



TURKEY-EU RELATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE 2014 PROGRESS REPORT: Same Old Song With A Different Meaning

The 2014 Progress Report of the European Commission for Turkey was published in an atmosphere of a new Turkish opening to the European Union (EU). It is worth to have a look at whether there is a sound basis for hope for a promising new era in the relations between Turkey and the EU and whether the last Progress Report substantiate these hopes.

The 2014 Progress Report went almost unnoticed. Given the "ring of fire" surrounding the country and domestic upheavals, this is understandable. However this lack of enthusiasm regarding the progress reports of the EU has been the usual case in recent years.

¹ <http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1139/Nilgun+Arisan+Eralp>

Significance of 2014

However this year should have been different; after all 2014 was declared to be the year of the EU by the then Prime Minister and current President Tayyip Erdoğan. His statement was supported with important developments events in Turkey-EU relations in late 2013 and early 2014:

- After three years of a standstill, an important chapter in the accession negotiations (Chapter 22: Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments) was opened in November 2013. This chapter was among the five previously blocked by France during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential term.
- In mid-December, the parties initiated a visa dialogue, agreeing to a long-awaited roadmap for the liberalization of visas for Turkish nationals wishing to travel to the EU. This followed Turkey's agreement to sign the "Readmission Agreement," which was a precondition for the instigation of this process that compels Turkey to take back third-country nationals who have entered the EU illegally via Turkey.²
- Important high-level visits occurred in early 2014. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan visited Brussels after a hiatus of four years to hold meetings with the top executives of the European Commission, European Council, and European Parliament. He also visited Germany and met with Chancellor Angela Merkel. French President François Hollande also visited Turkey, despite France still blocking four negotiation chapters.
- In February 2014, after two years of standstill, a joint statement³ of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders announced the resumption of peace talks to resolve the Cyprus dispute under the auspices of the UN Secretary General's Good Offices mission.

Reasons of optimism

Following these developments and after the elections in EU (elections for the European Parliament) and presidential elections in Turkey, people started to talk about the initiation of a new and promising era in Turkey-EU relations, mainly because the new Turkish government formed after the presidential elections seems to be refocusing on the EU agenda :

- In the new government programme Turkey's EU accession appears as a strategic objective again;

² Kirişçi, Kemal. "Will the readmission agreement bring the EU and Turkey together or pull them apart?", CEPS, 4 February 2014, <http://www.ceps.be/book/will-readmission-agreement-bring-eu-and-turkey-together-or-pull-them-apart>

³ Cyprus Mail, "Joint Declaration: final version as agreed between the two leaders", February 11, 2014.

- The new EU minister Volkan Bozkır is a former diplomat whose whole professional career has been dedicated to Turkey-EU relations, in which he has been in critical positions.
- Turkey adopted a new 'European Union Strategy'⁴ intended to revitalise its accession process and reiterate its commitment to it.

The re-commitment efforts seem to be backed by public support as the 2014 Transatlantic Trends Survey of German Marshall Fund (GMF)⁵ shows that 53 per cent of Turkish citizens think that EU membership would be beneficial for Turkey.

Also, there have been some developments in Europe, which have been evaluated as encouraging by Turkey:

- Fortunately and unusually there has not been any statement coming from an EU member state or politician excluding Turkey based on identity issues recently;
- After the European elections, the changes in the key positions of The EU institutions were greeted positively in Turkey. The upcoming President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and the President of the European Parliament Martin Schultz have been against a categorical rejection of Turkey's accession perspective questioning the Europeanness of the country. The new High Representative or Foreign and Security Policy Federica Mogherini comes from a country (Italy) and a government which has been supportive of Turkey's EU aspirations and finally the new President of The European Council, Donald Tusk was the Prime Minister of the country (Poland) where there is almost a bipartisan support for enlargement and Turkey's EU accession.

Other Side of the Picture

Can all these form a sound basis for a revitalisation of Turkey-EU relations? Let's try to be the devil's advocate and look at the other side of the picture:

- EU accession has always been rhetorically a strategic objective of almost all the governments in the last decade;
- The new EU strategy is almost a replica of the one prepared in 2010⁶ which could not be implemented and unfortunately Turkey lacks a study analysing the reasons of this non-implementation in order to be able to surmount them this time;

⁴ <http://www.ab.gov.tr/files/foto/icing.pdf>

⁵ http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2012/09/Trends_2014_complete.pdf

⁶ http://www.abgs.gov.tr/files/strateji/yabs_tr1.pdf

- It has already been declared by the upcoming European Commission president that there will be a pause for enlargement for 5 years ⁷;
- The people who will soon hold key positions in EU institutions like Jean-Claude Juncker, Martin Schultz and Johannes Hahn (soon the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations) have stated in different occasions that Turkey, where fundamental freedoms are at stake, is clearly far away from EU membership ⁸. They specifically refer to the bans imposed on social media as a major source of concern;
- Some independent Turkey observers in the EU even go further and argue that "unless the EU were to dump its 'political criteria' for realpolitik's sake, it is hard to see a clear path for Turkey's entry into the EU" ⁹;
- Greek Cypriots have pulled out of peace talks recently because of the sovereignty issues surrounding natural gas explorations;
- The aforementioned public opinion survey of GMF shows that Turkey's favorability in the EU is 10 points lower this year in the (31 per cent) than it was on average for the past four years. Notably in Germany this decline is 23 points from 46 per cent last year.

EU supporters in Turkey

Under these circumstances, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the stance of the EU supporters in Turkey:

- They regard or rather they want to see EU as a counterbalancing factor against the backsliding in fundamental freedoms in the country;
- They believe that universal values like democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms can only be established in Turkey via EU accession and that's why they support EU membership but;
- They have a great disbelief in the sincerity and hence credibility of both parties' approach to Turkey's EU accession process;

⁷ <http://juncker.epp.eu/my-priorities>

⁸ <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/juncker-and-schulz-say-no-turkey-last-tv-duel-302278>

<http://www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/austrian-enlargement-commissioner-turkey-important-partner-us-308831>

⁹ Marc Pierini, "The West and President Erdoğan", Hürriyet Daily News, 14 August 2013

- They together with the Turkish government question why EU cannot/ does not remove the unilateral blockage of some member states on some crucial negotiation chapters like Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice Freedom and Security);
- Together with the EU they question why in a negotiating candidate country like Turkey fundamental freedoms and rule of law are still at stake ;
- They question the reasoning behind the declaration of the upcoming Commission president regarding the pause in enlargement for five years when it is a given fact that none of the negotiating countries could complete negotiation process in this period. Then what's the use of stating the obvious?
- Finally they question whether the decision makers in Turkey really see Turkey's future in the European set of values. They think that "decision-makers are supportive of EU membership in principle but in general they seem to be uncomfortable with key elements of EU conditionality,"¹⁰ particularly those that appear in the form of norms and values.

In these circumstances, it is important to see whether the 2014 Progress Report herald a new era in Turkey-EU relations.

What does the 2014 Progress Report say?

As always it is an evidence based, fair picture of what has been done so far. The new EU minister of Turkey described it as constructive and objective.

Very briefly the 2014 report says nothing new. It raises more or less the same issues like the previous one, but it seems to be much more concerned, especially in the area of political criteria.

Political Criteria

After referring to the strategic nature of Turkey for the EU and the importance of further co-operation, with special emphasis on the developments in the joint neighborhood, praising the important humanitarian support provided by Turkey to fleeing Syrians and renewed efforts in the peace process with the Kurds; like the previous one the Report argues that a real participatory pluralist democracy has not yet been consolidated in Turkey.

It expresses serious concerns regarding the independence of the judiciary and the protection of fundamental freedoms. (especially freedom of expression and assembly).

¹⁰ Ziya Öniş, "Conservative Globalists versus Defensive Nationalists: Political Parties and Paradoxes of Europeanisation in Turkey" in Turkey's Road to European Union Membership: National Identity and Political ed. Susannah Verney and Kostas Ifantis, Routledge, 2009.

The specific issue that was underlined last year was the Gezi Park protests and the way were repressed, this year it is the corruption allegations and how they are being handled. It is stated that allegations of corruption in December 2013 have given rise to serious concerns regarding the independence of the judiciary and separation of powers.

Cyprus

The Report stresses the importance of defending sovereign rights of EU Member States. This includes the right explore and exploit natural resources in accordance with the EU acquis and Turkey is invited to respect this sovereignty.

Economic Criteria

Since 2008 Turkey has been referred as a functioning market economy. Turkey's economic performance is evaluated positively, however the country is warned against potential dangers of high current account deficit, increasing inflation and declining growth rate together with high indebtedness.

The Progress Report for the first time states that the formation of economic policies is affected by the political tension in the country and shares its concern regarding the opaqueness in the state aids and public procurement systems in the country.

Negotiations

In the area of negotiations the Report repeats the crucial sentences of the one in 2013: "only through active and credible accession negotiations the full potential of EU-Turkey relations can be exploited" and "Opening negotiations on the relevant chapters on rule of law and fundamental rights would provide a roadmap for reforms in these key areas".

However there has not been any sign of development regarding aforementioned statements. Although the causes of this it is not openly stated, the Report for the first time confesses that "work on a number of negotiating chapters has been interrupted over the years, due to lack of consensus among Member States."

Conclusion

Contrary to the expectations, the Report does not indicate a breakthrough in the relationship. On the contrary would not be wrong to think that Turkey's performance regarding "rule of law" (one of the three pillars of enlargement) may emerge as another stumbling block in its already problematic accession process to the EU. Turkey's performance in the two other pillars of enlargement, namely public administration and economic government does not seem promising either.

Regarding the accession, the picture resembles to a dialogue of deaf. If we leave aside the existing political blockages, EU demands significant steps to be taken especially in the areas of rule of law and fundamental freedoms to bolster the negotiations whereas Turkey expects the opening of relevant chapters. It would be unrealistic to expect an active and credible accession process to come out of this vicious circle.

However both parties seem to be willing to keep the engagement in tact but the nature of the engagement is changing. Strategic nature of the relationship is being emphasised more and more.

The key approach in the Progress Report and in the statements coming from top EU officials is Turkey being a strategic partner rather than an accession partner. EU wants to have an efficient foreign policy cooperation with Turkey, whose position acts as a buffer between the EU and a strategic region whose instability might easily spread to Europe.

For Turkey, the security vacuum in its unstable neighbourhood necessitates a renewed approach toward the West and hence the EU. Some argue that the fragility of the economic situation—namely a declining growth rate, a large and structural current account deficit, heavy reliance on short-term capital inflows, declining foreign direct investment, and a private sector with large foreign currency liabilities— have played a significant role in Turkey's recent rapprochement to Europe.

The Report also gives insight to other areas where EU would like to cooperate with Turkey. These are having a common economic reform agenda, alignment of positions in G20, deepening economic integration via upgrading customs union and migration and energy co-operation.

This stance of the EU worries the EU supporters in Turkey. They are concerned that by regarding Turkey only as a strategic partner, EU would turn a blind eye to the level of democracy in Turkey which seems to get less comparable with the EU with all its reminders like rule of law, separation of powers and fundamental freedoms. This situation is sometimes referred as "illiberal democracy".

However, if we do our utmost to look at the bright side of the picture, if an efficient and pragmatic co-operation between the parties can be realised in various policy areas, this can remove the lack of mutual trust between the parties and might create a conducive environment to revive the accession process sometimes in the future.

Well, one can always hope or like the Turkish proverb "hope is the poor man's bread".