

A breakthrough year in relations between Turkey and the European Union – an attempt to take stock

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September 2016 marks the passing of one year has passed since the outbreak of the EU migration crisis which became the basis of unprecedented co-operation between Turkey and the EU. Paradoxically, although this co-operation in containing the crisis has proven surprisingly effective, the climate of Turkish-EU relations has significantly deteriorated. This situation comes in part as a result of internal tensions in Turkey (and within the EU). However, genuine changes in the power relations between Turkey and the EU have occurred and Turkey feels that issues it attaches importance to are not being appropriately addressed by the EU – the frustration this causes has been even more instrumental in the deterioration of relations. This shift in relations between Turkey and the EU also stems from Turkey's aspirations to emancipate itself in its relations with the West; there has been an upward trend in this regard for years. The instruments the EU has so far been employing in order to put Turkey under pressure (above all the EU integration process) are losing their effectiveness, which is in stark contrast with Turkey's emancipation and assertiveness. However, irrespective of the present and future inevitable tensions in Turkish-EU relations, Turkey's aim is not to break off with the EU but to develop a new model of strategic relations which better serves its own interests. Despite the recent rapprochement with Russia, Ankara seems to be aware of a lack of alternatives to strategic co-operation with the EU and, more broadly, with the West.

The paradoxes of the breakthrough year

The EU migration crisis, which began between August and September 2015, has brought about a breakthrough in Turkish-EU relations. At the initiative of the European Commission and Germany – a plan to engage Ankara in containing and consequently in resolving the most serious crisis in the EU in years has been developed¹. This took the form of a series of visits that politicians paid to Turkey last year². Fundamentally,

the plan committed Turkey to tightening controls on the Turkish-Greek border (the main migration route to the EU at that time), to taking measures to improve the situation of refugees residing in Turkish territory, and to implementing the programme of deportations and relocations of migrants between Turkey and the EU. In exchange Turkey was promised substantial financial support (in total €6 bn by 2018), a major intensification of political relations (it was guaranteed twice yearly Turkey-EU summits) and finally a resumption of the accession process with the EU committing to the swift introduction of a visa-free regime with Turkey.

The plan to co-operate with Turkey to prevent the uncontrolled and massive influx of refugees

¹ A draft agreement was adopted at the Turkey-EU summit on 29th November 2015. Upon completion, it was approved at another summit on 20th March 2016.

² Including visits of the president and the vice-president of the EU, two EU commissioners and Chancellor Angela Merkel.

/migrants from the Middle East has turned out to be surprisingly effective. Between March and June 2016 the number of migrants coming from Turkey to Greece fell by 95%³, though it slightly increased in mid-July following a failed coup d'état in Turkey⁴. The EU has opened another chapter in the accession negotiations with Turkey (announcing the opening of further chapters) and has intensified work on introducing the visa-free regime with Turkey which was initially scheduled for 30th June but was later postponed to the end of 2016.

Turkish-EU co-operation alongside the Turkish-EU conflict are a manifestation of fundamental changes in mutual relations.

The period of effective collaboration over the huge crisis and the elevation of bilateral relations to an unheard-of level have simultaneously become a time of unprecedented deterioration in the atmosphere of relations between Turkey and the EU, mainly at the level of the rhetoric. This appears to be a paradox. Representatives of the Turkish government have traditionally accused the EU of anti-Turkish sentiment and Islamophobia⁵, of hypocrisy, a blatant failure to follow through on agreements (including the lack of promised financial aid and sabotaging

the liberalisation of the visa regime) and of having an ambiguous attitude to the anti-government forces in Turkey. They have also publicly blackmailed the EU, threatening to withdraw from the co-operation (both in the area of migration and strategic areas) or to support illegal migrations to the EU.

In the European media and also in certain statements made by politicians, growing criticism of the Turkish government due to Turkey's internal politics is present. The area which has come under the heaviest fire is the ruthless fight against the opposition, including the independent media, the brutal battle against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and finally the broad repression of the judicial system, education, the media and the police following the failed coup d'état of 15th July 2016. The main reason for the EU not meeting the deadline for introducing the liberalisation of the visa regime has been the fact that the Turkish government has resolutely refused to change the controversial anti-terrorist law (used in combating the opposition)⁶. In the EU there is the dominant conviction of Turkey's 'otherness' in terms of civilisation, further enhanced by the belief that Turkey's politics is radically anti-European (an authoritarian regime and Islamisation in internal politics, a shift towards Russia in Turkey's foreign policy).

The end of the present formula of Turkish-EU relations

Both the strategic Turkish-EU co-operation over the migration crisis and the intense conflict between Ankara and Brussels are signs of fundamental changes in relations between Turkey and the EU, above all of Turkey's accelerated emancipation from Europe.

Europe (and, since the Cold War, also the US) has been the main reference point for Tur-

³ Thus the pressure on the Balkan route has eased – from the EU perspective the tightening of controls on that route (without taking the role of Turkey into account) is seen as having been the decisive factor contributing to the containment of the migration crisis.

⁴ Before the Turkey-EU agreement on average 1,740 persons were arriving in Greece a day. Since the beginning of May this year the number has dropped to below 47. In this period of time the EU has taken in 511 Syrians from Turkey in exchange for 462 persons who were returned to Turkey. Since mid-July 100-200 persons a day started coming to Greece. See: *Implementing the EU-Turkey Statement – Questions and Answers*, 15.06.2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-1664_en.htm

⁵ This conviction is shared by the secular opposition, which further weakens the EU's reliability in Turkish society. See: Selin Girit, *Türkiye düşmanlığı kartı*, *Cumhuriyet*, 24.05.2016, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/538803/Turkiye_dusmanligi_karti.html

⁶ See: Mateusz Chudziak, *Turkey/EU: playing hardball on visa liberalisation*, *OSW Analyses*, 11.05.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-05-11/turkey/eu-playing-hardball-visa-liberalisation>

key in terms of politics, civilisation (modernisation) and economy for two hundred years. In modern times this is manifested in Turkey's membership in NATO, its attempts to join the EU, and its strong economic⁷ and social ties (including approximately 4.7 million Turks in the Western European countries⁸).

In spring 2015 Turkey was faced with serious internal and external challenges, while being convinced of the bankruptcy of its Middle Eastern policy and the fact that there is no alternative to its co-operation with the EU and NATO.

Due to the asymmetry of potential, the huge differences in social and political development (serious democratic shortcomings) and a feeling of otherness in terms of civilisation, to date Turkey has been treated as a supplicant and the accession process has been deemed impossible to implement in full. In Turkey the awareness of Europe's attitude towards it, together with an increase in the country's self-esteem are the main reasons for the resentment⁹ towards the West, coupled with a fascination with it.

The rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 significantly strengthened Turkey's pro-EU orientation. In the first years of its rule this orientation played a key role in the process of a fundamental political and social transformation of Turkish

society (democratisation, the replacement of the elite), an accelerated modernisation and dynamic economic development. This resulted in the opening of the EU accession process in 2005. Turkey's successes have substantially increased the ambition of the elites, but is in stark contrast with intensified problems within the EU due to the 2008 economic crisis and an important fall in support for the idea of EU enlargement (the EU integration process in fact slowed down around 2008). Ankara responded to it by intensifying its activity in the Middle East, which was regarded as an area where it could develop political and economic influence as well as a potential alternative source of revenue and investments. The apogee of Turkey's reorientation to the Middle East came during the Arab Spring (2011) in which Turkey became quite strongly involved (mainly in the Syrian conflict, more widely in the support for moderate Islamist forces), hoping that it would enhance its attractiveness in NATO and the EU. These hopes were finally scuppered in 2013 (the deadlock in Syria, the victory of the counter-revolution in Egypt) proved futile and Turkey's Middle Eastern policy directly led to various consequences: an escalation of the conflict with the PKK, the emergence of Islamic terrorism in Turkey, and a massive influx of Syrian refugees (nearly 3 million in 2016)¹⁰. In parallel, in 2013 the country's internal situation deteriorated (which was caused by protests over Gezi Park, the conflict with the Gulen movement, and the resumption of intense conflict with the PKK). This gave way to ever-growing authoritarian tendencies which generate tensions in Turkey's relations with the West.

⁷ Trade between Turkey and the EU in 2015 amounted to €140.7 bn; approximately 40% of Turkish exports go to the EU; see: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/turkey/>

⁸ According to data provided by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-expatriate-turkish-citizens.en.mfa>

⁹ This is also manifested by the conviction present in a section of conservative public opinion that there is no alternative to partnership with Europe, despite the 'love-hate' relationship with the West. See: Hasan Bülent Kahraman, *Niye biz Avrupa'yı 'içermeyelim'?*, *Sabah*, 5.09.2016, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/kahraman/2016/09/05/niye-biz-avrupayi-iceremeyelim>

¹⁰ This number has been consistently growing since the beginning of the conflict. According to data from 1st January 2014 – 560,000 registered refugees. According to data from 25th August – 2,726,000. These figures do not take into account unregistered refugees, persons who have left Turkey for the EU during the migration crisis and refugees from Iraq and migrants from other countries; see: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

Just before the migration crisis in the summer of 2015, Turkey was confronted with many serious internal and external challenges, with the feeling of the bankruptcy of its Middle Eastern policy (including the country's alienation in the region) and the conviction that there was no alternative to co-operation with the EU and NATO, regardless of the fact that these two institutions were increasingly mistrustful of Turkey and frustrated with its politics.

The migration crisis: a crisis in Turkish-EU relations

The migration crisis in 2015 acted as a catalyst for fundamental changes in Turkish-EU relations. The huge number of migrants who arrived in Europe (mainly via Turkey) in autumn 2015 and the scale of the constant migration pressure on Europe from the Middle East and Africa present a large and long-term challenge for the EU. For the first time in history, the relations of dependence in Turkish-EU contacts have changed—Ankara has at least a short-term solution to the EU's strategic problem. Turkey

The fact that Turkey is actively using the migration crisis to its advantage and that this may lead to an attempt to permanently redefine Turkish-EU relations seems to be the decisive factor which is generating the present bilateral tensions.

has gained the possibility to strengthen its position in relations with the EU, to shake up the existing and new co-operation mechanisms and to use the EU's dependence on it to realise its short-term objectives in internal policy. By making active use of the migration crisis, together with the huge dynamics of changes within Turkey and the EU, Turkey is gradually leading to attempts to permanently redefine Turkish-EU relations. This seems to be the decisive

factor forming the current bilateral tensions. At first (at the latest until the resignation of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in May this year) Turkey's politics focused on taking maximum advantage of its partner's weakness in order to realise its own interests, while maintaining the basic tenets of its politics. Inducing Chancellor Angela Merkel to visit Turkey at the height of the campaign for the early parliamentary election (October 2015) was Turkey's initial success. As was the case with visits of representatives of the European Commission, this visit was seen as support for the AKP despite the fact that the opposition and liberal circles raised concerns about the state of Turkey's democracy. Turkey's demands that the accession process be unblocked, that Turkey-EU summits be held twice a year, that the liberation of the visa regime be accelerated and that financial aid be provided to help refugees from Syria were part of the paradigm that was in effect at that time. Meeting these demands or announcing that they would be met was undoubtedly an important success for Turkish diplomacy, leading Turkey out of its growing isolation.

Apart from this, Turkey resumed the project to establish a security zone in northern Syria (mainly in its rhetoric), both as a sanctuary for refugees heading to Turkey and then Europe but also as a platform for strengthening Turkey's political and military position in Syria. This issue became particularly sensitive with the success of the Russian intervention in Syria (which began on 30th September 2015), the looming prospect of strategic co-operation between the EU and Russia over the conflict in Syria and the fight against terrorism (following the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13th November 2015). In both cases there was a real risk that Turkey would be pushed out of the Syrian game and this was most likely the main reason for the escalation of tensions between Turkey and Russia which culminated in Turkey shooting down a Russian warplane (on 24th November 2015). Contrary to Ankara's expectations, it did not receive suffi-

cient support from the EU or the US in order to defend its own interests in the case of the security zone or the conflict with Russia. At the same time Turkey regarded US support for Syrian Kurds as a hostile activity.

A radical shift in emphasis which was to bring about a new quality to Turkish-EU relations came in spring 2016. The EU felt a reduced migration pressure and began to have concerns about the constant deterioration of the internal situation in Turkey. Brussels increasingly pushed for Turkey to strictly implement the action plan in the area of the liberation of the visa regime (particularly the change in the restrictive anti-terrorist law, used to fight the opposition).

The EU has remained passive or reluctant in matters which were essential for the Turkish government.

In this spirit the rhetoric against Turkey and its president intensified in the European media (including vulgar attacks on German television) and a resolution was adopted in the German parliament which recognised the massacre of Armenians perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire in 1915 as genocide). The impetus for a further intensification of the criticism was provided by repression and purges in Turkey following a thwarted coup d'état (on 15th July). The key element of the agreement over the migration crisis, the liberalisation of the visa regime, was postponed on 30th June at least for several months (initially until October, unofficially until the end of 2016).

In Turkey there have been growing problems which are being solved contrary to EU expectations. In particular, the fight against all forces which are independent or hostile towards the Turkish president, which ranges from removing a relatively autonomous Prime Minister Davutoglu from power, through repression of the independent media, to the purges in the coun-

try's administration as a consequence of the failed coup (approximately 80,000 people have been subjected to repression in the civil service alone) and the ruthless quelling of the rebellion in south-eastern Turkey organised by the PKK. In the area of security, Turkey succeeded in reconciling with Russia, which enabled it to return to the Syrian game, to launch an independent (approved by Moscow) intervention in Syria and to begin the process of establishing its own security zone (since 24th August this year). The EU remained passive or reluctant in the matters which the Turkish government saw as being essential for it. In Turkish-EU relations Ankara toughened its rhetoric (including threats to break off co-operation over the migration crisis and suggestions to radically change the orientation to take an anti-West position). However, it also increasingly frequently referred to the Turkish minority residing mainly in Germany (by organising pro-Turkish demonstrations) and attempted to put the media, mainly in Germany, under pressure, something previously unseen in Turkey's politics. Nevertheless, despite threats and a slight increase in the number of migrants coming from Turkey¹¹ the co-operation between Turkey and the EU has thus far been maintained, although its political rank has been substantially lowered – meetings with EU delegations are held at the level of EU commissioners and Turkish ministers.

The breakthrough year – conclusions and the outlook

The 2015/2016 migration crisis has been the catalyst for extensive changes in Turkish-EU relations. These changes are both objective and linked with a correction in Turkey's perception of the EU. They have also led Turkey to fundamentally re-evaluate its goals and po-

¹¹ The increase was caused most likely by the post coup purges in the agencies responsible for the execution of the agreement, as well as optimal for sea navigation time of the year.

litical instruments and to test them. The migration crisis has above all revealed the scale of genuine threats from the Middle East and Africa (demographic pressure, threat of terrorism, the impact on Muslim communities in Europe and the related increase in populism) and the fact that they are permanent.

Turkey will undertake independent measures in matters which it deems to be important. It will do this in short-term co-operation with other players, and will include measures which run counter to EU or US interests.

Turkey has emerged as a vital partner in minimising the threats from the Middle East and as a country which is capable of effective co-operation in containing EU strategic challenges. Thus for the first time in the history of Turkish-EU relations, the EU has had to depend on Ankara's policy over a strategic issue. This is likely to continue and the imbalance in Turkish-EU relations has been corrected to Turkey's advantage. The situation has generated great tension and re-evaluations in its bilateral relations with the EU.

Despite favourable circumstances and contrary to official political assumptions, the strategic mechanism which regulates relations between Turkey and the EU - EU integration - seems to be coming to an end. Apart from traditional and growing mutual distrust, the shape and speed of this process is ill-adjusted to Ankara's political aspirations and the process of adapting to EU standards in fact runs against Turkey's priorities in its internal politics. Ankara's stance has swiftly crystallised in recent months, both as a response to the EU's unsatisfying position and due to a further deterioration of Turkey's internal situation. At that time not only did the EU not manifest it is able to effectively impact the attitude of the Turkish government to sen-

sitive issues (e.g. the anti-terrorist law, protection of the freedom of the media, the Kurds), it also lost its position as a point of reference and support for opposition circles, stimulating pro-European and democratic practices¹². At present the chances of reversing this trend (which is unfavourable for the EU) are rather infinitesimal. The shift in the balance of power between Turkey and the EU, the crisis of the concept of EU integration and the burning issues (internal and regional) Ankara is facing have led to a revision of Turkey's relations with the EU. The Turkish government seems ready to ruthlessly exploit the weakness of the West (above all, its susceptibility to the implications of the migration crisis) and to further develop the instruments to put the EU under pressure (among them blackmailing the EU with the threat that co-operation will be broken off, and potential actions taken in order to mobilise Turkish and Muslim communities in Europe). At the same time, Turkey will take autonomous measures in matters which it deems to be important; this will be done in short-term co-operation with other players, and will include measures which run counter to EU or US interests. One of the manifestations of this approach is the spectacular and effective rapprochement with Russia over the Syrian conflict, following a period of the greatest crisis in bilateral relations in decades. Nor should the tightening of short-term co-operation between Turkey and Syrian opposition groups (who the West views as being dangerous) be ruled out. It happened in the past and it is taking place at present.

Turkey is becoming freer and more assertive and is exhibiting anti-West frustration. Nor can a further escalation of tensions be ruled out. In spite of all this, it seems rather unlikely that Turkey will sever ties with the Euro-Atlantic

¹² See: Can Dündar'dan Merkel'e mektup: Yanlış saftasınız, *Diken*, 24.04.2016, <http://www.diken.com.tr/dundar-dan-merkele-mektup-turkiyedeki-ip-cekme-mucadelesinde-yanlis-saftasiniz/>

structures, and it is even less likely to change its orientation to take an unequivocally anti-EU position (e.g. based on its relations with Russia). The EU is not only an attractive partner for Turkey, particularly in the area of the economy, but there is no alternative to this partnership for Turkey. Turkey's attempts to seek partners in the Middle East (between 2009 and 2013) have not yielded any results and the present conditions for this seem far worse. Irrespective of the rapprochement with Russia and the present and future co-operation, there are a host of serious conflicts of interests dividing these two countries, as well as a deep rooted mutual distrust and the conviction that the other part-

ner is unpredictable. Above all, Russia's military power and the readiness to use it is an important asset for Turkey, but it is the only one and it is unambiguously insufficient when it comes to supplanting the EU as a strategic partner. Assuming that the present internal trends in Turkey (President Erdogan maintaining and asserting his power) continue and that the EU maintains its present course, it may be expected that relations between the EU and Turkey will evolve towards a more balanced, dynamic and challenging partnership which combines both elements of co-operation and conflict, and which resembles the entire spectrum of EU-Russian relations before 2014.

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