

The EU cannot afford to just 'muddle through' on Turkey

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Despite the intensity and duration of EU-Turkey relations, the challenge of maintaining constructive engagement against the backdrop of the *de facto* frozen accession process and democratic backsliding in Turkey has proved impossible. The European Parliament's (EP) 24 November resolution, recommending a temporary suspension of the accession negotiations in response to the serious deterioration of the rule of law and human rights following the 15 July failed coup, has left EU Turkey relations in dire straits.

While EU leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have stated that suspending the accession talks is currently not on the agenda, not least because of fears that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan may carry out his threat to cancel the EU-Turkey migration deal, tensions could escalate at any time unless Turkey and the EU learn how to maintain a constructive dialogue.

The stakes are high because this is not simply about the future of the migration deal or the accession process. It is more fundamental. It is about the strategic relationship with a key partner of the EU and within NATO and about the future of Turkey's Europeanisation process, which has been at the centre of the country's modernisation since the Ottoman period. A Turkey delinked from Europe risks becoming more difficult and unpredictable. The alienation of Turkey is also a risk for millions of Turkish democrats, who are committed to European values. The EU must listen to these democrats and help them raise their voices and concerns domestically and at EU level. At the December Summit, EU leaders need to have a real discussion on the state of EU-Turkey relations, look at what can be done to de-escalate tensions and not agree to simply muddle through.

False promises and distrust

The current crisis is unprecedented and has been in the making for some time. It developed not only because of the deterioration of the rule of law and civil liberties and freedoms in Turkey, but also due to the resentment that Turkey's political elites and much of the country's society have felt towards the EU for at least ten years as Ankara's accession process has been derailed. While enlargement has always been a mainly intergovernmental process, the frequency of incursions and opportunities for member states to interfere and undermine the process has increased over time. Turkey has been a victim of this process as member states have blocked negotiating chapters for political reasons and the rise in populism has further exacerbated the problem. Negotiating chapters are roadmaps for change and by blocking some of them the EU removed a key instrument for reform. This is particularly evident with chapters 23 and 24, which are related to the judiciary and fundamental rights and freedoms.

The migration crisis was an opportunity to rebuild trust, with the EU committing to reenergise the accession process and speed up talks for visa liberalisation in return for Turkey stemming the flow of refugees. Ankara, recognising the EU's desperation to outsource the problem, has clumsily tried to use the deal as leverage to guarantee visa liberalisation. This approach reflects the view of most Turks that the EU does not deliver on its promises, given that Ankara was promise free movement decades ago

EU leaders regularly talk about how European values and that honesty should be a core principle. But the EU and its members have not been (fully) honest when it comes to Turkey. Turkey's accession has been used and abused in the context of many political campaigns, referendums and elections in the last 20 years. In 2016, it became an issue in the Brexit referendum, the Austrian presidential election and the primaries in France. It will also be a topic in the Dutch, French and German elections.

No silver bullet

The EU is in a difficult situation because there is no silver bullet to fix EU-Turkey relations in the near future. At the same time Turkey realistically has no alternative to the EU. While President Erdoğan talks about joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), this is not really an alternative. First, with or without the EU, Turkey is still a strong Western country as a NATO member and US ally.

The SCO is openly anti-US/anti-NATO. Turkey does not have a future in this organisation, unless there is a major shift in Turkish foreign policy, including leaving NATO, which is more than unlikely. Second, Turkey does not share any common political or strategic interests with SCO members. Despite Ankara's *rapprochement* with Russia, the two have little in common in terms of their geo-political interests and goals. While Ankara and Moscow may develop closer cooperation in certain areas there are no grounds for a strategic alliance. Third, Turkey's major problems are the rule of law, civil liberties and structural reforms. While the EU offers solutions to these problems, the SCO has nothing to offer. Fourth, the EU is Turkey's main economic partner. The high level of economic integration between Turkey and the EU has developed throughout the decades and SCO cannot substitute the EU. Therefore, talking about alternatives for the EU is nothing more than populist discourse.

Willingly or not, Turkey and the EU have reached a high level of interdependence. Although Turkey is going through abnormal times, a divorce would be mutually destructive. While a return to the *status quo ante* seems unlikely in the near future, the EU should still uphold its engagement with Turkey and take steps to reduce tensions. While the upcoming talks aimed at revamping the EU-Turkey Customs Union offer an opening for further economic integration, additional steps should be considered:

- As the EP's resolution damaged dialogue at parliamentary level, other forms of engagement have become more important. This should include not only ongoing engagement with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) but also with the opposition parties represented in the Turkish Parliament and other key opinion makers such as mayors and business leaders.
- Greater dialogue with civil society, including the establishment of an EU-Turkey Civil Society Platform coming together twice a year to discuss key challenges.
- Strengthening counter-terrorism cooperation. With the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) losing in Syria and Iraq, thousands of European foreign fighters are expected to return to the EU through Turkey which could create a major security threat. Close cooperation and coordination between security forces and intelligence agencies are required for the security of millions of people in Turkey and the EU.
- More efforts to clamp down on the activities of the PKK in EU member states. The EU cannot only focus on certain terrorist groups, like ISIS, while some EU member states openly tolerate activities of the PKK, which is included on the EU's list of terrorist organisations.
- New EU-funded projects should focus on civil liberties and freedom of speech in order to support voices that are committed to European values.
- Ahead of the next round of the Cyprus settlement talks scheduled for January, increased EU support, including diplomatic help for bridging efforts between both sides, is crucial. A resolution of the Cyprus problem would bring new momentum to Turkey-EU relations.
- A realistic roadmap for Turkey's visa liberalisation process. While the EU needs to keep its promise, at the same time Ankara needs to meet all the necessary criteria.

Another initiative could be the creation of a wise men taskforce composed of Turkish and European experts to begin to look at what sort of alternative relationship Turkey could have with the EU in the future, although the ultimate membership goal should remain on the table given that nobody knows how the EU or Turkey may develop in future.

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