

Why the EU must reengage with Turkey

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Democratic values and basic rights in Turkey are hanging by a thread. Over the past eighteen months the rule of law, civil liberties and freedoms have been eroded which has left many Turks anxious over the direction in which their country is heading.

With Turkey's accession negotiations *de facto* frozen, the EU finds itself with little leverage over Ankara. Calls of concern have fallen on deaf ears as Turkey's leadership has become increasingly belligerent, with its EU related narrative overflowing with resentment. Because Turkey's accession negotiations are irreversibly intertwined with Turkey-EU cooperation in other areas, this has had a negative impact on the broader relationship between both sides. Recent examples include the issue of foreign fighters traveling from Europe to Syria via Turkey. Each side has accused the other of not doing enough to stem the flow. Likewise, following the decision of Russian President, Vladimir Putin, to ban the import of agricultural goods from countries that have placed sanctions on Moscow, the EU asked Turkey to demonstrate solidarity, as a "candidate country", and not to increase exports of agricultural products to Russia. Turkey rejected this request and is reportedly working on strengthening trade ties with Moscow.

Turkey remains an important partner in a number of key areas including trade, energy, foreign and security policy and migration. At a time when the EU faces crises in both its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, a reliable and predictable Turkey, with which it can cooperate in the Black Sea and Middle East neighbourhoods is crucial. Hence the vision and plans of the EU's new leadership, in particular new Foreign Policy Chief, Federica Mogherini, and Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, how to shape relations with Ankara is particularly significant. The Union's current policy is counterproductive and is further eroding trust and cooperation rather than enhancing it. It needs to be turned around.

Windows of opportunity

The first opportunity would be in the event of a solution to the Cyprus problem. However, despite ongoing UN-led reunification talks, it remains unclear when and if, they will be successful.

The second opportunity has arisen as a consequence of accession talks having recently returned to Ankara's radar. Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister, Bulent Arinc, announced that Ankara is working on a new three-stage action plan to accelerate the accession process. 2023, the centenary of the Republic of Turkey, has been slated as the target date for accession. A new Chief Negotiator and Minister for European Integration has been appointed. Already well acquainted with the dossier, having been Turkey's Ambassador to the EU between 2005 and 2009, as well as holding the post of Secretary General for EU Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, Volkan Bozkir is a well-respected and competent diplomat. On his first visit to Brussels in his new post earlier this month, he made a positive impression. There was none of the usual "the EU needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the EU" discourse. Finally, President Erdogan is set to embark on a trip to several EU member states in the coming months, during which he will reportedly push Turkey's EU accession bid. While this may be little more than lip-service, this development nevertheless offers the EU an opportunity to reengage.

What next?

The most effective way to re-engage with Ankara would be to make progress regarding the accession process, this seems unlikely despite the fact that the *status quo* is not benefiting the EU. Keeping chapters blocked, such 23 and 24 which cover justice, freedom and fundamental rights, serves no useful purpose. Opening chapters should not be seen as a 'gift' but rather as an instrument to bring about reform; the closing is the crucial part. Therefore, as long as this channel remains closed, the EU should target other areas, which can bring Turkey added value to ties.

Turkey is more than a neighbour, it is a strategic partner and should be recognised as such. Ankara should be offered a much broader role in EU foreign policy making in areas of mutual interest. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) where the two partners face many common challenges and goals is one such area. Closer cooperation in the Western Balkans, where Turkey has strengthened ties with a number of countries including Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), is another. Furthermore, with ties between Turkey and many of the countries in the EU's Eastern Partnership growing, Turkish civil society should be invited to be part of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. Integrating Turkish civil society into the Forum as a stakeholder would allow Turkish counterparts to learn with their neighbors, and to share their own insight regional issues of common interest.

The recent tension related to foreign fighters has underlined the need for better cooperation in this area. First, the EU should be more ready to share intelligence with Ankara in order to have a more coordinated strategy. Second, the EU could offer to provide Turkey with greater levels of financial assistance to help Ankara control the inflow of people and secure its border. Additionally, the EU should further increase the financial assistance it has given to Ankara to support the more than one million Syrian refugees that are now in Turkey. Given that the Turkish government has spent an estimated €3 billion, the reported €43 million so far pledged is a drop in the ocean and much less than it has given to other states dealing with Syrian refugees. Furthermore, with Turkey reaching saturation point, the EU should accept more refugees. This was underlined by the UNs Refugee Agency, the UNHCR in July, which reported that Europe had only accepted 4% (some 124.000) of an estimated 3 million refugees and the majority of those had gone to Sweden and Germany.

Turkey has become a key component in EU efforts to strengthen energy security. The Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) that will bring Azerbaijani gas to the Turkey-Greece border is an important part of the Southern Gas Corridor. The Ukraine crisis has further increased the strategic significance of this corridor and Turkey's role as a transit state. This role will be further enhanced when more gas comes on line from the Caspian and possibly from a number of other regional states too, including Northern Iraq, and Iran. Having Turkey fully harmonized with EU energy regulations should be logical, yet the energy chapter remains blocked. This makes no sense.

Turkey is now working towards a visa free regime with the EU. Allowing this process to pass unhindered is of crucial importance. It is an extremely sensitive issue for Turks who consider they should have had it years ago under the terms of the Ankara Agreement, signed with the EU in 1963. It is important for rebuilding trust and also in terms of having Turkey meet its obligations under the accompanying readmission agreement.

It is also important that the ongoing TTIP negotiations result in an agreement that reflects Turkey's Customs Union with the EU. Without such an agreement TTIP is expected to negatively affect the Turkish economy

Lastly, the new EU leadership should convene a conference dedicated to Turkey-EU relations, similar to that organised by German Chancellor, Angela Merkel in August for the Balkans. It would offer a platform to find areas where relations could be strengthened to mutual benefit, and would also include the participation of experts and civil society actors.

In today's inward-looking, enlargement fatigued EU such steps may not be easy, but they are vital to reinvigorate this important relationship. Moves in this direction would also demonstrate to the millions of Turks, who feel their country is slipping into a very uncertain future, that the EU has not given up on them.

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