

Turkey and the European Union in 2005

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The long-lasting Turkey-EU relationship faced a major challenge in the year 2005. It was a year in which it would be tested whether the EU and Turkey would be able to go ahead with their relationship. It was challenging because this time there was a need for a “qualitative” leap to find a way to continue the relationship. For Turkey, it was no longer possible to continue as a permanent candidate country in a non-negotiating status. Turkey had to finally enter into the negotiating phase to maintain the long-lasting relationship with the EU. The European Council of 16th – 17th December 2004 had already decided that the EU would start negotiations on 3rd October 2005, but in the EU and also in Turkey there were contrary opinions and as the deadline was approaching it remained quite ambivalent whether Turkey would be able to start negotiations with the EU. As the long-lasting pattern in the relationship reflected the Turkish case was a contested one even as the European Council convened on the 3rd October 2005.

The Defining Moment

The European Council meeting of 3rd October was therefore a defining moment in nearly half a century long relationship. In this long period, Turkey and the EC (EU) faced several ups and downs in their relationship. The early

years in their relationship in the 1960s when Turkey was an associate member of the EC were quite harmonious. The Ankara Agreement was signed in 1963 within this climate and aimed to prepare Turkey for a customs union arrangement with the EC. There was more convergence of Turkish and EU patterns within the context of the Cold War as economic and political stability of Turkey was perceived significant for the strengthening of the Western Alliance (Eralp: 1993). The relationship entered more difficult periods in the 1970s and 1980s as the EC and Turkish dynamics started to diverge rather than converge. In addition to difficulties in the customs union arrangement there were also mounting tensions in the respective understanding of democratization in Turkey and the EC (Eralp: 1993). Within that context, Turkey was not able to become part of the enlargement process of the EU initially in the post – Cold War context when the EU focused on a “big-bang” process of incorporating a large number of countries (Eralp: 2000). It took until the Helsinki Summit of the EU in 1999 to formulate a more inclusive policy towards Turkey as the EU started to realize that inclusion of Turkey would contribute more to the zone of stability, security and peace in the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean. This shift in the EU policy encouraged reform-oriented forces in Turkey and we witnessed the building of a coalition of domestic groups focusing on a process of Europeanization, the core of which was the issue of democratization in Turkey.

The Helsinki framework, however, required a major mental shift on orientation in the attitudes of both the EU and Turkish officials to create a more co-

operative relationship (Öniş: 2003). This mentality shift was not easy because Turkish and EU officials have long been geared towards an adversarial relationship and treated each other in bilateral “us-them” terms. Consequently, Turkey’s reform process has been somewhat “slow” compared to the other accession countries (Eralp: 2003). It has been slow in comparison to other countries primarily because of the ambivalence of the EU regarding Turkey’s accession coupled with domestic anti-European and Euro-sceptic political tendencies even among the then governing coalition forces in Turkey (Eralp: 2003). As a result, Turkey for a long time remained the only country which has not fulfilled the political expectation of the EU and without a clear time-table on its accession process. The time-table of accession was clarified a “little” when the European Council in the Copenhagen Summit of December 2002 decided that the European Council would make a political assessment of Turkey’s reform process at the end of 2004 and that if the European Council at that point reached to the decision that Turkey has fulfilled the Copenhagen political criteria, the EU would open negotiations without delay. This “limited” clarification of the time-table was quite important in the acceleration of the reform initiatives in Turkey in the last years. In the aftermath of the Copenhagen Summit, the Turkish government formulated several crucial “harmonization” laws to meet the challenge of meeting the Copenhagen political criteria, which focused on the more sensitive issues of the reform process such as the civilian-military relationship and cultural minority rights (Öniş: 2003). Within that

context, the European Council of 16th – 17th December 2004 declared that Turkey has met the Copenhagen political criteria “sufficiently” and decided to open negotiations with Turkey on 3rd October 2005.

The Turkey-EU relationship was at another historical crossroads in 2005. While the European Council in December 2004 decided that EU would start negotiations with Turkey on 3rd October, it remained unclear whether the EU would be able to take this historical decision to start negotiations with Turkey. On the Turkish side, there were high expectations; it was believed that Turkey had done whatever it could in terms of the reform process. Therefore, a negative decision by the EU would not only harm the EU as a credible partner but would also lead to the rise of the anti-EU feelings in Turkey. The offer of a “special” relationship to Turkey would not counterbalance the damage inflicted to the relationship. It was too late to offer this status to Turkey, as the Turkish public opinion was geared to the start of negotiations at the end of 2005. For the EU, the timing of the decision on Turkey had come at a difficult moment.

Difficulties in the European Union

The EU was facing a moment of “crisis” as the long-lasting Turkey-EU relationship was at historical crossroads in 2005. The Constitutional Treaty was not ratified in two member states, France and the Netherlands, and there were mounting criticisms elsewhere. The budget for the EU for the 2007-2013 period also remained undecided because of frictions among the leading members of the EU. In all these moments of crisis the issue of enlargement of the EU was at the centre of debates; there were rising criticisms of the incorporation of new countries as the EU was unable to solve its problems. The resentment of the EU public opinion was increasingly directed to newcomers or candidates as they became the scapegoats of the EU’s unsolved problems. Enlargement, which was one of the most successful policies of the EU, was under a enormous pressure

and the Turkish accession was at the centre of these criticisms. From the Turkish perspective, this context was quite unfortunate; as Turkey was getting ready to start negotiations after a long period of waiting, the enlargement policy was under severe criticism and it was getting difficult to continue this successful policy of the EU.

This context of “crisis” within the EU reinforced those tendencies in Europe which argued for an exclusionary attitude or a “special partnership” towards Turkey. These tendencies had the upper hand in the European Council Luxembourg Summit of December 1997 when Turkey was put in a special “European strategy” and excluded from the normal accession process of the other countries. At that point these tendencies based their arguments on cultural, religious or geographical essentialist grounds and pointed out that Turkey did not belong to the EU as a member state. These tendencies lost the upper hand when the EU Council adopted an inclusive attitude in the Helsinki Summit of 1999 as it decided to treat Turkey according to the same “Copenhagen criteria” and made Turkey part of the same accession-partnership relationship as in other candidate countries. The resolutions of Helsinki regarding Turkey were drastically different from the Luxembourg decisions: they were more open, inclusive and less discriminatory. They were based on the understanding that Turkish accession should be treated like other cases on economical and political values and criteria rather than on essentialist cultural and religious considerations (Nicolaidis: 2001). This Helsinki framework was quite important in the establishment of a working relationship between Turkey and the EU. It was this Helsinki inclusive attitude towards Turkey which was under severe criticism within the “crisis” context of the EU. The more conservative forces in Europe were activated by the resentment of the masses and targeted their attention on a more exclusionary policy towards Turkey.

The 3rd October European Council meeting was consequently a challenging moment not only for the Turkey-EU relationship but also for the EU itself. Within an intense climate of debates,

as the Turkish case became a domestic issue all over Europe, the European Council decided on 3rd October 2005 that Turkey had met Copenhagen political criteria sufficiently and the EU was willing to start negotiations with Turkey. The inclusive attitude towards Turkey was able to exert its influence once again at a historical moment over various kinds of tendencies ranging from more exclusionary to ones arguing for a “special partnership” with Turkey. Amid intense debates, the European Council came to the resolution that the exclusionary attitude was not to the benefit of a long-lasting Turkey-EU relationship. It was realized that in an international system in which there is an increasing polarization between West and Islam and between United States and Europe, Turkish inclusion would help in creating more cooperative relations in the critical regions around her. Turkey’s inclusion in the EU would help the EU to be an attractive model and an agent to lessen tensions in an increasingly turbulent international system.

Contentious Issues in the Relationship

The European Council on 3rd October, while adopting a predominantly inclusive attitude towards Turkey, also took into consideration the different shades of attitudes towards Turkey. Consequently, the European Council adopted a framework of negotiations in the Turkish case which was different from the other accession countries. The framework of negotiations regarding Turkey stated explicitly that the accession process was an open-ended one and the outcome of negotiations would depend both on Turkey’s adoption and implementation of the EU acquis, as well as on the EU’s absorption capacity of Turkey. These issues were also present in the previous enlargement processes, but in the Turkish case they were stated openly and made part of the negotiation framework. In addition to these general factors, the European Council also emphasized the possibility of permanent safeguards in some sensitive areas such as free movement of per-

sons, structural funds and agricultural policy. Furthermore, it was also emphasized that the European Council would monitor the implementation more closely in the Turkish case, formulating "benchmarks" both in the opening and closing of each and every chapter. In addition to these issues, there is also the perennial problem of Cyprus. The negotiating framework stated that Turkey should work towards normalization of bilateral relations with Republic of Cyprus and extend the Association Agreement (Customs Union relationship) to all new member states including Republic of Cyprus.

This framework shows that the European Council has adopted a different framework for negotiations with Turkey, taking into account both the lessons derived from previous enlargement processes, as well as emphasizing the difference of Turkey on political, economic, social and other factors. The emphasis by the EU on the "difference" of Turkey created a climate of resentment in Turkey; public opinion-formers stated that the EU was not only treating Turkey differently from other accession countries, but also in a more discriminatory manner.

Amid all these problems, Turkey started the screening process on several chapters of the EU acquis. At the end of 2005 it had completed the explanatory and bilateral phases in about nine chapters. The Commission has already prepared its screening report on the Science and Technology chapter and submitted it to the European Council. The Commission has provided a positive assessment on this chapter and Turkey is hoping to start negotiations in the first half of 2006. However, it should be mentioned that there is a possibility for the Republic of Cyprus to block the process of negotiation if not in this chapter then in other chapters, since the Republic of Cyprus has a say in the opening and closing of each chapter. As long as the Cyprus problem remains unsolved, there is a possibility for the "politicization" of many of the rather technical chapters, quite different from the previous enlargement process. The Cyprus problem has the potential to hamper the long-lasting Turkey-EU re-

lationship as long as the stalemate on the island continues.

Concluding Comments

As well-informed observers on the process of Europeanization indicate, this process is different and more difficult in the context of non-members and candidate countries (Di Quirico: 2005). The EU has mainly used the incentive of membership and formulated more specific financial instruments to implement its principle of "conditionality" in the last enlargement process. This package of incentives, together with conditions, was quite important in the acceleration of the reform process in the accession countries. It helped the building of a reform coalition in these countries and decreased the political costs in the process.

As argued in this paper, the process of Europeanization in Turkey accelerated after the more inclusive approach of the EU after the Helsinki Summit of 1999. The "limited" clarification of the timetable for Turkey after the Copenhagen Summit of 2002 was quite important in the further acceleration of the reform initiative in the last three years. The decision of the EU Council on 3rd October 2005 to start negotiations with Turkey was also critical in maintaining the incentive of membership for Turkey. However, the formulation of a different negotiation framework which emphasizes the open-endedness of this process for Turkey creates difficulties for the consolidation of the project of Europeanization in Turkey. As the accession process in other countries shows, the process becomes more difficult with the rise in the number of losers, as well as the increase of political costs with the start of negotiations. Governments faced with such difficulties were able to maintain their political will because of the clear incentive of membership in their cases. In the Turkish context, the process becomes increasingly difficult because of the ambivalence of the time table of negotiations and its open-ended nature.

It is extremely important for the proj-

ect of Europeanization to be owned by domestic groups. If there is non-correspondence between the principle of conditionality and the incentives of the EU, there might be the dangerous image of Europeanization as a project imposed by the European Union. This could damage the project of Europeanization, the core of which is the issue of democratization. It could lead to the perception of democratization as something which is imposed from the outside. In the Turkish context, the process of democratization has a long history and a strong internal support base; it is not seen as a process imposed from the outside as in some other countries. The EU should be sensitive during the negotiations to the internal dynamics of this process. In this context, the implementation of the principle of "conditionality" should not be treated as a technical matter; it is a highly politicized matter and has important internal ramifications. It should always be matched with incentives and be sensitive to the internal dynamics of the country. To put it briefly, domestic ownership of the process of Europeanization is extremely important and the EU should give more consideration to this issue if it wants to deepen this process in the acceding countries. The acceding countries on their part should consider that the EU accession process provides many incentives to consolidate their attempts of democratization. This linkage between the EU accession process and the democratization drive is extremely important in the present turbulent international climate and this opportunity should not be missed.

Turkish accession is one of the most challenging cases for the EU. It seems that this process will be a long, contested and challenging for both Turkey and the EU. It will be challenging for Turkey, because Turkey will adopt the multilevel governance system of the EU and will act within the broader context of the EU. This process will also consolidate the project of Westernization pursued since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. It is a challenging project for the EU, because it will include a country, which has been for a long time considered

as the “other” Europe. However, the EU has faced many challenges in the past and has been successful; it can also meet the present challenge.

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