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Turkey and the EU: Strategic Rapprochement in the Shadow of the Refugee Crisis

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BEKEN SAATÇIOĞLU, JAN 21 2016

The year 2015 closed with crucial developments formally boosting Turkey-EU relations in the wake of Europe's refugee crisis. The EU-Turkey deal reached on 29 November 2015 raised Turkey's strategic importance for the EU to a whole new level. The Turkish government was offered key economic and political incentives in exchange for its agreement to host the Syrian refugees in Turkey, while attending to their socio-economic needs and help stem the refugee flow to Europe. Among the perks were a generous financial aid package of 3 billion euros to support Turkey in this daunting task, the prospect of visa liberalization for Turkish citizens by the end of 2016 contingent on Turkey's full implementation of the 2013 EU-Turkey readmission agreement and a "re-energized" EU-Turkey accession negotiations process. The deal additionally promised Turkey enhanced cooperation with the EU in critical issue-areas ranging from business relations, the Customs Union and energy to foreign and security policy, and counter-terrorism. Relatedly, the importance of "structured and more frequent high-level dialogue...to explore the vast potential of Turkey-EU relations" was emphasized and a decision to hold regular Turkey-EU summits twice a year was reached (European Council 2015a). Finally, on 14 December 2015, a new negotiation chapter dealing with economic and monetary policy (Chapter 17) was launched by the Intergovernmental Conference; more than a year after the opening of Chapter 22 ("Regional Policy and the Coordination of Structural Instruments") in November 2013.

Clearly, Turkey finished the year under the EU's spotlight. Yet, these developments are a far cry from making it a viable negotiating country with a realizable accession perspective or even a serious EU candidate under the firm scrutiny of the EU's democratic membership conditionality. As it stands, Turkey is, first and foremost, a strategic partner for the EU, which, effectively speaking, is a lot like the status enjoyed by the countries included in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Indeed, as the European Council President Donald Tusk put it, after the EU-Turkey summit of 29 November: "Turkey remains a key strategic partner for Europe, but also a candidate country for the EU" (European Council 2015b). Hence, as the EU sees it, Turkey is a partner first and a candidate second.

The "Migrant Crisis" and the EU's Geostrategic Interests

The refugee crisis, which has intensified along the EU's borders and shores since the summer of 2015 has brought to the fore the EU's vital security and stability needs. Faced with internal divisions regarding the management of its worst refugee crisis since World War Two and unable to effectively cope with the massive influx of migrants to Europe, the EU felt constrained to outsource the problem to the countries in its periphery and support their efforts to host the refugees so as to contain the migratory flows to Europe (Müftüler-Baç 2015). The mini-summit held between the EU and the Western Balkan states (25 October 2015) and the EU emergency meeting with African countries in Valetta (11-12 November 2015) were strategic steps in this direction. Gradually, the EU moved from an open-door policy (originally advocated by Germany) in regards to the refugee problem to one focused on realpolitik and pragmatism. On the one hand, before readily opening the EU's doors to the refugees, EU member-states agreed to step up cooperation on the issue and establish centers of reception along the Western Balkan route where migrants would be registered before being redistributed to European countries (particularly to Germany) or sent back home (European Commission 2015). On the other, to further solidify the EU's external security, an Emergency Trust Fund of 1.8 billion euros was established at the Valetta Summit to help African countries (including, among others, Libya,

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Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt) contain and prevent irregular migration to Europe.

The EU's strategic rapprochement with Turkey came against this background. Suddenly, as the migrant crisis reached its peak at the EU's doorstep, Turkey became the center of attention in EU circles, in direct contradiction to its previous sidelining by Brussels (due, in large part, to its deteriorating democracy on the one hand, and growing European opposition to Turkey's EU accession on the other), which marked the pre-crisis period. As a country which has received more than 2 million refugees since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and served as a critical passageway for migrants traveling to Europe (Kirişçi and Ferris 2015), Turkey remains in a pivotal geographical position in the EU's periphery. That is why Brussels was quick to intensify bilateral meetings with the Turkish government last fall and draft an Action Plan with Turkey soon after in October, which was eventually finalized and activated by the EU-Turkey deal of 29 November.

First, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan was welcomed in Brussels on 5 October by EU officials at the highest level, which was followed by three Commissioners' (Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans, Neighborhood Commissioner Johannes Hahn and Home Affairs Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos) visit to Ankara on 14 October in order to continue negotiations over the Action Plan with Turkey. Perhaps most interestingly, Angela Merkel met with Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in Istanbul on 18 October and agreed to the 3 billion-euros-aid-package that Turkey had consistently requested (instead of insisting on the EU's previous offer of 1 billion euros) to host the Syrian refugees and effectively implement the EU-Turkey readmission agreement. She additionally expressed support for the opening of further negotiation chapters with Turkey (including Chapter 17, and Cyprus-vetoed Chapters 23 and 24) and described the EU-Turkey talks as "very promising" (EurActiv 2015). As a traditionally staunch critic of Turkey's EU membership, Merkel's "u-turn" surely meant a lot to the Turkish government which was quick to capitalize on her visit's "wins" ahead of the Turkish general election on 1st November.

Quo Vadis EU Conditionality with Turkey?

These developments amply demonstrate the EU's prioritization of its strategic interests over the defense of its core values in its relations with Turkey (Today's Zaman 2015, Şenyuva and Üstün 2015). Considering the exceptionally hard times the Turkish democracy is going through, the deal with Turkey was rightly interpreted "as a partnership cemented by partly converging interests – not values" by keen observers of EU-Turkey relations (Bechev and Tocci 2015). By choosing to "reward" Turkey in exchange for its vital agreement to help the EU contain and externalize the refugee problem, the EU blatantly disregarded its own conditionality policy. Although the perks apart from the 3 billion euro aid-package are far from automatic (visa liberalization is conditional on Turkey's full application of the readmission agreement with the EU, while progress in accession negotiations is still under Cyprus veto over the opening of Chapters 23 and 24), the very fact that Brussels sat down with Turkey and agreed to the prospect of closer ties and support is enough to signal Turkish officials that Turkey's backsliding in democracy and rule of law can easily be swept under the rug when it comes down to securing the EU's core interests.

Indeed, this was openly stated by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker on the eve of the EU-Turkey agreement: "We can say that EU and the European institutions have outstanding issues with Turkey on human rights, press freedoms and so on. We can harp on about that but where is that going to take us in our discussions with Turkey?...We want to ensure that no more refugees come from Turkey into the European Union" (The Telegraph 2015).

At a deeper level, Juncker's comments revealed the pragmatic logic behind a series of favorable EU gestures as EU-Turkey talks on the refugee crisis were ongoing; the EU's postponement of one of its most critical progress reports to date until after Turkey's November general elections and Merkel's October visit just two weeks before the elections signaled much-awaited EU support to the Turkish government at a time when it most needed it at home.

To be sure, this is not to suggest that the EU cannot cooperate with an accession country on strategic issues like immigration. Rather, the point is that such cooperation is misplaced and illegitimate when it happens in disregard for democratic values that the EU has long sought to project onto its candidates, partners in the ENP and other

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associate countries. It is very telling, for example, that the EU-Turkey agreement came only a few days after the arrests of Turkey's two prominent journalists, Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, for charges of spying and "divulging state secrets" (The Guardian 2015), causing an uproar in Turkey's democratic circles. Had these arrests happened at any other time, Brussels would have most likely withheld or postponed any type of cooperative arrangement from Turkey.

Where Turkey and the EU stand today is a far cry from a decade ago when EU-Turkey negotiations were launched on the provision of suspending talks "in the case of a serious and persistent breach in Turkey of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law on which the Union is founded" (Negotiating Framework 2005, paragraph 5). This, taken together with the overall bitter message of the Commission's 2015 progress report (which, for the first time in EU-Turkey relations, used the term "significant backsliding" to describe Turkish democracy instead of the usual, milder expressions "slow reforms" or "insufficient progress") would have normally resulted in strained relations, if not an outright end to the accession talks. Yet, the EU's realpolitik exigencies in the face of the migrant question acted as the brake on the path towards any outcome which could have been dictated by a strict application of EU conditionality.

Where to from Here?

At the present juncture, EU-Turkey relations seem to be evolving towards a strategic partnership rather than Turkey's full integration into the Union. Faced with its worst humanitarian crisis since World War Two, the EU seems intent on prioritizing its core interests even if this comes at the expense of promoting democracy in its periphery. Indeed, it would not be completely far-fetched to draw parallels between Brussels' current stance vis-à-vis Turkey and its previous cooperation with Tunisia's Ben Ali and Libya's Gaddafi, all in the name of containing migrant flows from Africa to Europe. Once again, the EU has shown that it is primarily after security and stability along and beyond its borders rather than democracy (Börzel and Lebanidze 2015).

Considering the EU-wide opposition to Turkey's membership and Turkey's deteriorating democracy in the background, this arrangement seems to suit the EU very well since it can realize its agenda short of treating Turkey as a serious EU candidate. The current relationship is also ideal for the Turkish government which can still count on (and domestically sell) benefits earned from the EU notwithstanding its resistance to restore democracy at home.

In the future, relations could possibly be put back on track towards accession if European opposition to Turkey lessened (to which the Turkish government's regained resolve to democratize would contribute to a great extent) and other political barriers to Turkish membership were eliminated (i.e., resolution of the Cyprus issue, removal of Cyprus' veto on EU-Turkey accession talks). While there is hope for the realization of the latter in view of the current momentum of the negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, the former remains a key challenge to watch for.

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