



IS THE EU READY FOR AND/OR WILLING TO A CHANGE IN TURKEY?

Although the European Union (EU) and the relations with it seem to be insignificant in a Turkey which has already been in the election atmosphere, they are in the agenda of the opposition (notwithstanding the fact that they are not very vocal about it). One of the reasons for this is the result of several opinion polls which indicate that there is a notable public support for the EU, especially among the youngsters.

As I have iterated in different occasions, Turkey is not a real candidate for the EU anymore, also it is far away from being a strategic partner. It is not regarded as being in the league of democratic countries. As referred to by some EU officials, mainly due to its geographic location and its role in the refugees/irregular migrants Turkey is now being qualified as an “*unavoidable*” partner. Even though the “balanced policy” that has been pursued by Turkey vis-à-vis Russia after the invasion of Ukraine has been praised by the EU, the allegations against Turkey regarding the circumvention of the sanctions and the perception that Turkey is being manipulated by Putin’s Russia has strengthened the cautious approach towards Turkey.

In such an environment, EU seems to assume that nothing would change in relations with Turkey, a possible change in the administration would not be reflected on foreign policy and accordingly the opposition would not have a different policy than the current administration. This seems to be taking the easy way out.

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

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The Opposition's Brussels Excursion

Approximately two months ago, foreign policy representatives of four parties from the "table of six" (Republican People's Party, Good Party, Democracy and Progress Party and Future Party) and Peoples's Democratic Party visited important EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament and EEAS), the permanent representations of important EU member states and some civil society institutions. Representatives of academia and think tanks from Turkey, including myself accompanied to this delegation as observers.

This belated visit of the opposition parties to Brussels was a necessary one, given the fact that against all odds Turkey is officially still a candidate country to the EU which has a significant support from the public in Turkey. Therefore, it is quite natural for the opposition parties' willingness to explain their policies and listen to EU's Turkey strategy if ever it has one.

In this visit the opposition parties emphasized that they want to open a new page with the EU via re-making the political landscape in which parties can talk with each other. They claim that their foreign policy will be based on the following principles:

- Respect for international law and Turkey's existing alliances;
- Compliance with the provisions of international conventions it has signed and approved, especially European Convention of Human Rights and Istanbul Convention
- Priority to diplomacy and dialogue;
- An institutional policy essentially based on the expertise of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- Recognition of the territorial integrity and non-intervention to the internal problems of the neighboring countries
- Pursuance of a pluralist policy based on national consensus.

While talking about the envisaged change in the foreign policy, the representatives of the opposition parties emphasized the need to get rid of the poisonous narrative entrapment and hence give up the gunboat diplomacy.

What was particularly noticeable in this visit for us the observers is that: being aware of the critical turning point Turkey faces domestically and internationally, the opposition parties' representatives responsibly tried to disregard their disagreements and reach a consensus based on aforementioned principles. Hence they made us feel their decisiveness to pursue a functional and respectable foreign policy. However we could not quite understand the impact of this decisiveness on EU officials as it was very difficult to note a reaction.

The Critical Question: Is the EU ready for a change in Turkey? Does it have a strategy vis-à-vis Turkey?

The foreign policy representatives of the opposition parties made it clear that they are realistic about the accession perspective of Turkey; they think there is a light at the end of tunnel but there are a lot to do in Turkey in the short and medium term in the areas of democracy fundamental rights and especially rule of law. While taking serious steps in these areas they are ready to have a healthy dialogue and co-operation based on mutual trust with the EU.

Whilst the possible constituents of this co-operation according to the representatives of the opposition are economy, refugees and visa liberalisation, the EU side claimed that the most possible starting point would be the modernisation of the customs union.

The most critical questions directed to the EU officials by the foreign policy representatives of the opposition parties was : “Have you ever thought that there would be a change in the administration in Turkey and its possible impact on Turkey-EU relations ?” and “Do you have a strategy vis-à-vis Turkey?”

It is hard to claim that the EU officials gave a satisfactory answer to these questions, let alone they gave any answer. Their reaction was questioning whether the current administration would lose in the upcoming elections, whether it would accept the defeat if that would be the case and whether Turkey can manage to have fair elections.

Another important factor that was also raised by the representatives of the opposition parties in the meetings is that the EU unfortunately does not differentiate between the administration and the citizens of Turkey. The EU representatives we met did not give the impression that they are interested and knowledgeable about the opinion of the public in Turkey regarding the developments in Turkey. Surely the limited contacts of the opposition with their counterparts in the EU have a role in this, however I think EU is not interested in the thoughts and demands of the citizens and civil society in Turkey anymore.

My impression after the meetings can be summarised as follows: the EU institutions, no matter how much they dislike and do not trust the current administration in Turkey, have prepared themselves to a continuity in Turkey. They seem unprepared for a new Turkey that would remind its candidacy and demand the re-initiation of the accession negotiations after implementing serious reforms in line with the universal norms. They regard such a possibility very challenging. They also know that if Turkey would have fulfilled the membership conditions or completed a substantial part of them, it would almost be impossible to exclude Turkey in a period where the enlargement process is being reinvigorated, where the possible membership of Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova are being discussed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although EU still claims that it would respect the *pacta sunt servanda* principle, it does not seem to be willing to re-initiate such a process that it considers to be very challenging. EU seems to be more inclined to carry on the piecemeal transactional relationship with the current administration that would comprise of the issues it would choose. It seems that the negative stance of the opposition regarding the refugees enhances this approach of the EU.

I also have gathered that, in order to legitimise its above mentioned stance, EU has been instrumentalising the “Cyprus problem”. Although it is being referred as “elephant in the room” by the EU officials in our contacts, until now we have not witnessed a constructive approach of the EU to this problem that is in its soil. The representatives of the EU make reference to the solidarity principle regarding this and their silence about some legitimate claims of Turkey concerning exclusive economic zones in Eastern Mediterranean. However I do not think the solidarity principle would prevent the EU from elaborating on constructive solutions for Cyprus and discussing some of the legitimate claims of Turkey with Greece and Cyprus behind closed doors. After all it is a successful peace project isn't it?

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The silence of the EU officials when the opposition representatives , academicians and researchers asked them the following hypothetical question : *“What would be the EU’s reaction if Turkey and Turkish Cypriots (like they did during the referenda of the Annan Plan and Crans Montana process) would support a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation in line with the United Nations parameters, provided that there would be political equality between the communities ?”* seems to justify the above assertion.

In summary the EU does not seem to envisage a change in the administration and domestic/foreign policy in Turkey. Hence it has not been prepared for such a transformation. Furthermore it is not certain how much EU wants such a change.

Surely, it would be quite unfair to attribute such a stance to the EU as a whole. EU is not a monolithic bloc. We can talk about three viewpoints in the EU towards Turkey:

- Those who are categorically opposed to Turkey’s membership, no matter what the country does, and who use the current state as an excuse to keep Turkey out forever;
- Those who regard Turkey only as a strategic partner based on a realpolitik approach, particularly in the areas of security, migration and the economy, and usually turn a blind eye to the developments in the country;
- Those who always argue that Turkey has the right to become a member as long as it meets the conditions for membership. They were very explicit in supporting Turkey’s accession process during the period of Turkey’s political and economic reforms and are again very explicit in criticizing Turkey during its democratic backsliding.

The aforementioned assessment concerning the taken aback and unwilling approach of the EU with respect to a change in Turkey pertains to the first and second segments above. However the third group who has a fair approach towards Turkey also seems to be a bit hopeless about a transformation in the domestic and foreign policy of Turkey in line with the universal norms. Hence they do not seem to be ready for such a transformation.

However, despite all these, I think the opposition in Turkey should institute a functioning dialogue with the third group that would hopefully lead to a mutually beneficial relationship for both parties and, I believe if positive developments can be realised in Turkey that would extend and strengthen the third group in the EU.

A policy or policies based on a lack of a strategic vision would be quite damaging for both sides, especially taking into consideration the detrimental effects of the invasion of Ukraine by Putin’s Russia. I sincerely hope such an undesirable end could be prevented via a healthy and honest dialogue between the parties.