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Talking with Turkey: Why EU dialogue with Turkey remains a good idea

Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, senior policy fellow, ECFR Wider Europe Programme,
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Turkey's relations with the European Union are often described as in 'crisis', or in a 'coma', or on a more positive note, as being 'frozen.' It is true that for all practical purposes Ankara's accession process with the EU has come to a halt, with nearly all chapters blocked. The camaraderie and enthusiasm of a decade ago is long gone – replaced with public feuds and resentment on both sides. European leaders now often discuss Turkey as a *problem* to address, as evidenced in the recent electoral debates in Germany and Netherlands. Turkish politicians meanwhile often paint Europe as a hostile power trying to undermine Turkey's stability.

Once regarded as an enormous strategic opening for both sides, Turkey's relations with the EU are now largely reduced to a question of how to best manage each other.

And even “managing” the relationship has proven difficult in the face of populist currents and Turkey's contentious domestic scene. The relationship has few advocates and many public opponents on both sides. Previous ideas to improve relations – such as upgrading the existing Turkey-EU customs union or formulating a roadmap for a visa-free travel for Turks – have now largely been shelved due to political developments on both sides. Endless rounds of brainstorming sessions in Brussels, Istanbul, Ankara, and Berlin have not produced much that is new.

Worse – diplomatic crises between Ankara and various European governments have become a regular occurrence, as, for example, in Ankara's latest spats with Germany and Netherlands. They now threaten the idea of a common future.

Turks and Europeans talk past each other. Europeans fail to understand the trauma inflicted in the 15 July attempted coup and the existential fears of Turkey's current leaders. In turn, Turks misconstrue every European criticism on human rights as a sinister effort to weaken Turkey, its regime, or its leadership. Much of the debate revolves around the figure of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The long history of Turkish-European engagement, not to mention the large segment of Turkish society still committed to EU accession, is often left unmentioned. Even though Turks profess a commitment to democracy in general, in day-to-day affairs, there seems to be a huge divergence with Europe on the question of “values”.

So here we are. Twelve years after the opening of accession negotiations, 30 years after Ankara's application to the EU, and more than half a century after Turkey's association agreement with the European Economic Community, Turkey's image in Europe and Europe's image in Turkey are at an all-time low. And there is little prospect of any meaningful progress in the short run.

Many wonder if the relationship can survive the current impasse. Are Turkey and the EU standing on the brink of a nasty separation even before taking the marriage vows? What is the short-term outlook for Turkey's accession process with the EU?

And more importantly, after so much turmoil and vitriol, is there any chance for salvaging whatever is left of the relationship?

This paper aims to provide a realistic framework for this very critical relationship and suggest a few ideas for both parties to deal with the existing challenges. Some of the ideas presented here are based on the findings of an important study undertaken by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) examining the perceptions and core beliefs on Turkey in 28 European member states. Traditionally, ECFR has used its "Power Audit" to pin down the unrealised potential of a common EU foreign policy on issues like Russia or Ukraine. In the reverse Power Audit, we surveyed member states through conversations with decision-makers and officials to understand their different policies or common perceptions on Turkey.

Focus on "Europe and Turkey" for now – not on accession

One of the important discoveries of Power Audit is that, even though there is little desire by European nations and decision-makers to unlock the accession process, the idea that Turkey has indispensable role in – and attachment to – Europe still exists. Forty-six percent of respondents from decision-makers in EU states said that their government "supports Turkey becoming a member of the EU", while another 25 percent has replied that there is "strong support" for Turkey's membership. Those that are against or strongly against Turkey's membership remain at roughly 15 percent. That means that overall, Turkey can still build on a cooperation model with the support of some 70 percent of decision-makers at the political level.

That is a big number. Even though Ankara has long focused on its various disputes with the EU Commission or politicians, one thing that is clear from the Power Audit is that Turkey's biggest advocates in Europe are still the elites – officials, diplomats, bureaucrats.

In many ways, Europeans like the status quo with Turkey. Despite believing in Turkey's importance, support for opening "new chapters" or moving ahead with the accession process remains low (36 percent) – with an overwhelming 57 percent of European decision-makers wedded to the idea of "keeping the currently frozen accession process as it is." Europeans like the idea of Turkey, love the idea of a strategic alliance, but show no inclination at the moment to make Turkey a member of the club. They do not want to disown the relationship either. When asked separately, support for "terminating the accession process" or recasting it as a "privileged partnership" both remained at a meagre 4 percent.

This is an elite game and Turkish leaders should understand that the top proponents of the relationship are still their primary interlocutors in Europe. That is, they are precisely the officials that Turks often fume at. Despite the downturn in relations, the arguments for Turkey's membership in the EU do not seem to have changed much over the past decade. Among European respondents, 78.6 percent agree that "Turkey is seen [by their country] as a strategically important partner and would make the EU stronger." Another 61 percent accept that "Turkey's membership would provide economic opportunities for the EU." Coming at the lowest point in relations, these numbers should be heartening for Ankara.

But the dirty secret in the relationship is that "officials" are not the only game in town. As liberal democracies, what various domestic constituencies in EU states say matter. Despite the

strong support for the “Turkey in Europe” argument among the decision-makers, an overwhelming number concede that “public opinion” is a different matter. Only 7 percent of respondents said that the public opinion in their countries is “supportive” of Turkey’s bid. Thirty-nine percent confessed that public opinion is “indifferent” while a whopping 54 percent admitted that public opinion is “against Turkish membership.” Almost 70 percent point out that Turkey’s public image has eroded over the past two years towards a more negative sentiment about Turkish membership to the EU.

These results show that the Turkey debate in Europe will continue to be a matter of “elites” versus “populists”. Elites believe in Turkey’s importance, but the European public is not convinced. No wonder that the spike in Turkish-European tensions almost always coincides with various European elections. Turkey’s membership bid was a big topic in the Brexit referendum campaign, as well as in the Dutch, Austrian, and German elections.

Navigating through this difficult territory and the widening gap between elites and the public requires a more sophisticated approach than simply repeating an allegiance to the status quo. The results of ECFR’s Power Audit underline the need to develop a new language to highlight the importance of relations outside of the scope of the current accession process. We need to start framing the debate as “Turkey and Europe” and move away from the language that focuses on the stymied and fatigued enlargement process.

When Turkey is discussed within the context of the accession process, the focus is inevitably on Turkey’s weak points – the democratic deficit, the Cyprus problem, or the rule of law. Turks resent the “hierarchical” tone that the accession process entails, and Europeans feel Turkey’s progress is too slow. But when the discussion is “Turkey and Europe”, as two strategic partners that need one another, it reduces tensions.

None of this is to suggest that the accession process should be suspended or terminated. But since it is effectively frozen, it is important to develop a new focus on “Turkey and Europe”, as opposed to Turkey within the European Union. European and Turkish leaders should not be trapped by the “should we suspend the accession or not?” question and instead engage in a new conversation about Turkey and Europe’s mutual strategic reliance – at least for the next few years. In that context, bilateral relations with member states, with attention to foreign policy and economic partnership, should be the new framework.

“Turkey within the European Union” is a tough sell at the moment – but “Turkey and Europe”, while keeping the accession process dormant, is more relevant than ever. When the focus moves away from the accession process, it is easy for both sides to recognise that an effective partnership is critical for their interests. To preserve what we have now, this is the best approach.

Ceasefire in public feuds

Over the last two years, vitriol and resentment has become a recurring feature of public statements by Turkish and European officials. These mutual recriminations have further eroded the public support for Turkey’s accession process to the EU. As noted above, election cycles in Turkey and in European members states often coincide with an escalation in rhetoric and behind a good deal of the damage to Turkey’s brand in Europe.

This has to stop. Turkey and Europe can continue to criticise one another but this criticism has to be within the scope of a civilised conversation so as not to further bleed the public support for the relationship. For Ankara, this means references to “Nazis” or similar remarks

that deeply offend the German or the European public must stop. Europe-bashing has become a common feature of the Turkish media landscape and this could only change if Turkish leaders and politicians speak in favor of the alliance. Turkish leaders need to move away from the emotional tone and sweeping statements about the “civilisational” clash with the West.

Another important distinction that Turkish policymakers should make is not to equate criticism of Turkey’s human rights record with support for “terrorism.” These blanket accusations, now prevalent in Turkish political culture, erode the Turkish public’s trust in Europe and in a shared future with Europe.

Europeans should not roll their eyes about the coup attempt

For Europe, the red lines are different and top among these is the failed coup attempt of 2016. It is clear that Europe – much like the United States – never quite understood the impact of the coup attempt on decision-makers and the society at large. No doubt part of the problem is Turkey’s disregard for human rights in the post-coup crackdown and its clumsy propaganda efforts that fail to understand European values and concerns. But all that said, somewhere along the way, the deep insecurity about its future felt by the Turkish state and society has been lost in translation.

Only 39 percent of European respondents agreed that the events of 15 July were “a real coup and a threat to democracy.” Forty-three percent of European elites, including diplomats and decision-makers, believe it is “too confusing to understand what really happened.” Another 18 percent subscribed to the view the coup is “an excuse for the government’s crackdown on dissidents.” The figures for those “too confused” and those that think it was “an excuse” would assumedly only increase if we were to poll the public at large.

Somewhere along the way, Turks could not explain and Europeans couldn’t understand what happened. The above figures point to a staggering lack of understanding on an existential topic that defines Turkey’s current trajectory. It certainly is not good news for the government of Turkey, which desperately seeks European empathy for its national security concerns but mostly gets human rights criticism in return.

There are lessons here for both sides. Turks should see that human rights violations have pushed the coup debate to the background. Europeans should understand that a large cross-section of Turkish society opposed the failed coup attempt of July 2016, whether they are AKP supporters or not, and assign some level of blame to the Gülen network.

The sluggish Western response to the coup attempt has already contributed to the demise of Turkey’s relations with the US and Europe. Europe should tread on the topic gingerly and with empathy. Dismissive statements on the coup or the culprits further breed suspicion that “the West” would have preferred a different outcome on 15 July. This is not simply a sentiment that is harbored by Turkey’s leaders or its pro-government media. It is shared by a large segment of the population. To have an alliance or a strategic relationship, there has to be a minimum level of public trust – or at least the notion that the other side is not trying to destroy your democracy.

The Council of Europe should step in

Following the Turkish referendum on the executive presidency in April 2017, Erdogan travelled to Brussels to meet with EU leaders as part of an effort to reset relations with Europe. After highly caustic election campaigns in Turkey and the Netherlands, Erdogan's meeting with Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker, the presidents of the EU Council and the European Commission, created some optimism on both sides. However, the idea of a "roadmap" to improve Turkish-EU relations, as reportedly discussed in the trilateral summit, never materialised. The failure of the Cyprus talks further led to a situation in which Turkey's relations with European member states and European institutions seem to be in a free-fall and subject to vicissitudes of the news cycle – without much of a strategy or roadmap on either side.

A more constructive approach would be to use this current period to establish a close working relationship between Ankara and the Council of Europe. This relationship would work to address the difficult issues of human rights, rule of law, and political freedoms outside of the accession process – but in a way that complements Turkey's progress towards the Copenhagen Criteria. This would reduce the tension in Turkey's relationship with the EU.

Turkey was among the founding members of the Council of Europe and Erdogan has enjoyed a good rapport with its secretary general, Thorbjorn Jagland. Last Spring, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe open the monitoring procedure in respect of Turkey over "serious concerns" about human rights and democracy. Turks should view this as an offensive gesture but as a "tool" Ankara can use to continue its ties with European institutions. As a founding member, Turkey should build on the existing cooperation since Turkey's membership to the body is still regarded as a symbol of international prestige. Working with the Council of Europe on a roadmap can demonstrate to both the Turkish and European publics that the alliance can still have a positive, transformative impact on Turkish democracy.

Customs Union upgrade still necessary

A promising idea that was floated in EU circles last year to improve ties with Turkey was upgrading Turkey's existing customs union trade agreement with the EU to provide incentives for Ankara to continue reforms. The European Parliament mandated the Commission to look into the matter last year and various institutions and think-tanks in Turkey started focusing on the upgrade as a way to deepen relations in time of crisis.

However, following the bitter spat between Ankara and Berlin last summer, German Chancellor Angela Merkel reconsidered her support for the idea, effectively killing any such possibility. "I do not see a mandate to expand the Customs Union in the current circumstances," Merkel said in August.¹

Behind the scenes, there is a quiet whisper in European circles that the best way to affect Turkish behaviour is to withdraw economic support for Turkey – a sentiment that led to a recent decision by European leaders to slash pre-accession aid to Turkey.

But Turkey's ability to increase trade with Europe has benefitted, more than anyone, Turkish business and society – both largely supportive of a strategic alliance with Europe. Despite the

¹ Celal Özcan, "Merkel conveys Germany's veto on Customs Union update with Turkey to Juncker", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 31 August 2017, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/merkel-conveys-germanys-veto-on-customs-union-update-with-turkey-to-juncker.aspx?PageID=238&NID=117422&NewsCatID=351>.

vicissitudes of the accession process, that anchor ought to be preserved through deeper economic integration.

Regardless of what happens in Turkey's accession process, the existing customs union agreement is outdated and needs to be revised. The Turkish and European economies are well integrated, and both benefit from the free trade agreement that was signed in 1995. Most European respondents to the Power Audit said that their country's trade with Turkey is small but have also mentioned trade and economic relations with Turkey as an important reason for continuing the alliance. In this area, there is room for growth on both sides.

The current free trade deal is not adequate and fails to cover critical economic sectors such as agriculture, financial services, and public procurement. It is also weak on arbitration and legal mechanisms for free trade. Updating it would not only allow greater economic integration, but also impose a new set of standards on Turkish businesses and government – including transparency, adherence to the rule of law, and dispute settlement, all of which are ingrained in most of the EU's free trade deals. The possibility of an upgrade would also provide an incentive for the business sector to lobby the Turkish government for continued ties with the EU.

Civil society needs a boost in EU funding

Following an EU Council summit last month (October), Donald Tusk, president of the Council, admitted that the EU was considering cutting Turkey's accession funding: "The scepticism when it comes to the Turkish accession process was yesterday very, very visible." According to Tusk, EU leaders asked the European Commission "to reflect on whether to cut and re-orient" the pre-accession aid, called Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) funds.

This is a bad time to deprive Turkish society of a much-needed external support. Instead of slashing accession funds, European leaders should target these resources towards Turkish civil society, the art world, universities, municipalities, minorities, and NGOs that promote democracy, pluralism, and free speech.

So far, IPA funds have not been distributed in a fashion that has made a noticeable difference to Turkish society, even though €4 billion have been made available through the programme. The support for municipalities and government programmes have largely gone unannounced and the funding for Turkish civil society has only been around €190m. The funding for civil society and municipalities is one way to highlight the importance of Europe to Turkish society and to help protect pluralism in Turkish society. The EU should also consider starting a separate programme specifically to provide resources for struggling independent media outlets in Turkey.

Work on Syria and Iraq

Even though migration is one of the main concerns of European politicians and Brussels, there is a remarkable lack of European interest and involvement in Middle East conflicts, particularly in Iraq and Syria. The EU migration deal with Turkey has curbed the flow of illegal immigrants for now, but Europe's migration worries will remain until these countries attain some level of stability. Both of these nations serve as "country of origin" for tens of thousands of illegal immigrants that arrived in Europe during 2014-16 and both are top priorities in Turkish foreign policy. By and large, Turkish and European goals on the stabilisation of Syria coincide, but officials who work on these issues rarely get together.

It is important for European institutions and policymakers to develop a closer working relationship with Turkey on the stabilisation of Iraq and Syria. Almost 70 percent of European respondents said that their country is aligned with Turkey on the issue of the Syrian war. But, while bilateral cooperation between intelligence agencies exists, the working relationship between European defence and foreign ministries and their Turkish counterparts remains limited.

Turkey has an interest in seeing its borders stabilised and has emerged as a key participant in the Astana process led by Russia. Despite criticism of Turkey's human rights record on the Kurdish issue, Europeans largely share Turkey's objection to an independent Kurdish state in Syria or Iraq. There is also shared interest in containing jihadists that come through these regions. Europeans should also use this opportunity to develop a closer working relationship with the Turkish government on the stabilisation of northern Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan and the disputed territories of Iraq, including the oil-rich town of Kirkuk.

Europe's energy needs and foreign policy priorities are best served through a close relationship with Turkey, whose security and stability is intertwined with the developments in its near-abroad.

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