



NEW JUNCTURE IN EU-TURKEY RELATIONS?

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With the issuing of the EU Commission's Progress Report on Turkey, it would appear there is fresh impetus for EU-Turkey relations to be placed on an improved footing after their decline in recent years. The EU affirms its support for the AKP's political vision even if it adopts a more critical tone concerning its delivery of public policies. It is unlikely, however, that the clock can be turned back to before 2005 when relations reached an historic high. While encouraging, recent developments should be tempered by more realistic expectations that enthusiasm for the Europeanization process in Turkey has waned and that there is still no clear prospect of membership.

There would appear to be fresh impetus to place EU-Turkey relations on a better footing. In its 2013 Progress Report issued on October 16, the EU Commission adopted a mostly balanced tone toward the AKP government's performance in the accession process to the EU, whereafter German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Minister of Foreign Affairs Guido Westerwelle agreed on lifting the German veto on accession negotiations. Furthermore, during the EU General Affairs Council meeting on October 22, the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs took the decision to resume such negotiations in November. These developments signal a more positive attitude on the part of the EU toward the AKP government aimed at rebuilding mutual understanding and better cooperation, after a period of mutual alienation in recent years.

Good But Could Do Better

In the EU's renewed Turkey strategy, the AKP government receives support for its declared commitments as much as actual performance. As such, the Turkish government's democratization package, declared only two weeks before the publication of the report, is the main point of reference for the EU's supportive posture. Indeed, the reform objectives, notably regarding the situation of minorities and cultural rights, the electoral system and education, are considered as "positive steps," as is the government's handling of the Kurdish issue. Notwithstanding continued tensions between the AKP and Kurdish groups, the EU Commission qualifies the government's declared intentions as a milestone for lasting domestic peace.

On the role of the military in Turkish politics, moreover, the report seizes upon the AKP position on underlin-

ing the necessity to fortify civilian authority by establishing a more effective control mechanism over the armed forces. Although there is some criticism related to the freedom of speech and functioning of the judiciary system, these are counterbalanced with praise for the forthcoming judicial reform package elaborated by the AKP cabinet.

The EU's implicit support of the AKP also stems from the Gezi events of May-June. The German foreign ministry views, for instance, the demonstrations as a sign of a profound debate in Turkey on plurality and civil liberties. While the EU Commission's Progress Report condemns how the police handled the events, it too sees in the protests signs of a flourishing civil society and democratization under AKP rule, which Turkish President Abdullah Gül has utilized to burnish Turkey's democratic credentials.

The EU is more critical, however, concerning the AKP's performance in public policies—that is, the provision of public goods and services such as health, welfare, justice, education, and security. The Progress Report calls for an instant harmonization with EU procedures, such as a longer consultation period in the policy-making process on sensitive decisions, an increase in the Parliament's budgetary powers, efficient policies for social inclusion, improving civil servants' conditions, fighting against corruption, and fulfilling economic duties as regards the Customs Union, as well as better neighborly relations with Greece and Cyprus.

Getting Back on Track?

In spite of the EU's more explicit criticisms of the AKP's public policy performance, there is a renewed drive to get bilateral relations back on track after having gone astray after 2005, especially after the anti-Turkey membership



stances of various EU governments. The EU now seeks to restart a better framed communication with the AKP government over technical issues and on the basis of clear goals, in an attempt to introduce a mainly policy-based dialogue instead of seeking to persuade the AKP of a radical change in terms of values. Thus, the EU prefers at this stage to take advantage of a shared vision of reforming the Turkish political regime—both are anti the political regime of 1982—which appears to be the common denominator for mutual communication.

The flux and reflux of the Turkey-EU relations are in fact representative of the contrasts within EU governance. The fate of relations is determined according to two parallel processes, one being the institutional calendar supervised by the European Commission, and the other rather political one where individual governmental standpoints are expressed in the EU Council of Ministers, Parliament, or intergovernmental conferences. The period between 1999 (the granting of membership status) and 2005 (beginning of accession negotiations) was remarkable in that the institutional calendar overcame political debates and the EU Commission became the central actor in Euro-Turkish relations. This had two positive outcomes: the Europeanization process in Turkey gained a certain momentum and the dialogue between the two parties converged toward common goals.

While the EU's new position aims at recreating the once harmonious relationship, its sustainability is hindered by a lack of real commitments which have decreased the EU's credibility and, therefore, also capacity to make an impact on Turkish politics. And whereas long-term relations also hinge on which actors and political vision win the upper hand, in the shorter term any "rapprochement" now depends on how Turkey will react to the EU's new position.

Mixed Reactions

President Gül, who was foreign minister ten years ago when relations with the EU were at their peak, has adopted a positive—albeit discreet—stance on the need for good relations, as have Turkish Minister of EU Affairs Egemen Bagis and the Minister of Justice Sadullah Ergin, who both cautiously welcomed the report. Prime Minister Erdogan has, however, taken a more distinct approach by questioning whether the EU Commission has nothing better to do than write Progress Reports on Turkey. Such an attitude would

appear to tap into the popular sentiment of the majority of the Turkish population, who are tired of the erratic and extremely prolonged EU accession process.

At the current stage, since there is no clear prospect of membership and the stakes of Europeanization have lessened for Turkey, the EU would appear to be trying to placate Turkey and avert relations from deteriorating further by bringing it back to the negotiation table for technical talks. So far, there have been technical negotiation talks in 13 different fields, some of which have been achieved, but relations remain fragile and easily disrupted. Adopting a merely technical perspective and giving implicit support may satisfy the AKP, thus serving to mitigate the emergence of more conflictual relations. However, the new EU rapprochement still exhibits serious shortcomings if the Turkish government is to return to the halcyon days of its pro-European stance prior to 2005.

If EU-Turkey relations are to recover their former standing, the EU needs to: make clear commitments; prove that they share common security and economic concerns that necessitate enhanced cooperation; win over a skeptical Turkish public opinion that has tired of the accession process and EU demands; and, more generally, rejuvenate its somewhat negative image as an ineffective peremptory bloc in decline, rather than simply imposing certain roadmaps that have lost credibility among many in Turkey.

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