

TURKEY, FRANCE, EU: WHAT SCOPE FOR SOLVING COMMON CHALLENGES?

Ediz Topcuoğlu

International Security Master Student at the Sciences Po Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA)

The views and facts presented in this paper are the result of research for the purpose of a thesis on Turkish foreign policy. Notably, this research has involved interviews with Turkish officials whom I thank for their contribution. The views and opinions expressed in this paper, however, belong to the author and should not be taken to represent those of the interviewees. Full transcripts of the interviews can be provided on request from: ediz.topcuoglu@sciencespo.fr

Many commentators were hopeful that the March 18th Memorandum and, in particular, the Voluntary Readmission Scheme provided for by the Agreement between Turkey and the EU, would mark a turning point and revitalise relations[1]. While this has occurred to some degree, rather than create a new dynamic in Turkish-EU relations, the Memorandum has shone a spotlight on a fundamental contradiction that lies at the heart of these relations. Turkey and the EU are tied through common geography, history and cultural bonds. More significant in the short term is the fact they need each other to face common challenges in an increasingly volatile geostrategic environment. These challenges involve everything from conflict prevention to economic cooperation. Indeed, both sides have demonstrated that they are able to work together to overcome these issues – collaboration of which the March 18th Memorandum is seemingly an example. However, despite a demonstrated ability to work together and a recognition on both sides that they should work with each other[2] neither side seems willing to re-examine its own aims or compromise with the other in order to achieve greater cooperation to overcome common challenges.



Turkey has maintained that full-membership to the EU is its final objective ever since the Ankara Agreement of 1964. It claims that it has continued to pursue this goal, as a so-called “policy of state” or “strategic objective”, despite a turbulent history with the EU^[3]. Nevertheless, a cursory examination of the history of Turkey’s accession process shows that its commitment to membership has fluctuated more than Turkish authorities might like to admit. Conversely, while in theory the EU maintains an “open door” policy to whichever country fulfils its entry criteria, its policy is not determined by EU institutions and thus not necessarily by these criteria. Indeed, while Turkey’s relations with the Commission have often been very positive, EU-level institutions are constrained by the will of the Council and, to a lesser degree, that of the European Parliament. This leaves them indirectly beholden to the domestic politics of various member states. Greece and Cyprus are eminent examples of member states where Turkey’s accession is a major political issue. The attitude of France to Turkish membership has however also been particularly significant (and variable). While, initially France would back Turkey’s bid for membership, former President Sarkozy was the first to propose the idea of an alternative institutional framework (in the form of the Union for the Mediterranean) rather than full membership for Turkey, setting a precedent which Germany would then support^[4]. Today, President Macron has also indicated his desire to facilitate a “privileged partnership” with Turkey, rather than full membership^[5].

These contradictory standpoints are inescapably antithetical to a true strategic alignment of Turkey and the EU. It seems clear, now that nearly 15 years have passed since the official start of accession negotiations, that no convergence will occur given that both sides insist on maintaining the policy status quo. Yet, this does not make the fact that both sides need each other any less true. Indeed,

worryingly it seems as though the long and varied history of relations affects the attitudes of both Turkey and the EU detrimentally, even in those cases where there are clear and obvious mutual benefits to cooperation. The most poignant example of this is the failure to renew the Customs Union. It is astounding to note that while it was the EU that made the proposition to renew it and that all accounts of the proposition demonstrated that it would benefit the EU more than it would benefit Turkey, the EU has been unable to mobilise the necessary political capital to go ahead with the project^[6]. Conversely, despite incredibly rapid progress initially, Turkey has still been unable to fulfil the criteria outlined in the March 18th Memorandum for the provision of visa free travel to Turkish citizens in the EU.

Both cases are emblematic of the problems that plague Turkey-EU relations. In each case, both Turkey and the EU seem more interested in blaming the other than on moving forward constructively. Certain EU member states have opposed the proposal on the basis of concerns about the rule of law in Turkey and this, despite having initially agreed to make the proposal. On the criteria for visa liberalisation agreed to in the March 18th Memorandum, the Turkish side claims that it has still not fulfilled the seven (as of April 2018) out of 72 remaining criteria due to concerns that the EU^[7] will impose more ‘last minute criteria’ and because the EU has still not fully transferred the funds promised for the refugees in Turkey within the framework of “voluntary readmission” or implemented the promised refugee quota.

What is clear here is that without a fundamental shift in the policy of either or both sides they will find it very difficult to face common challenges collectively. A change to long standing policies is, however, unlikely to occur and politicians on both sides are rightly concerned about the opinion of

their publics. Unfortunately, the publics in both Turkey and in Europe seem either ambivalent to or suspicious of the existing frameworks of the Turkey-EU relationship. On the European side, Turkish accession has been weaponised for domestic political purposes, initially in France during the then candidate Sarkozy's campaign for the Presidency^[8] but also in Austria and most spectacularly in Britain, where it may have tipped the balance of the Brexit referendum. Similarly, in Turkey, the many setbacks in the accession process of the mid 2000s and a consequent feeling of betrayal has hardened Turkish public opinion. It seems that in this context both sides must envisage to limit the scope of solutions to common problems commensurate with the issues themselves without transforming those solutions into tools within their overall policy towards one another.

Indeed, when facing common challenges, the same pattern seems to emerge repeatedly. It can be approximated as follows: both sides agree that cooperation would benefit them; then, as they go about designing a common framework to address these issues more or less productively, the question becomes politicized and grows beyond the scope of the initial issue. Both sides then try to use the issue as leverage in the overall relationship and because of this, they are unable to fully realise the framework they had envisaged to overcome the problem they had both agreed to solve. Taking the two examples used here, this was clearly the case in both with the renewal of the Custom's Union and with the March 18th Memorandum. In the former case, the EU made a purely economic issue into a point of contention in order to try and shape the domestic political environment in Turkey. It thus failed to reap the benefits of increased economic connectedness with Turkey. In the latter case, Turkey insisted on trying to leverage the migrant crisis for progress on its accession process, thus in part contributing to the politicization of the issue and making it harder for

European leaders to provide the aid they had promised for Turkey to cope with the large number of Syrians taking refuge in the country.

To overcome these debilitating habits, both sides must make a conscious effort to restrain the scope of their cooperation to the field in which they are cooperating. It seems politically impossible, at least currently, for either Turkey or the EU to change its overall policies with regards to one another. Therefore, cooperation should be limited in scope to only those issues where both sides benefit in the short to medium term. To prevent issues in certain areas from being used as leverage in other ones, both sides should try to work together through parallel organisations when they are available. Ironically, the Union for the Mediterranean is a good example of such an organisation as it has evolved beyond former President Sarkozy's initial purpose into an effective platform where both parties can work towards common solutions on issues in the Mediterranean geography. Other possibilities include international bodies where both parties are represented like UN organisations, the WTO or OECD. Ideally, this kind of "third party" cooperation would operate through initiatives launched by Turkey and EU member states. Here, the effectively inactive Turkish-Spanish "Alliance of Civilisations" initiative comes to mind, though a more up-to-date initiative would be preferable.

Working through third parties will of course involve the interests of said parties in Turkish-European affairs and while this might not be preferable to either side, the reality of the Turkey-EU relationship is that their level of integration dictates the involvement of third parties in their affairs. This is true in the case of a political process in Syria, where all sides are working in Geneva together through the UN, as it is the case in the economic sphere, where the problem is less one of integrating the Turkish and European economies – over half of Turkey's trade is with the EU^[9] – but rather selling Turkish



and European goods, produced in integrated transnational production lines, to third countries. Furthermore, working with third parties will also bring into perspective the inherent proximity of Turkey and the EU when facing common challenges, something that will hopefully help prevent either side from making these issues a part of the wider political problem. It is important to add that France's role in this kind of new cooperation framework could be very significant, given the interests of both countries in various areas. These interests include the possibility of economic cooperation in the defence and energy sectors and geostrategic cooperation in North Africa where both have and seek considerable influence. Indeed, history might have been different had France and Turkey cooperated more on the NATO intervention in Libya but here too the possibility of working together was stifled by the state of the overall Turkey-EU relationship^[10].

Turkey and the EU have already demonstrated that they can overcome major challenges together. The outstanding success of the Voluntary Readmission Scheme is a clear example of this. The problem preventing both sides from overcoming their collective challenges is thus not one of means but one of the ability to cooperate without transforming common challenges into elements of the overall political problems of the Turkey-EU relationship. By producing positive examples of Turkey-EU cooperation, limited and issue-based approaches through third parties as described here are necessary, at least in the short term, to overcome collective challenges. These will also help soften the rhetoric on both sides against one another and thus might help lay the groundwork for a positive agenda in the future. Then, with greater trust and less public suspicion, both sides can start working constructively towards an acceptable compromise that will lay the foundation of a permanent macro-framework for cooperation.

References

- Aksoy, H. (2018, December 12). Spokesperson of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Interview by Ediz Bener Topcuoğlu [Recorded] [In person]. *Ankara*.
- Alp, Y. (2018, December 17). Former Deputy Director General for Relations with the EU and Turkish Ambassador to Addis Ababa. Interview by Ediz Bener Topcuoğlu [Recorded] [Phone interview]. *Ankara*.
- İkizler, H. T. F. (2018, December 17). Former head of department for EU affairs and Counsellor at the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm. Interview by Ediz Bener Topcuoğlu [Recorded] [Phone interview]. *Ankara*.
- Kiran, Y. S. (2019, January 7). Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Interview by Ediz Bener Topcuoğlu [Recorded] [In person]. *Ankara*.

Bibliography

- [1] Yabancı, B. (2016). The future of EU-Turkey relations: between mutual distrust and interdependency. FEUTURE Online Papers, (1). p. 10.
- [2] Yezdani, İ. (2018, October 15). Moment is there for Turkey to get closer to Europe, EU commissioner says. Hurriyet Daily News. Retrieved from <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com>.
- [3] Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (n.d.). Türkiye'nin Girişimci Ve İnsani Dış Politikası. Retrieved from <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/>.
- [4] Kardas, S. (2009). Merkel and Sarkozy Call for Privileged Partnership Angers Turkey. Eurasia Daily Monitor. 92(6).
- [5] Irish, J. (2017, September 07). France's Macron urges continued EU ties with Turkey. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/>.
- [6] Ülgen, S. (2017, December 13). Trade as Turkey's EU Anchor. Carnegie Endowment. Retrieved April 09, 2019, from <https://carnegieendowment.org>.
- [7] European Commission. (2018). Key findings of the 2018 Report on Turkey (3407 ed., Vol. 18, MEMO, Fact Sheet). Retrieved from <http://europa.eu/rapid/>.
- [8] Holm, C. (2007, February 13). Sparks Expected to Fly Whoever Becomes France's President. DW. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com>.
- [9] Turkey-EU - international trade in goods statistics (Statistics Explained). (2018, April). Retrieved <https://ec.europa.eu>.
- [10] Lindström, M., & Zetterlund, K. (October 2012). Setting the stage for the military intervention in Libya. Decisions made and their implications for the EU and NATO. FOI. p. 20.