

The EU should not turn its back on Turkey

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Getting EU leaders to agree on a strategy for Turkey is like herding cats. While all member states are alarmed over the backsliding on democracy and the rule of law in the country, a common response is missing. At the forthcoming 19-20 October European Council meeting, EU heads of state and government are expected to have an open debate on the future of ties with Turkey as a first step towards developing a new strategy for relations with the country.

When weighing up the various options, it is important that the EU understands that a change in approach from Turkey's leadership ahead of the numerous elections in 2019 (local, presidential and parliamentary) is unlikely. Foreign policy choices will continue to be dictated by domestic political imperatives. Staying in power is the number one priority for President Erdogan. Hence Ankara's frequent jingoistic anti-EU rhetoric is likely to continue. Representatives of the EU and its member states should not allow themselves to be caught in a perpetual war of words with Ankara, which unfortunately is currently the case. Rather, while maintaining a principled stance on civil liberties and freedoms, the EU should first look for avenues for constructive engagement that could help reduce tensions. Second, it should find ways to boost support for Turkish democratic advocates, who also view EU engagement in the country as important.

Thus, the EU should consider:

- **Stop talking about Turkey's EU accession negotiations.** Continually having an open debate on the issue of Turkish accession and threatening Turkey to freeze or suspend the negotiations – which in reality have been *de facto* frozen for years – is counter-productive. By doing so the EU is feeding the domestic objectives of both Turkey's leadership and the Europe's far-right and national populist parties. The never-ending threat of suspending negotiations as well as speculations over possible new arrangements for Turkey-EU relations also send a wrong message to all democrats in Turkey and undermine their work for democracy and European values under very difficult conditions. In this sense "silence is golden". Furthermore, since the conclusions of the December 2016 European Council have stated that "under the currently prevailing circumstances, no new chapters are considered for opening", there is really no reason to continue raising this issue.
- **Increasing support for civil society and journalists.** While objectively criticising the Turkish government is important, this should not turn into "Turkey bashing", which is futile. Turkey is more than its government and President Erdogan and the EU can go beyond criticising when it comes to supporting freedom of speech. Despite major problems and political pressure, Turkish civil society is still extremely dynamic. Turkish journalists are also very creative in finding alternative channels to do independent journalism. Digital journalism through websites, social media and video sharing platforms is booming. These alternative channels are much more developed in Turkey when compared to EU countries. The EU can and should provide concrete support. Today, initiatives are afoot to freeze funds under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) funds. The EU should explore ways instead to redirect the money into projects supporting Turkish civil society, pro-democracy initiatives, free media and freedom of speech. Some EUR 4.45 Billion is available for Turkey under IPA II for the period 2014-20 and only a small amount has been spent so far. The European Parliament has already made such a proposal. The European Commission should therefore urgently work on a plan to provide this support in a more structured way. Even a small portion of IPA II could make a significant difference for Turkish civil society and media.

- **Launching the negotiations to modernise the Customs Union.** Moving ahead with the modernisation of Turkey's Customs Union (CU) with the EU may prove to be the one thing that could prevent a total collapse of relations as benefits can be reaped by both sides. Presently the European Commission is waiting for the European Council to give it the mandate to begin negotiations. This green light is not yet there because some Member States, including Germany, are blocking the road. In the run up to the German federal elections on 24 September, Chancellor Merkel has asked the European Commission to suspend preparatory work to this end.

In economic terms, not least trade and investment, Turkey is firmly moored to the EU. Conflict and turmoil in the Middle East, where Turkey had hoped to deepen economic ties, have further consolidated this economic dependency despite efforts by Ankara to strengthen economic ties with other states such as Russia and Iran. Presently the CU is narrowly focused on industrial goods. An upgrade would involve new areas of trade including services, agriculture and public procurement which would lead to more economic integration between the EU and Turkey. Unfortunately, the “economy card” is being increasingly used against Ankara by some EU member states, most recently Germany, despite the fact it has had no positive impact. Punishing Turkish business and citizens should not be seen as a policy option and the CU upgrade should not become a casualty of ongoing tensions. EU leaders should rather agree on a date to open negotiations with the final ratification process made conditional to Turkey meeting a certain set of political criteria.

- **Making greater efforts to fight the PKK.** Despite the EU recognising the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as a terrorist organisation in 2002, PKK supporters continue to hold rallies in several EU member states. A June 2017 Europol report cited Germany as well as Belgium, France and Romania as states where the PKK could freely carry out propaganda activities and fundraising. While the EU could commit to adopting more measures to stamp out the group's activities, member states could also publicise the measures they are currently taking against the PKK which are not widely known by Turkish citizens.
- **Liberalising Visas:** Visa liberalisation is very difficult under the current political circumstances. Yet, because a large majority of Turkish citizens are unaware of the technical requirements, they view the visa requirement as an unfair treatment, especially since Georgia and Ukraine received visa liberalisation earlier this year. Still, even if visa liberalisation is not a realistic option in the short term, the EU could explore alternative solutions including facilitating the visa process for certain segments of the society such as entrepreneurs, students, journalists or artists. For example, it is unacceptable that young Turks, who have been accepted for master's degree programmes or internships in EU countries, face major visa issues that prevent them from advancing their studies or careers.

The relationship between Turkey and the EU has never been straightforward. The past five decades have seen as many setbacks as advances. Today, relations are at an unprecedented low with the EU having limited tools to compel Turkey to return to a democratic track. However, Turkey remains an important strategic partner and all avenues for engagement should be investigated and utilised. Keeping dialogue channels open and aiming at small achievements would seem to be the most reasonable option in the short term. Given the close (geo-) political, economic and societal ties, allowing relations to standstill and decline further is in the interest of neither the EU nor Turkey.

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