

## Turkey and the EU – What Sort of New Start?

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Since the meeting in Brussels on 25 May between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Presidents of the European Commission and European Council, Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk, dialogue between Turkey and the EU has been stepped up and seems set to continue this way – at least for the time being. A first political dialogue took place on 13 June, with others to follow apparently including an anti-terror gathering in early July. There has also been a visible reduction in anti-EU rhetoric from Ankara which, during the referendum campaign, reached dizzying heights. President Erdogan has stopped talking about severing ties with the EU and finding alternative partners and begun to talk about the need to open negotiating chapters and insisting that EU membership remains a strategic goal. This reflects the fact that he is aware that ties with the EU cannot be cut without harming Turkey's vital interests, not least the economy. Indeed over the decades Turkey and the EU have developed an intricate, inter-twinned and interdependent relationship which crosses and dips into many different areas and would be very difficult, if not impossible, for Ankara to replace. This inter-dependence ensures that their dialogue continues even when the going gets tough and over the last year or so the going has been very tough indeed. Yet ultimately it is the quality not the quantity of the dialogue that matters and when we take a closer look at this so called 'new start' or 'reset' there is little reason to be overly optimistic based on the current realities on the ground.

Obviously the EU does not want to risk burning its bridges with Ankara. Turkey has been, is and will remain one of the most important countries for the EU. This was reflected in the decision of EU foreign ministers at their meeting in April in Malta not to suspend accession talks with Ankara. While from one side not suspending comes at a high price to the EU's credibility as a values-based actor, on the other side, given the EU's double standard approach towards Turkey's accession, that credibility has been almost non-existent for many years. The talks mean little in practice anyway, as they were killed off by the EU years ago when negotiating chapters were blocked for political reasons. As Commissioner Hahn has stated, the call for suspension is an artificial debate because of the stand-still in accession negotiations. Furthermore, suspension or termination would mean failing Turkish society – not least those that voted against the constitutional amendments and demonstrated a strong democratic resilience – as it would risk cutting off the EU's ability to reach out and strengthen dialogue with Turkish society and civil society. The EU's embrace of Turkish society needs to deepen not erode. Furthermore, a suspension is likely to lead to reduction of funds directed to Turkey including to civil society which would be counter-productive. It would also mean pulling up a rules-based anchor – albeit a terribly weak one presently – without having a credible alternative. A transactional relationship based on cooperation in areas of mutual interest is not an alternative. Hence suspending would be no positive outcome for this relationship and this position is unlikely to shift unless the death penalty is reinstated.

So the EU finds itself in a catch-22 situation. While the EU wants to have a positive, constructive results-driven engagement with Ankara, at the same time there is a lack of appetite to deliver anything tangible to Ankara while the current sorry state of democracy and human rights continues. This is reflected in the approach of some Member States towards the starting of the talks for the upgrading of the EU-Turkey Customs Union. European Commission officials are waiting to receive the mandate from EU Member States for the go ahead to begin negotiations. This green light is not yet there because some Member States are blocking the road including Austria and Cyprus. There is an expectation that Turkey

should take certain steps to properly revive relations yet there is no sign this is going to happen.

Furthermore if some in Europe think they can use the upgrade of the Custom Union as leverage on Ankara then they are probably wrong. Yes, President Erdogan wants to boost the economy ahead of the 2019 Presidential election which he would like to win with a good margin, and an upgraded Customs Union would have the potential to do that. However, in the first place it is questionable whether the negotiations would be finished by the election. Furthermore even if they , the final agreement would still need to be ratified by EU national parliaments and by the European Parliament. Indeed the European Parliament is playing hardball. On 20 June the Parliament called not only on the EU to 'formally suspend the accession negotiations with Turkey without delay if the constitutional reform package is implemented unchanged', MEP's also propose upgrading the EU-Turkey Customs Union, by making human rights and fundamental freedoms part of a new agreement. All in all the future of Turkey-EU relations remains unclear and there is every chance of renewed tensions on the horizon.