

No Quick Fix for Turkey-EU Relations

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Over the last few years, Turkey-EU relations have been plagued by animosity as a result of the destruction of Turkey's EU accession process and increased EU criticism over democratic backtracking in the country. However, the seriousness of the current situation is unprecedented. The latest escalation in relations came about as a consequence of the European Parliament resolution of November 2016, which recommended a temporary freezing of accession negotiations in response to the serious deterioration of the rule of law and human rights following the 15 July 2016 failed coup. In December, Member States, rather than suspend talks, agreed that 'under the currently prevailing circumstances, no new chapters be considered for opening'. While EU leaders needed to respond to developments in Turkey, it was rather absurd to hear EU officials at the same time talking about the accession negotiations and Turkish membership as if it was an ongoing, problem-free process and that Turkish accession was on the cards. In reality, the EU more or less shut the door on Turkey years ago.

This fact makes the EU far from blameless for the troubling situation in Turkey today. Long before Ankara began to wander off the democratic path, relations were increasingly difficult as a result of some EU leaders constantly reopening the question of whether Turkey was a suitable candidate for full membership or bluntly rejecting Turkey's membership altogether. The blocking of negotiating chapters was a particularly destructive policy. Chapters are roadmaps for change and by blocking some of them a key instrument for reform was removed. This is particularly evident with chapters 23 and 24, which are related to the judiciary and fundamental rights and freedoms. As a consequence, the EU lost leverage over Turkey because the reform process is inextricably linked to the accession process. Unfortunately, Turkey's accession has been used and abused over and over in the context of many political campaigns, referendums and elections for years.

It took a humanitarian crisis, and the EU's desperation to outsource the problem, for the EU to adjust its approach towards Turkey. Unfortunately, this reinvigoration came about too late. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, could have used her weight much earlier to broker a breakthrough in the dead-locked process but rather chose to support the status quo. Due to this lack of investment in a crucial strategic relationship, Turkey's leadership currently does not care what the EU has to say, a sentiment that is shared by a considerable part of society who feel let down by the Europe that once inspired them.

Yet so far, despite the rising tensions and enflamed rhetoric neither Ankara nor the EU has yet been willing to officially pull the plug on the accession negotiations although both sides almost certainly recognise membership is never going to happen. For Ankara, there are likely concerns over the possible economic consequences of such a step. Turkey cannot afford to take such a big risk at a time when the Turkish economy is already facing difficulties. In this sense, Europe's anchor is crucially important. Meanwhile, the EU is also unlikely to end the accession process as it fears the possible blowback. Beyond the migration deal, Turkey is a key strategic partner on a number of other important issues including energy and counter-terrorism. Moreover, it is unlikely that achieving the necessary consensus between Member States would be easy. In that sense, the EU would prefer it to be Ankara to officially end the process by coming up with a new proposal. While there are many rumours flying around that Ankara is working on a new model for its relations with the EU, such an alternative has yet to materialise.

Looking ahead to the next few months, there is unlikely to be a major breakthrough. However, a number of events in the coming months could have a significant impact on the

future shape of relations. The outcome of elections in key EU countries where far-right groups are increasingly powerful – the Dutch elections in March, presidential elections in France in April/May, parliamentary elections in France in June, and German elections in September; a referendum on 16 April on constitutional amendments aimed at transforming Turkey into an Executive Presidency; the start of negotiations between Turkey and the EU on upgrading the Customs Union; keeping the March 2016 migration deal on track and linked to that the issue of lifting visa obligations for Turkish citizens once Turkey fulfils a long list of conditions, including a change to its anti-terror laws; a breakthrough in the talks aimed at reunifying Cyprus. A Turkey-EU summit is also expected to take place before the summer. The EU and Turkey have reached one of the most difficult, yet at the same time most important moments, in their decades-old relationship. It will require visionary and pragmatic leadership and smart diplomacy to prevent a further breakdown in relations. What is at stake here is not simply the future of the EU's relations with a key strategic partner but the future of Turkey's Europeanisation process, which has been at the centre of the country's modernisation since the Ottoman period. What Europe really needs is a long-term strategic vision. Yet at a time when the future shape of the EU itself remains unclear such a vision is unlikely to materialise any time soon.