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A NEW STRATEGY FOR TÜRKİYE IS ON THE WAY

The leaders of the European Union (EU) member states came together last week for one of their biannual summits. While these summits, which used to be closely followed in the past, are no longer of interest to anyone except those working directly in the EU field - and even some of them are not interested- in a Türkiye that has already lost its EU membership perspective and with relations heading towards an uncertain future, President Tayyip Erdoğan's statement last weekend drew attention to the results of the summit. Türkiye's President laid down the condition of "paving the way for Türkiye in the EU" for Sweden's NATO membership to be approved. Even though the issue of EU membership in Türkiye is only rhetorical and it seems impossible to fulfill this condition in the current conjuncture, Türkiye seems to be back on the agenda of the EU. In any case, it does not seem possible for any government in Türkiye to openly say "we have given up on the EU membership perspective", even if the real picture is different. For this reason, it is important to keep track of what happens at EU summits. In fact, it has already been decided at the last summit to prepare a new road map for Türkiye.

As has been the case for a while, the final report of the summit, which took place on June 29-30, refers to Türkiye under the heading "Eastern Mediterranean". Democracy, human rights and the rule of law were not mentioned at all, since Türkiye is no longer considered a candidate by the EU, but treated as a third country.

Under the heading "Eastern Mediterranean", the EU, once again as usual, emphasized the urgent need for the resumption of negotiations for the settlement of the Cyprus

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

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issue under the guidance of the United Nations (UN) and stated that the EU would support a settlement process that would be carried out within the UN parameters and EU values and in line with the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Briefly, what is implied here is that a two-state solution will not be accepted. A point not taken into account or ignored by Türkiye is that the acceptance of a two-state solution cannot be put forward as a precondition for negotiations. Only through negotiations can such a solution be reached in the current circumstances. If Greek Cypriots once again reject political equality with Turkish Cypriots in a possible negotiation process, this issue might be addressed again. The Turkish Cypriots' opinion on this issue is also of critical importance.

For Türkiye, the main significance of the Summit is that the EU is on the eve of developing a new strategy for Türkiye. Referring to the EU's March 2021 statement on Türkiye and the outcomes of the EU summit in June 2021 and in light of the recent election results, the EU leaders requested a report from the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell on the state of EU-Türkiye relations, just like in 2021. This report, according to the summit decisions will be based on the tools and options previously put forward by the European Council and will aim to develop relations in a prospective and strategic manner.

What EU leaders expect from this report is actually clear in between their well-chosen words. The report is expected to provide guidance on how relations with Türkiye, which continues to be of "strategic importance" especially due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine and its NATO membership, can be maintained after the elections, far from the perspective of membership.² While this report is being prepared, EU member states, together with EU institutions will also exchange opinions on how to manage relations with Türkiye. This brings to mind the following question: "Will the EU develop a new strategy for Türkiye?" Although the constituents of the roadmap previously prepared by Borrell could not be materialized, maybe this time the EU will evaluate the current state of relations and develop a strategy that can be implemented. The "road map" previously prepared by BORRELL and published on March 22, 2021 can be summarized as follows:

- Updating the Customs Union:
- High-level dialogue in the areas of common interest, such as public health, climate, counter terrorism and regional issues;
- Strengthening cooperation with Türkiye regarding people to people contacts.

Additionally, the "roadmap" praised Türkiye for hosting around 4 million irregular migrants, including 3.6 million Syrians and committed to provide additional support to the country together with Jordan and Lebanon.

Among the above elements, only high-level dialogue has taken place and even agriculture has joined the list of areas that have been subject to this dialogue. Moreover, the transfer of funds to Türkiye for irregular migrants continues. Yet, there has been no progress on the issues included in the 18 March 2016 migration statement, such as the acceleration of negotiations, the updating of the Customs Union and visa free travel.

Another document referred to at the last EU summit on 29-30 June 2023, the conclusions of the EU Summit of 25 June 2021, vaguely and conditionally mentioned the modernization of

² No reference to Türkiye's membership perspective in the summit outcome document.

the Customs Union and the continuation of funding for Syrian refugees to Türkiye, along with Lebanon and Jordan, as part of cooperation with Türkiye.

The conclusions of all EU summits and the aforementioned roadmap also emphasize the maintenance of stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and the solution to the Cyprus problem within the framework of UN parameters.

- **Possible Components of a New EU Strategy for Türkiye**

Hence, concrete areas which could be included in the new strategy seem to be the modernization of Customs Union and cooperation on the irregular migrant/refugee issue. The stability of the Eastern Mediterranean and a resolution in Cyprus could also be addressed. While the Eastern Mediterranean is currently a stable region - even if we have no idea regarding the sustainability of this stability-it is not realistic to expect any progress in the resolution of the Cyprus problem in the short term, due to the different approaches and understanding of the parties regarding the solution.

As for what kind of progress can be achieved in concrete areas of cooperation, we can consider the following.

a) Updating the Customs Union

The modernization process of the Customs Union is especially important for the business sector in Türkiye and for those who want a norm based relationship with the EU as much as possible; at least one that would require a rule-based economy. This seems to be postponed for the time being. Since June 2018, initiation of negotiations to update the Customs Union has been made conditional on the progress in the areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. As of March 2021, the conditions were modified to the elimination of trade irritants in the existing Customs Union and the implementation of the Customs Union in full to all member states. This last condition means opening ports and airports to Greek Cyprus.

Moreover, EU officials have emphasized several times that if the process of updating the Customs Union starts, one of the focus points will be green and digital transition, which is necessary for the continuity of supply chains in Türkiye.

If we look at the conditions which are required for the initiation of the negotiations to update the Customs Union, it can be stated that they cannot be easily fulfilled in the current political conjuncture. Still, this update seems necessary in order to maintain trade with the EU in line with the necessities of the age. Also, there is a specific point that companies trading with the EU point at; the need to make progress on green transition in order to ensure that the existing Customs Union can function properly and that Türkiye does not face taxes like carbon tax. Furthermore, the EU should provide the required support for Türkiye to adapt to the green transition and this issue should be included in the new strategy.

b) Cooperation on Refugees/Irregular Migration

Lately, EU officials have been emphasizing the priorities (like Türkiye's efforts to prevent irregular migration and human trafficking to the EU and to take back irregular migrants returned by Greece) set out in the summit conclusions, this time not referring to bilateral cooperation, but to multiple cooperation, including Lebanon and Jordan, which are hosting Syrian migrants on their territory.

However, it almost certain that cooperation on migration would continue, perhaps with some qualitative changes, to the mutual benefit of all parties.

As stated in the European Commission's latest Türkiye Report which was published in the fall of 2022, the EU now intends to focus its cooperation with Türkiye on "dignified return" and border security. Accordingly, migrants other than those who are settled in Türkiye, having jobs, and schooled children in the country, can now be persuaded to return safely, with dignity and voluntarily in accordance with international law. Türkiye can cooperate with the EU in developing the framework for this, and a common strategy can be developed with the effort of both countries to prevent new waves of migrants. The details of this cooperation must also be set out in the new strategy.

c) Expectations of the Parties: Visa Facilitation?

To briefly list the EU's short-term expectations from Türkiye, it could be said that these are a sustained stabilization in the Eastern Mediterranean and a proper cooperation on migration. Although cooperation with Türkiye in terms of "strategic autonomy" in EU Security and Defense, which has been on French President Emmanuel Macron's agenda for a long time, seems very crucial, the lack of mutual trust prevents the EU from preparing a comprehensive strategy on this issue. As in its relations with Türkiye in general, the EU prefers "ad-hoc" cooperation on an issue basis in the field of security and defense. This can be expected to be addressed in the strategy to be prepared.

Moreover, the EU may prefer to cooperate with Türkiye in this field within the European Political Community (EPC)³, which was established with Macron's proposal and whose main objective is to ensure that Europe can act together in the context of the serious security and energy supply threat posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, rather than "bilaterally". Türkiye has not taken EPC very seriously because of the large number of different countries (44 countries) and the lack of a decision-making mechanism. In fact, President Erdoğan did not attend to the second meeting of the EPC in Moldova on June 1, 2023.

So what realistic issues can Türkiye demand from the EU as an extension of its pragmatic and functional policy? Updating the Customs Union revision does not appear to be on the government's list of urgent demands. The conditions put forward by the EU are also unlikely to be implemented in the short term.

Türkiye has not complied with all the conditions for the abolition of visas, which was also referred to by the opposition parties in the pre-election period.⁴ In this case, the EU should be

³ The proposal for the establishment of an EPC came from President Emmanuel Macron of France, who made a speech in the European Parliament on May 9, 2022, on Europe Day. This proposal by Macron, who always comes up with his "innovative" outputs on the future of the EU, was supported by EU President Charles Michael, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen and the German Chancellor and was adopted at the summit meeting of EU leaders in June 2022 and the first meeting was held in Prague on October 6, 2022, with Türkiye represented at the Presidential level.

⁴ Unfulfilled conditions:

- Alignment of legislation on the protection of personal data with EU standards;
- conclusion and implementation of an operational cooperation agreement with Europol;
- Implementation of the "Action Plan on Enhancing Transparency and Strengthening the Anti-Corruption Policy" and the Council of Europe GRECO recommendations
- Revision of anti-terrorism legislation;
- Ensuring effective judicial cooperation in criminal matters with all EU Member States;
- Implementation of the Türkiye-EU Readmission Agreement in full.

reminded to start the process of visa facilitation in order to realize the "strengthening of cooperation with Türkiye on people to people contacts and mobility", which is also stated in the 2021 "Roadmap" referred to in the conclusions of the last summit.

Such a process should be one of the first steps the EU should take to overcome the lack of mutual trust between the parties.

Nowadays, we observe that the rejection rates of visa applications of business people, academics, students and non-governmental representatives have reached to enormous numbers. In addition, in the transportation sector, which is essential for trade between the parties, visa difficulties have become a significant obstacle. Although our Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the representatives of EU member states in Türkiye had several meetings on visa facilitation procedures at the end of last year, no results could be attained from these meetings. The EU has concluded "visa facilitation" agreements with 10 non-member countries.⁵ These include countries such as Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cape Verde, Armenia, Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Moldova, North Macedonia and Ukraine.

In order for the EU to have a healthy cooperation with Türkiye in any field, the "visa liberalization will be realized anyway, we do not want visa facilitation" attitude of the then decision makers in Türkiye in 2016 should be abandoned. It seems essential that a project is carried out on the EU side in order to meet the needs of the above-mentioned groups and that a solution to this issue is included in the new strategy/roadmap to be developed. The European Commission's report on the facilitation of the visa process for some groups, which Türkiye had previously rejected, could be very beneficial in this context.

⁵ After the invasion of Ukraine, the agreement with Belarus and Russia was partially suspended.