slow pace of accession negotiations, the “strategic dialogue” between Turkey and the EU can not be strengthened.

Secretary General of NATO, Mr. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in his statement in the European Voice dated 30 September, iterated that the NATO-EU cooperation stumbles mainly because of the Cyprus conflict and proposed a new role for Turkey in EU's security policy to surmount this problem. He raised the same concern in his recent visit to Turkey.

Almost simultaneously with these developments, on 16-17 September 2010 the group of Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament which supports Turkey's accession process came up with a new suggestion to give a new momentum to Turkey's EU accession process which is in a serious bottleneck. Other factors that led to this proposal were the negative stance of France and Germany to Turkey's full membership and the obvious concerns of EU public regarding Turkey's membership. In order to alleviate these problems, the aforementioned group started to work on the “gradual integration” alternative as they “want Turkey's active participation in discussions in the EU via the model of gradual integration until full membership”. According to the co-chairman of the group of Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats, there is a concrete difference between the “gradual integration” and the “privileged partnership”: the former has a dynamic rather than a static nature as it targets to gradually integrate Turkey into the process. If this formula is to be accepted Turkey would take its place in the EU institutions and participate in the discussions without a voting right which would be attained via full membership.

In October, the European Council on Foreign Relations published a report on European security architecture called *'The spectre of a multipolar Europe'* (written by Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, with Jana Kobzova, Dimitar Bechev and Andrew Wilson) The report argues that the EU, Russia and Turkey must come together in a triologue to build a new European security architecture. The Report also recommends to strengthen Turkey's EU accession process via opening some strategic negotiation chapters like energy and common foreign and security policy alongside recognition of its recent emergence as a credible regional power.

This is not the first time “alternative membership” or “closer relationship” formula for Turkey are being discussed. Even though a clear definition for it has not been found yet, the “privileged partnership” formula which aims to restrict the EU-Turkish relations to a few areas (like extended customs union and common foreign and security policy) and permanently keep Turkey’s status as an “associate member” or partner, has been brought up by the political actors of Austria, France and Germany since 2000s. The European Parliament also discussed this formula upon the proposal of Christian Democrats in 2008. In the aforesaid proposal neither sovereignty sharing nor codecision has been envisaged. Naturally the “privileged partnership” has never been accepted by Turkey and the member states who support Turkey’s accession.

The important point that needs particular attention is the substantial difference between “gradual integration” and “privileged partnership”. Privileged partnership is presented as an alternative of full membership; whereas “gradual integration” is an intermediate stage in membership process. Although it necessitates a serious discussion, “gradual integration” seems to be an idea that has been developed to keep Turkey’s accession process alive.

Cemal Karakaş, who is among the group of people who brought up the gradual integration idea first, in an article he wrote in “Europe’s World” in 2007 (“*A Compromise Solution for Turkey’s EU Ambitions*”) presented it as a formula that is ahead of privileged partnership but behind full membership. In Karakaş’s article a dynamic three – step integration model was suggested. The preliminary stage would cover basic integration and full membership would be completed in three stages. The duration of each stage would be decided by mutual consent. Unlike the privileged partnership, in this model Turkey’s status will remain as “candidate” in all three stages. The first stage is envisaged to be made up of enhanced customs union (including services and agricultural products).

In Karakaş’s proposal Turkey would be in the decision making mechanism regarding the areas in which it is integrated into the EU, but would not have any veto rights in the Council of Ministers. In other areas, the country would have an observer status in the decision making mechanism.

The main difference between Karakaş’s model and the proposal of group of Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament is that Turkey would not have any voting rights in the EU decision making mechanism until membership in the latter model

The “gradual integration” concept was later brought up at a round table conference organized by Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies’ (EDAM) round table in October 2008 as the following :

“if it would take it so long to take Turkey into the EU as a full member and if it would be very difficult for EU to “digest” such a big country, then let’s take Turkey into the EU gradually and let’s start from the most functional areas”

In the meeting it was assumed that these could be concrete areas where both Turkey and the EU are willing to cooperate like energy and defense and security. In line with the discussed formula “*Turkey’s EU membership would first cover only security and defense dimension where the country would have the competences of a full member limited to the design and implementation of these policies*”.

EVALUATION

Although the “strategic dialogue” and “gradual integration” proposals are not very clear, the following evaluation can be made based on the existing information.

Both suggestions aim at breaking the deadlock in Turkey’s EU perspective via considering the realities of the current conjuncture. The difficulties in surmounting the existing problems and the lack of a common will on the EU’s side on Turkey’s EU membership necessitates to direct the EU-Turkey relationship to a different status. However the realization of the above proposals does not seem very feasible for a variety of reasons. To begin with, the accomplishment of these proposals requires reformulation of the accession negotiation process. This does not seem to be very realistic no matter how slow the process proceeds.

A. STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

The most important factor concerning the “strategic dialogue” is the participation of Turkey to the relevant decision making process with a voting right. If Turkey can not be included in the decision making mechanism in this area with a voting right, it would face similar problems it confronts in the case of “common commercial policy” and “free trade agreements” within the framework of the customs union.

In line with the Customs Union Decision, Turkey can not participate in the decision making mechanism in the aforementioned areas. Hence “transfer of sovereignty” rather than “sovereignty sharing “ prevails in the implementation of “common commercial policy” and “free trade agreements” which cause serious problems of implementation for Turkey. One should envisage the extent and nature of the potential problems once the theme becomes foreign policy.

As stated above, the main reason that led the EU to propose “strategic dialogue “ to Turkey is the increasing importance of the country in its region. However it should be foreseen that the “regional power” of a country who would be connected to the EU via a “strategic dialogue” and with a weaker membership perspective would diminish. Recent research in the region indicate that Turkey’s regional weight is closely related with its EU membership perspective. Hence albeit ambiguous, the membership perspective that would be perceived as being replaced by a “strategic dialogue” would impair Turkey’s increasing global significance.

A different standpoint argues that as long as Turkey continues to be an important NATO member, it would not need such a cooperation. This viewpoint questions to what extent can Turkey count on the EU in the case of a military and political threat if it is anchored to the EU via a special status that excludes membership.

A supporting argument would emphasize that Turkey, being already a member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe, having its troops in EU Peace Keeping Operations in Afghanistan, Balkans and Africa, has nothing to gain from a closer relationship or “strategic dialogue” with the EU.

An optimistic albeit not very widespread view suggests that if a “strategic dialogue” formula can be accepted, Turkey could play a role in shaping the EU foreign policy decisions if not in making them.

B. GRADUAL INTEGRATION

Some observers give particular importance to this alternative, visualizing that it would incorporate Turkey into the EU decision making mechanism and guarantee the country's membership in the long term.

Those who approach to the issue from the same viewpoint think that "the gradual integration" formula could bring a solution to the problems created by the free trade agreements in the customs union process. According to them this formula would finally necessitate Turkey's participation in the decision making mechanism regarding the common commercial policy. Furthermore "gradual integration" would not require demanding a "date" or "membership guarantee" to remove the bottleneck in the negotiations. Hence "gradual integration" can be interpreted as being a new design of membership that would assure Turkey's membership in the long term in case of a complete halt in accession negotiations and prevent the country from breaking away from the "West".

However, while evaluating the "gradual integration" model one should question how it can be implemented practically :

- Would the slowly progressing accession negotiation process be terminated or redefined?
- Isn't it necessary to determine the current level of integration between Turkey and the EU (some observers argue that Turkey has already adopted to 50 to 60 % of the EU acquis) ?
- How would the areas to be covered in different integration levels be determined ?
- What kind of a transition procedure would be followed between integration levels?
- Would Turkey have a voting right in EU decision making mechanism regarding the areas included in different integration levels?
- Does EU's legal structure is suitable for such a membership model ? Would the "enhanced cooperation" whose implementation was simplified in the Lisbon Treaty provide a legal basis?

In addition to these practical questions there are other issues that need to be taken into consideration in the case of "gradual integration" :

"Gradual integration " seems to require a substantial amendment in the legal structure of the enlargement policy of the EU. For this amendment all member states including those who oppose Turkey's accession should be convinced.

Turkish public opinion who might interpret "gradual integration" as a second class membership should also be convinced. This can be nearly impossible if Turkey can not be included in the decision making mechanisms with a voting right.

Hence the new formulas (some are bona fide like the "gradual integration" and some stem from necessity as the "strategic dialogue") for Turkey-EU relations should be approached carefully before giving a binding response which should be based on a detailed analysis considering all the pros and cons of both proposals.