



Two views on... Turkey and the EU

With Başak Kale and Gerald Knaus

Turkey's relations with the EU have been at a stalemate in recent years, yet the bloc remains a key trading partner for Turkey and accession-related reform continues. Asst. Prof. Başak Kale of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University and Middle East Technical University (ODTÜ), and Gerald Knaus, founding chairman and lead analyst of the European Stability Initiative (ESI) since 1999, share their views with Turkish Review on the future direction of EU-Turkey relations

YONCA POYRAZ DOĞAN

TURKISH REVIEW: *Where do you think the Turkish-EU relationship stands today, and where is it going?*

BAŞAK KALE: This is definitely the 100 million euro question! As my thesis supervisor at the London School of Economics once said, "If you can guess how the Eastern Enlargement will end then you'll have the answer to the 100 million euro question!"

Turkey-EU relations in the last couple of years are at a stalemate. A double-blaming episode between the two parties seems to be affecting the pace and scope of relations. The Turkish side feels that the EU is not committing to or does not understand Turkey, and the EU side believes that Turkey is not committing to or does not understand the EU. This cognition problem creates a major obstacle in working together toward the common goal of integration of Turkey in the EU. Between 2002-2005 -- up until the accession negotiations were opened -- there was enthusiasm and willingness to overcome difficulties. Since the opening of accession negotiations we can see that there have been mixed signals from both sides. EU Minister Egemen Bağış once in an interview called the slowing

down of the reform process experienced after the opening of accession negotiations "cooperation fatigue." The reasons are various from the EU side and from the Turkish side, including political restrictions due to right-wing politicians in Germany and France (the [former French President Nicolas] Sarkozy and [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel factors), domestic resistance on both sides, financial crisis, rising nationalism in Turkey due to growing security concerns, etc. The future of relations will depend on the willingness and commitment by Turkey to keep up with the reform process and the EU's long-term strategic goal of becoming a global player.

TR: *April saw NATO member Turkey signed up to become a 'dialogue partner' of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is dominated by China and Russia. Some commentators have suggested this means Turkey sees its destiny in Asia. How would you explain the ruling party's decision?*

BK: In the last decade Turkey has been in search of pragmatic solutions to its long-term chronic foreign policy problems. The EU accession process has been a long and problematic journey for Turkey. In the last decade Turkey proposed various new



paths for its traditional foreign policy agenda. One has to interpret Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's proposal [to join the SCO] within this perspective. It could be beneficial for Turkey to be involved in various different international organizations, alliances and institutions. However, no political, diplomatic or economy-based organization will be able to offer what the EU can offer Turkey. Turkey has half its trade with the EU, based on a detailed customs union. Despite its problems, the harmonization process with the alignment of Turkish legislation with EU legislation (*acquis communautaire*), involving various sectors and policies, has been going on for more than a decade. Within this framework, it will be quite difficult to find an equivalent level regional integration project to join. Similarly, it will be nearly impossible at this point to undo all the progress -- though limited in certain areas -- that has been made and move toward a different target.

TR: *Would you elaborate on the positions of the main opposition parties toward Turkey's integration to*

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*the EU in the last 10-15 years?
What are the key features?*

BK: There has never been a very strong commitment toward the EU integration project by any of the current or past opposition parties. It is possible to argue that at the Brussels level communication between the Turkish political parties and their European counterparts is next to

nothing. It is not customary for Turkish political parties to become members of the political groups in the European Parliament in order to meet and interact with similar-minded colleagues from various member states. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party), although an associate member of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats), only has observer status [in the group]. AK Party members with international diplomatic experience attend the group's annual summit. The other Turkish political parties and party political leaders have no strong tradition of working closely with their colleagues in Brussels. Until summer 2008 the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) had neither representative nor

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ISA SIMSEK



representation in Brussels. In July 2008 the CHP opened a representation in Brussels, which can be regarded as a positive development considering that the CHP traditionally accepts Turkey's foreign policy strategy, emphasizing keeping alliances with West and Western institutions. However, in the 2007 elections the CHP formed a strong anti-EU and anti-West campaign. When then-CHP leader Deniz Baykal was asked why relations with the EU were not emphasized in the national elections program, he replied that the program was like a "British cookbook" -- the party aimed to keep it short but positive. With respect to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the EU has always been accused of creating sovereignty problems for Turkey. Delegation of competences in various fields and sharing of sovereignty have been considered a threat to Turkey's integrity and security.

TR: *What can you tell us about the dimensions of Euroskepticism within the Turkish political parties?*

BK: After the end of the Cold War, divisions within society over the future path and identity for Turkey became more apparent, leading to a deep-rooted polarization within Turkish society. There has been no single political party that has recently aimed at ending this polarization and embracing the various sections of Turkish society. This deepening polarization embraces one issue: skepticism over the European integration project. The global financial crisis and economic crisis in the Eurozone seems to have enhanced this skepticism in all Turkish political parties. Rising nationalism in Turkey after 2005 due to security concerns and the rise of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terror "put the brake" on the reform process and made the following period "lost years of reform." I am not sure to what extent this was naturally generated as a result of the high-pace reform period of pre-2005 or Prime Minister Erdoğan decided to consciously halt the reform process. When it comes to the CHP, after the election of [Kemal] Kılıçdaroğlu as party leader it is possible to see a diversion from Baykal's arguments of demonization of the EU. With respect to the MHP, Euroskepticism will always be present in one way or another.

TR: *Do you think disillusionment with the EU pushed Turkey to search for Eurasian alternatives?*

BK: When Turkey applied to the EU in the

beginning, the contract made between the EU and Turkey was clear. The objective was that the EU would transform Turkey. This contract and its goals were clear and unambiguously agreed by both sides. With the strategies of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey's "soul searching" after the Cold War took a new path. This new path rejected Turkey's role in the world being limited to Europe or the West, but rather aimed at acquiring a global perspective. In this new awakening, Turkey started to question whether or not the change that would be brought by EU harmonization reforms was desirable -- and in that respect whether it really wanted to join to the EU. The disillusionment with the EU only added to this new strategy of becoming a global player.

TR: *What can you tell us about the dimensions of Euroskepticism within the Turkish public?*

BK: It is important to acknowledge that the accession process is one requiring public support. The "people factor" is vital for the momentum of the domestic reform process. The rise of Euroskepticism, triggered by anti-EU sentiments and the weakening commitment of the AK Party

government to the accession process, which are interrelated and interlocking processes. It is important for the government and for the EU to persuade the Turkish public that -- and to ensure that -- EU membership is beneficial for the country and useful for the wider public. Otherwise, the rise in anti-EU sentiments will bring a drop in support for the EU.

TR: *To what extent will Turks' increasing anti-EU sentiments influence Turkish foreign policy?*

BK: In a public speech at Oxford University in 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan argued that despite the obstacles and the hurdles on the way to accession, Turkish institutions are undertaking a continuous and comprehensive technical harmonization process with the EU. It is a valid fact that the delay in opening of chapters for negotiation as a result of political crises experienced between the EU and Turkey does not drastically hinder harmonization and cooperation at the technical level. The acquis adoption and implementation continues at the policy-making level. However, I think the pace and scope can be seriously limited. A stronger commitment from both sides would

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strengthen the EU's enlargement strategy while giving the EU a more confident global perspective. The commitment to the EU's enlargement process can contribute to the post-Cold War identity construction both in the EU and Turkey. It can reinforce the EU's democracy and diversity-based identity while creating a credible anchor for Turkey's identity search.

Above all, the success of accession negotiations will depend on overcoming the vicious circle experienced between Turkey and the EU since 2005. A strong commitment by the EU to support and acknowledge the reforms in Turkey, and a clear transformation strategy by Turkey will be needed to overcome these difficulties. This is a decision to be taken by both sides. After all, as you know, it takes two to tango -- or waltz in this case! If Turkey decides not to tango or waltz but prefers to belly dance or Chinese dragon dance, these may only provide temporary solutions or diversions...

TR: *The European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled in the Demirkan vs. Germany case that Turkish citizens may not travel without a visa to EU countries to receive services. Has the ECJ closed the doors to visa-free travel for Turks in EU member states?*

GERALD KNAUSS: No, I do not think so. One door has been closed by the ECJ: It is now clear that it will not be possible to obtain visa free travel for Turks through the courts. But another way, the one taken in recent years by all the other countries of southeastern Europe, remains open, and that is to get rid of the visa through a process of negotiation between Turkey and the EU, a "visa dialogue." The sooner this process starts, the better.

TR: *You were involved in the White List Project on visa liberalization for the Western Balkans and are credited with contributing to its success. Would you tell us about it?*

GK: I have lived and worked for many years in Bulgaria and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I remember well the frustrations that the visa requirement brought, particularly for young people. For two decades governments and civil society in those countries complained about visas for the EU. However, when we started our White List Project in 2006, we realized that you never obtain anything on such a sensitive issue by complaining. To lift visa [restrictions] you need enough votes in the Council of the European Union to change the visa regulation! To get the votes you need to address the fears that EU ministers have

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about what happens after visas are lifted. If they feel that nothing bad will happen, if they feel that they can trust a country, they will take the political risk. And so we started to research how to reduce the risk. We even formed an advisory group of former interior ministers of big EU countries -- Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom. When they said that there was only limited risk, their colleagues would listen. And we started reaching out to public opinion, and hundreds of articles were written about the White List Project. And in the end this approach worked.

TR: *The Balkan countries received in 2008 roadmaps which involved a lot of conditions for visa liberalization. How successful they have become in fulfilling the expectations?*

GK: The image of many of these Balkan countries in 2008 in some EU member states was very bad. They were seen as a source of all problems: illegal migration, organized crime, instability. Each of these countries is small, but remember that there were then an estimated 700,000 illegal immigrants in the EU just from small Albania. No other region generated as many refugees to the EU in recent decades. So the key challenge for the Balkans was to build trust, and the way to do so was through reforms, yes, but above all through contacts with EU counterparts; in the police, in customs, in interior ministries, at the working level. And so the Balkan governments made fulfilling the requirements of the visa roadmap a top priority. And then they surprised skeptics. When German or French interior ministry officials came to Albania or Macedonia as part of the visa dialogue to check what was happening, and left impressed by what they had seen, this was worth more than 10 speeches on visas by a Balkan foreign minister.

TR: *Could the same thing can happen for Turkey?*

GK: There is absolutely no reason that exactly the same thing [could not] happen in Turkey as happened in the Balkans if a visa liberalization dialogue finally begins, which it has not yet! Sometimes I am told in Ankara that Turkey is different from the Balkans: it is bigger, there are more prejudices in the EU, etc. But in reality Turkey is different in a way that is good for Turkey: The per capita GDP in Turkey is higher than in all the Balkan countries that had the visa lifted,

including Bulgaria and Romania. And the EU now already allows more than 1 million holders of Turkish green passports visa-free travel and there are no problems. The real difference between the Balkans and Turkey is how governments approach the visa dialogue. The Balkan countries took the roadmap, set out to fulfill the conditions, and made very effective advocacy to convince skeptics in Berlin and Paris and Brussels. Until now Turkey feels that the EU cannot be trusted and hesitates to even sit down [at the negotiating table]. The other difference, of course, lies in the results of these two approaches: Today all Albanians, Macedonians, Serbs travel without a visa.

TR: *What developments have occurred since the Council of the European Union gave the roadmap to Turkey?*

GK: More time has been lost. In the case of the Balkans, the visa liberalization dialogue lasted two, at most three years before visas were lifted. Turkey was presented a roadmap in summer 2012, but there is still no dialogue. The main reason is that Turkey does not want to sign a readmission agreement with the EU, something all Balkan and all East European countries have done. A

readmission agreement commits Turkey to take back from the EU illegal immigrants who cross into the EU through Turkey. There is a fear in Ankara that this might involve tens of thousands of people. But this is just wrong. We did a detailed study of all readmission agreements in the world that the EU has made and the total of all readmission cases every year for all of them together are a few hundred. Even if there would be 4,000 readmission requests to Turkey in a year -- which I do not believe -- this would not be a problem. Turkey arrested tens of thousands of illegal migrants inside Turkey every year and hosts hundreds of thousands of Syrians. In addition, for the first three years, the readmission agreement with the EU does not require Turkey to take back more illegal immigrants than it wants to; there is a three-year transition phase! So our recommendation is: Turkey ratifies this agreement, starts the visa dialogue, sees how many requests come, sets its own limit on how many it will accept. It should also set the EU a deadline: If by the end of 2015 we do not have visa-free travel, we will cancel the readmission agreement.

TR: *Turkey was also expected to fulfill some other*

TURKEY DOES NOT WANT TO SIGN A READMISSION AGREEMENT WITH THE EU

conditions for visa liberalization, including biometric passports, integrated border management, etc. How has Turkey performed?

GK: There is a lot that Turkey has done, and there is a lot that remains to be done. Take integrated border management. It is in Turkey's own interest to control its borders well. There is a lot of experience on this in the EU. I just returned from Finland, which has a very long land border and a sea border with Russia, and a very experienced border service. Turkish border officials know the Finnish system, they studied it, but so far they were not able to carry out the same reforms. Why? Because it involves changing the roles of the police, customs and especially the armed forces, which still do a lot of the land border control in Turkey. And no institution likes to give up any influence. So the result is that Turkey has good plans but still has a very inefficient system. This can change, easily. If Albania or Serbia can reform border management, Turkey can do it for sure! But it requires a political push from above. It must be a priority.

TR: *In your article 'The Future of European Turkey' (ESI, June 17) you expressed concern about Turkey's future and its EU integration. Can you share those concerns with us?*

GK: It is normal for a democracy to see protests over big construction projects: this happens in Germany, in Austria, even in Sweden. Sometimes, when the police intervenes to stop protests there are clashes in European countries, too. I have lived in Berlin, where this happens every May 1. What shocked European observers about the handling of the Gezi protests was the unnecessarily aggressive response by the police. Even on May 1 you do not see the whole center of Berlin under a huge cloud of tear gas for weeks. What also surprised many observers was an official rhetoric that described all these protesters as "terrorists." When such events happen in the middle of the tourist season in the center of one of the most visited cities in Europe it is obvious that media interest will be huge, and the Gezi protests were headline news for weeks. And in European papers you see a consensus, from the right to the left, from Turkey's oldest friends to the biggest skeptics, that this was very badly handled by the authorities.

TR: *What are your observations on the Turkish government and citizens' attitudes as regards a common European future?*

GK: I see a paradox. On the one hand there is a tradition in Turkey of distrust of outsiders, rooted in history, in the education system and in political rhetoric. Remember, already in the late 1970s there was a great opportunity for Turkey to join the European Community, together with Greece. Then it was the left and the right, [Bülent] Ecevit and [Necettin] Erbakan, who were opposed to submitting even an application. This skepticism can be found across the political spectrum, then and now. But on the other hand you have a new Turkey: the new middle class who wants their children to learn foreign languages, who wants to travel; the new entrepreneurs who want to expand and compete and upgrade their technology; the tourism sector that is now world-class and sees many more opportunities; and millions of students who want to do what European students do, get on a cheap flight and visit other European countries for a few days. In all these groups people are also frustrated with the EU, but they see that in many ways Turkey is already part of

an integrating Europe. Europe is where most foreign direct investment, most tourists, and most ideas come from, and Europe is where most Turks who live abroad live today. It is Europe, not Syria or Egypt, that is the stable partner. So there will be a common European future, because there already is a common European present. The real question is whether the new generation of Turks can experience the rest of Europe easily, which is why the visa obligation is such a problem. If there are more contacts between people there will be more trust. This happened between Poland and Germany in the past two decades, and it can happen between Turkey and the EU as well. 

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NOTE:

The full ESI report on visa liberalization, "Cutting the Visa Knot: How Turks can travel freely to Europe," is available online: http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=139