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Turkey and the European Union: explaining a resilient relationship

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The adhesion process of Turkey to the European Union is arguably the most complex and long over all processes of enlargement of the block. Turkey is the country that waited longer to enter the European Union, always threatening to quit, but never actually leaving. What is sought here is not only to explain the reasons for such complexity, but the reason for the persistence of this relationship that has lasted over 50 years.

The relations between the country and the bloc began in 1959, when Turkey asked for the first time its membership as an associate member of the then European Economic Community. Since then this relationship was marked by numerous ruptures and new beginnings. What explains the continuity of the relationship despite the numerous obstacles faced and what are the predictions for this relationship that is so problematic?

The argument developed is that membership to the European Union has become a state policy in Turkey, not because of the internalization of the merits of becoming a member of the bloc, but because of the interpretation, of the meaning that a possible acceptance of Turkey by the European Union could have, by all the main political actors country. In other words, be accepted has become more important than actually participate in the integration project.

This particular interpretation is a result to the historical relations between Turkey and Europe which preceds the application for membership as



an associate member in 1959 and that, in fact, before the very creation of the Republic in 1923. Accordingly what will be argued is that despite the many setbacks that mark the relations between those two actors negotiating for accession should continue to be pursued by Turkey, regardless of the political party that governs the country.

To explain this argument, first will be provided a history of the European Union-Turkey relations with emphasis on the post-2005 period, when the membership negotiations began. Then, the internal factors to the European Union and Turkey that are complicating this fragile relationship since 2005 will be visited. Along the paper, will be demonstrated that a possible acceptance of the country by the European Union has become so crucial domestically. Finally, there will be an analysis of the potential for cooperation between Turkey and the European Union's foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring.

In 1963 the process initiated in 1959 was completed and Turkey became an associate member of the European Economic Community. The then Prime Minister, Ismet Inonu, at the time of signature of the Ankara Agreement, said that "being a member of the Western world and, in view of our system, from the beginning we were enthusiasts of the European Economic Community. We want to be part of the community "(Bozdaglioglu, 2003, p. 69). Likewise, the then Deputy Prime Minister argued that "Turkey's desire to join the European Economic Community as an associate member was not based only on a simple short-term calculation. [Participate in the Community] confirms that Turkey shares the same fate with the free West and the borders of Europe are drawn to the east and south of Turkey (Turhan Fevzioglu in Bozdaglioglu 2003, p. 69). The then Minister of Foreign Affairs acknowledged that the agreement was "essentially an economic agreement," but emphasized that "confirmed and approved of Turkey's desire to be part of Europe" (Bozdaglioglu, 2003, p. 70).



This desire to be accepted as part of Europe and to, have confirmed the country's identity as a European country is the product of the dynamics of relations between Turkey and its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, and the European continent.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire from the 18th century was due, among other factors, by nationalist movements, some of which were supported by Europe and military defeats, many of them to European countries. To Ottoman leaders, Europe has been considered a direct threat - to defeat the Empire in battle - or indirect - to feed discontent among people under Ottoman rule. In order to prevent the decline and ultimately survive the empire adopted a strategy that later would have a major impact on the world view of the Ottoman elites and after the republican elites: the modernization according to European standards to be recognized as equal.

In first place having Europe's administrative and military superiority recognized, a modernization program of the armed forces and public administration was adopted by Ottoman Empire from 1839 to 1876. Second, the Empire tried to be recognized as part of the European states system (Karaosmanoglu, 2000, p. 203). Despite the Treaty of Paris (1856) seems to grant such recognition, the fact that the system of customs was not abandoned demonstrates that the Empire was not considered a full member of Europe, since its sovereignty continued to be disregarded (Bilgin, 2009, p. 116). So, at first, be accepted as a member of Europe was a survival strategy.

The Ottoman Empire finally collapsed after World War I and besides it has lost all territories located outside of Anatolia, the territory of modern Turkey was divided among the winners of the conflict. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) which formalized the division, now represents the culmination of European plans to disrupt the Empire and exacerbated the already present fear of bad European intentions toward the Turks.

After the founding of the Republic in 1923, the modernizing and westernizing reforms initiated in the 19th century and continued by Young Turks (1908-1918) were taken by the government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.



However, the reforms promoted by Atatürk were even more profound: the goal was not only modernize the country for recognition as an equal partner in order to survive. Atatürk's reforms craved a complete break with the Ottoman and Islamic past and the reorientation of Turkey towards the "European civilization". In the view of Mustafa Kemal, Turkey should be a modern, Western, secular and homogeneous country (despite the heterogeneity of its population).

Over time, being recognized as equal was no longer just a survival strategy, it has become crucial to confirm the construction of the Turkish identity as Western. The recognition and acceptance of Europe came to be particularly coveted, given the weakness of this construction internally. The attempt during the Republican period to instill in the construction of this particular identity - through the education system and military service; control, marginalization and oppression of resistant groups as religious conservatives (*muhafazakârlar*), Kurds and religious or non-Turkish minorities such as the Alevis, Armenians, Greeks and Jews - was not successful. The heterogeneity of the population, with different conceptions of identity, persisted.

Therefore for the Republican elite - which historically populated the judiciary, the military and political parties such as CHP (Republican People's Party) - the acceptance and recognition of Europe was seen as a key element of a strategy to ensure precarious and fragile identity, subject to challenge even violent (and repressed with greater violence).

However, it is interesting to observe that Europe has become both admired and feared. The distrust towards Europe as a result of the "Sevres Syndrome" (in reference to the aforementioned Treaty) is particularly visible in the position adopted by the republican elites in relation to the membership to EU. Despite the desire to become member of the bloc in order to have Turkey's Western identity confirmed, there is a rejection to the conditions that must be met during the adhesion process. Republican elites are quite sensitive about the sovereignty of the country as a violation of sovereignty is



interpreted as a possible first step towards its disintegration. Thus, European demands for the transfer of more rights for minorities such as the Kurds are filtered by the Sèvres syndrome and perceived as the newest European attempt to disintegrate the country. Therefore, despite the acceptance as a member of the European Union is a goal of these elites, part of the integration process, which involves the delegation of certain powers to Brussels is seen as problematic.

During the Cold War, Turkey has continued to approach to the West in general, and in particular to the European Community and, in 1987, the country requested accession as a full member. The Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, Vahit Halefoglu, explained that the request was "the result of our goal of integrating Turkey to Western civilization since the establishment of the Republic" (Bozdaglioglu, 2003, p. 70).

In 1999, the European Union finally gave the country the candidate country status to the bloc. A series of reforms were conducted primarily by the coalition government led by Bulent Ecevit from 1999 to 2002, and then by the Justice and Development Party government (AKP) led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in power since then. As a result of the reform program the European Union decided that Turkey had fulfilled the Copenhagen criteria and that the accession negotiations could be initiated in 2005.

Since then, only one of the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* was completed and only 13 are being negotiated. Most of the remaining chapters are blocked by Cyprus, France or the European Council. In Turkey, the pace of reforms has slowed. Between 2010 and 2013 no chapter was opened for negotiation. Which means that since 2005 the possibility of accession became more remote, which was the year that seemed to crown a tortuous but resilient relationship between Turkey and the European Union. The reasons relate to the internal affairs of the European Union and Turkey.

Since the beginning of negotiations some European leaders, notably Austria and Germany, spoke in favor of an alternative arrangement for membership for Turkey. The proposal generally dealt around a "privileged



partnership" that would exclude the country's decision-making process and offer few advantages over that Turkey already had as an associate member and member of the customs union (which it was part since 1995). France and Austria also indicated that the potential Turkish accession should be approved in a national referendum. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy openly opposed to the country's entry into the bloc.

This type of discourse and attitudes provided ammunition to Euro-skeptics in Turkey and caused frustration in the general population. The general perception has become that the country despite all the reforms already made and in progress ones to accommodate the *acquis communautaire*. It would never be accepted by a European Union that did not meet their promises. A drastic drop in support for the country's entry into the EU followed: in 2004, 73% of the population declared itself in favor of accession; from 2007, this ratio ranged between 34 and 48% (Independent Commission on Turkey, 2004, p. 9).

In addition, the economic and financial crisis in which the European Union plunged since 2008 has resulted in an increased opposition of European populations to the accession of a predominantly Muslim country. This opposition is not restricted to Turkey, but is part of a wider debate about the (lack of) integration of immigrant populations in Europe made in local, national and European elections, and that is partly responsible for the rise of extreme right-wing parties in several European countries. However, the presence of about 9 million Turks and descendants in European territory intensified rejection. In short, a Europe in crisis does not seem ready to welcome new members, particularly a populous and predominantly Muslim country like Turkey.

In Turkey, this growing opposition from Europe reinforced the lack of government's determination to proceed with reforms demanded by the accession process - some of them quite painful. The lack of involvement of the government from the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was also partly the result of internal problems faced: alleged plans to overthrow



government, a process of the Constitutional Court to close the party and a threat of intervention by the military. As of 2007, the pace of reforms has slowed considerably.

Still, the government has made important changes, notably with regard to the balance of power between civilian and military and the question of the Kurds.

It is interesting to explain the reasons why this party with Islamic roots took upon itself the goal of accession, despite the slowdown in the reforms. This question is relevant since, historically the Turkish Islamic parties slope leading up to and influenced the AKP, such as those led by Necmettin Erbakan, were opposed to EU membership.

The parties led by Erbakan were contrary to European and Western orientation in foreign policy and favored to the country's leadership role in the Muslim world. For Erbakan, the European Union was nothing more than a plan to assimilate the Muslim Turkey in a Christian union (Bozdaglioglu, 2008, p. 65- 66).

On the other hand, the AKP instead of adopting a speech "Islam vs. West", came to power in 2002 and in favor of the country joining the European Union, a surprising shift in the party's foreign policy.

For the opposition side, the AKP embraced the cause of accession for instrumental reasons: to reduce the power of the military and strengthen their own political power. Although it is clear that the accession process benefited the AKP, as their opponents were weakened and the balance between civil and military now hangs in favor of the former. It is argued here that the AKP inherited the republican elites' desire to be accepted by European Union.

In AKP's case, the reason is for not having a Western identity confirmed, hence the construction of the Turkish identity articulated by the AKP favors the multi- civilizational aspect - with emphasis on Sunni component. Conservative elites, represented by the AKP, pursue membership as a matter



of prestige. The party leaders speeches often emphasize that, despite the reforms not implemented yet, Turkey is already on the same level as Europe.

In an article entitled "The Robust Man of Europe", Prime Minister Erdogan noted that "Turkey is a regional player, an international actor with an expanding range of soft power and a resilient, sizable economy. [...] Sometimes I wonder if Turkey's power is an impediment to its accession". The Prime Minister added: "It's been more than half a century since Turkey first knocked at Europe's door. [...]The Turkey of today is different. We are no more a country that would wait at the EU's door like a docile supplicant. [...]Europe has no real alternative to Turkey. Especially in a global order where the balance of power is shifting, the EU needs Turkey to become an ever stronger, richer, more inclusive, and more secure Union. I hope it will not be too late before our European friends discover this fact." (Erdogan, 2011, Newsweek p. N / d).

The idea then is that Turkey should be accepted as a member of Europe, at first formulated as a survival strategy and then transformed into a need for confirmation of identity of the western country, is a reversed idea. In AKP's speech, is Europe that needs Turkey. Turkey is already an equal partner and Europe must recognize this fact. Suat Kiniklioglu, AKP's vice president for foreign affairs, points to the "inability [block] to treat Turkey as a strategic partner rather than just as a candidate country any [...] Turkey is not happy with a fragile, unfair and unequal relationship with Europe. [The country] seeks a proper, respectful and dignified position" (Kiniklioglu 2011, pp. 66-68). In other words, the conservative elite represented by the AKP is still pursuing a possible acceptance by the European Union. However, in this case, this acceptance is desired for the sake of prestige, pride and dignity.

The AKP and its electorate also share an ambivalent vision of Europe with the Republican elites and as a result are also sensitive to any kind of action interpreted as interference in the sovereignty of the country. Therefore, despite the worldview and foreign policy of the Republican and conservative elites considered antithetical, both pursue the goal of being accepted as a full



member of the European Union, without this meaning the interference in the country's sovereignty - which, of course, is not a realistic goal.

After a period in which almost no progress has been achieved the relations between Turkey and the European Union seemed to improve in 2013. François Hollande, elected president of France in 2012, moderated the opposition to Turkish membership and unlocked the opening of Chapter 22 (Policy regional Coordination and regional Instruments) one of which had been unilaterally vetoed by France and the first to be opened in three years.

Negotiations on this chapter started in November 2013 and in January 2014, President Hollande visited Turkey. In the same month the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan made his first visit to Brussels in five years. In Germany, the new coalition government abandoned the use of the term "privileged partnership". Despite the rhetoric change does not signal a change of position the more moderate language signals a more cautious approach. However, despite these advances seen since the early 2013 in the relations between Turkey and the European Union, obstacles remain.

Internally, Turkey continues to face a number of problems and has yet to hold a series of reforms to suit the European *acquis*. The difficult transformation of the country into a democracy that respects fundamental rights and freedoms is partly explained by the polarization between the main domestic political actors. With less concrete prospect of membership due to the lack of commitment by the European Union, political groups and civil society who joined forces in the 1999-2005 period lost its common cause.

This polarization can be seen more clearly in two recent episodes: the Gezi protests of June 2013 and the corruption scandals involving AKP members in late 2013 and early 2014 (Independent Commission on Turkey, 2014, p.21).

Demonstrations against the destruction of the Gezi Park in Istanbul for the construction of a shopping center in June 2013 demonstrated quite clearly the polarization between the government and civil society. The brutal police response to the initial demonstrations swelled the protests that have spread



to other cities and began to gather a heterogeneous group including environmentalists, socialists, secular, Kemalist, anarchists, Kurds, anti-capitalist Muslims, the GLBT movement and feminist, scholars, soccer fans and nationalist teams. Despite presenting various demands, these groups were able to unite against the disproportionate police response and the growing authoritarianism and interference in the lifestyle of the Erdogan government's population.

The corruption scandal that emerged over the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 highlighted the growing animosity between the former allies AKP and the Gulen movement led by Fethullah. For the AKP the infiltration by members of the movement in the police, the judiciary and the media has become a nuisance. For the movement, the style of an increasingly authoritarian government by Prime Minister Erdogan is intolerable.

This growing polarization in Turkey combined with setbacks in freedom of expression - including but not limited at all to temporary banishment Twitter and YouTube - and in the judicial reforms - historically marked by structural deficiencies and increasingly subject to political interference - put into question the capacity and political will of the country to follow through with the necessary reforms to become a member of the European Union.

One possibility would be to approach the foreign policy area.

The AKP government aspired to transform Turkey into a regional leader with an autonomous foreign policy. Since 2007, when Turkey lined up to almost 100% of the declarations of the Foreign and Security Policy, compatibility rate declined continuously: in 2013, the rate was only 46% (European Commission, 2007 and 2013).

However, the confidence of the country was deeply shaken by the Arab Spring and as a result, the "superb" view towards the West in general and the EU in particular became moderate. Turkey began to seek greater cooperation with Western countries, as seen in the decision to accept the installation of a radar in Turkish territory for a NATO anti-missile shield and to participate in NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 after initial hesitation. This approach



may ultimately also benefit the relations between Turkey and the European Union, at least in the foreign policy aspect.

The ties that Turkey had been building with Middle Eastern countries since 2002, as part of "zero problems with neighbors" policy, were gradually worn. The overthrow of the friendly government of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt has made Turkey harshly criticized the military regime, which departed not only from the Cairo government, but also from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The conflict in Syria had even more serious consequences for Turkey both domestically and at the regional level. Initially, Turkey sent delegations to the country to assist the regime of Bashar al-Assad to develop democratic reforms that settled down the demands of the opposition. After being ignored, Erdogan's government began to support the rebels, including military, which undermined Turkey's relations also with Iraq and Iran. Turkey still have to deal with more than 1 million Syrian refugees in their territory, with the rise of Kurds in Syria and the growing influence of radical Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq.

These new dynamics and complications that arose in the region in function of the Arab Spring, especially the radicalization of the civil war in Syria and the refugee crisis, may create incentives for Turkey and the European Union align their foreign policies and deal together with the challenges in the Middle East.

Indeed, the European Union and Turkey have been participating in regular dialogues to discuss foreign policy issues, since 2010, even in a period in which the accession process remained asleep. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoglu, have often found to discuss issues related to the Balkans, North Africa, Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia.



Which means that foreign policy could become a "gateway" to reset this problematic relationship. Turkey, to be included in discussions concerning their neighborhood, feel treated as a regional power and as a result tend to behave in a more conciliatory manner. On the other hand, the European Union would benefit from the experience of an actor with important interests involved in the region.

In conclusion, what is sought to explain here was the persistence of the relationship between Turkey and the European Union despite all the obstacles. Regarding Turkey, one can say that as a result of the history of the relationship between these two actors since the 19th century, the main political and social groups in the country yearn for a possible acceptance as a full member of the bloc, despite the ambivalent view on the European Union and the sensitivity with respect to sovereignty of the country. So despite analyzes that predict the contrary, the path of Turkey towards the European Union must continue, regardless of the government in question.

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