From the Desk of the Editor

In this issue, TPQ takes up three interrelated themes, Turkey’s EU accession process, home grown democratization, and potential synergies created in the foreign policy realm. Just as progress in each of these policy arenas reinforces the other, problems in one front has the potential to strain or impair the others.

The history of expulsion of ethnic and religious minorities throughout the neighborhood of modern Turkey continues to haunt the region. The 20th century spread the ideal of homogeneous nation states, where minorities were viewed as a weakness, a liability, or a threat in much of Southeast Europe. The current ideal of the European Union involves challenging past conceptions of nation and nationalism, embracing diversity within, and identifying shared interests with neighbors. The relationship of successive Turkish governments with the country’s minorities and with neighbors – both perceived as threats for decades– has slowly been increasingly “Europeanized” in the past decade. Liberal intellectuals empowered by EU integration have played a central role in this process.

Overcoming discrimination of non-Muslim minorities and openly discussing the many tragedies these communities experienced in Anatolia throughout the 20th century is of central importance for Turkey’s democratic development and domestic reconciliation, as well as for the EU accession process. The rights of Christian minorities in Turkey is a theme TPQ has regularly addressed – most recently in its Fall 2010 issue.

In this issue, we include the insights of Bartholomew I, the Patriarch of Istanbul. As he points out “today, one can comfortably talk about the very unfair and unjust practices of the past and consensus can be reached regarding the fact that these practices have hurt not only non-Muslims but the entire country.”

All political parties in Turkey share responsibility for provoking a latent distrust towards non-Muslims for their own populist ends. Though the rights of non-Muslims in Turkey have increased and the space for discussion of past injustices has expanded, positive steps have often been ad hoc. To consolidate and build on the positive changes, comprehensive policy reform and unwavering political will is needed. Only then can the recent constructive rhetoric be translated into reality.

Violence against Christians and anti-Christian reporting in the media has dropped considerably since the trials against ultranationalist networks affiliated with people in the “deep state” began in 2007. Unfortunately though, these trials have also once again demonstrated the deep structural problems of the Turkish judiciary,
as well as its susceptibility to politicized manipulation. In this issue of TPQ, Dani Rodrik, elaborates on the violations of due process and the use of spurious evidence against defendants in the high profile Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials.

As has been noted in numerous instances by European institutions, the apparent deficiencies in investigation, the widespread and arbitrary use of pre-trial detention, the lengthy imprisonment of individuals without a court sentence, and the phenomenon of unsolved murders/extrajudicial killings have tainted Turkish judicial practice for decades.

The recent arrests of investigative journalists under the Counterterrorism law, for alleged links to a plot to topple the government, raised even more concerns than similar previous incidents. The need for structural change to protect civil liberties is now being voiced across a wide spectrum of society. In its report released on 9 March 2011, the European Parliament also expressed its deep concern about these developments. Concerned Turkish intellectuals are also increasingly voicing the importance of Turkey’s accession process to get back on track, in light of the deeply polarized environment in Turkey and the widespread lack of confidence in domestic checks and balances.

In assessing whether an EU anchor is necessary, GMF Transatlantic Fellow Emiliano Alessandri writes: “The domestic drives for further democratization are overall still strong but, as observed, the risk is high that Turkey develops as a populist-nationalist state as opposed as to a pluralistic liberal society.”

In an article welcoming Turkey’s foreign policy objectives, Guido Westerwelle, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice Chancellor of Germany, underlines the joint interest of the EU and Turkey in Turkish progress towards a “more lively democracy, more effective state institutions, [and] transparent courts accessible to all.” He points out that freedom of expression and freedom of the press are cornerstones on which European democracies are built, and that in successful democracies, criticism is countered with arguments, not with bans.

Marietje Schaake, the Dutch member of the European Parliament representing Democrats 66/ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), points out that Turkey’s strongest allies in the EU have been put in a difficult position by the arrests of journalists as part of these trials. “Liberals are forced to speak out strongly when the values they fiercely defend in Europe and across the world are violated in Turkey,” she states. As much as it is in the interests of Turkish democrats for European institutions to hold Turkey to higher standards, the fact that the negotiation process has been blocked for reasons unrelated to the acquis reduces EU leverage in Turkey. The two issues that have led chapters of the acquis to be
blocked are related to the Cyprus deadlock and the perception of an existential non-European Turkish identity.

The Cyprus problem that is taking Turkey’s EU integration hostage both technically and by fueling perception of injustice among a wide range of Turkish citizens, is tackled by Serdar Denktaş, former foreign minister of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. He underlines that political leadership is needed for Turkish and Greek Cypriots to reach an agreement. Until an agreement is reached, Turkey should not be blackmailed by the EU on the basis of this issue and the rights of Turkish Cypriots should not be violated.

Another critical issue is the perception within Europe of Turks being culturally un-European. This perception is fuelled by the problems of integration of migrant Turks – a topic taken up by the Professor of International Relations at Bilgi University, Ayhan Kaya in this issue of TPQ.

The debate in Germany is particularly noteworthy in this context. ESI outlined the current debate in the following words in a recent report (www.esiweb.org):

In 2004 a paperback appeared in German with the title Turkey and Europe - The Positions. The book described the German debate on Turkish accession to the European Union. In the introduction, Claus Leggewie, the book’s editor, outlined three big issues at the centre of this debate: the state of Turkish democracy; the relative backwardness of the Turkish economy; and geopolitics, including the question whether the EU would want to share a border with Iraq. (…)

From January 2005, however, it was above all two German women born in Turkey – Necla Kelek and Seyran Ates – who set out to redefine the issues at stake in the public debate. The new debate took place against the background of a series of traumatic events, including terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, riots in the banlieus of Paris, the assassination of film director Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, and the honour killing of a young woman, Hatun Surucu, in Berlin in early 2005.

At the core of the debate that unfolded between 2005 and 2010 are the real lives of German Turks, in particular those who reside in urban areas such as the Berlin district of Neukölln, home to a large number of poor Muslim migrants. (…) Arguments about history and the borders of Europe are replaced by arguments about the treatment of women and the failures of integration of migrant communities in German cities, particularly Berlin.
By 2010 this debate moved to the very centre of German politics. Its apex, for now, is the summer 2010 publication of Deutschland schafft sich ab (Germany doing away with itself), a book by Bundesbanker Thilo Sarrazin. (…)

This Great Debate derives its energy from fears and hopes; from the real sense that Germany (like other European societies) is changing rapidly and that Turkish EU accession would change it further; from the real challenge of an aging society faced with a youthful migrant population; from the need to integrate a new religion into a largely secularised society; from an avalanche of serious new research; and from an enormous reservoir of old prejudices.

Germany matters and so does Turkey, which turns this national debate into one of European importance. The quality of this debate and, most importantly, the policy responses it generates, will leave a defining mark on German domestic politics and the future shape of Europe.

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Two discussions that recently took place in Brussels shed light on the complex dynamic between Turkey’s democratization, foreign policy outreach and EU integration.

On 24 March 2011, TPQ, jointly with the office of MEP Marietje Schaake, and supported by the Black Sea Trust of the German Marshall Fund, held a roundtable discussion meeting titled Developments in Turkey’s Democracy and Regional Ambitions in the European Parliament building, in Brussels. A related video and press bulletin (in Turkish) of this roundtable can be accessed via the “Roundtables” link on TPQ’s web site: https://www.turkishpolicy.com

The event took place at an interesting juncture: A few days after a critical European Parliament report on Turkey, in the midst of ongoing outcry about the arrest of journalists on allegations of being part of a terrorist organization and during a month that otherwise was characterized by upbeat debate about Turkey’s strategic value for the West in the wake of the Arab Spring, and the potential for Turkey to be a model for Muslim nations the Middle East and North Africa seeking a better future. Discussions, featuring Kadri Gürsel, Ian Lesser, and Marietje Schaake focused on these themes, and the interplay between them.

Marietje Schaake pointed out that while positive change had been ongoing in various aspects of Turkey’s domestic front, there were also worrisome trends of rising
populism and violations of civil liberties. She underlined that Turkey is important for the EU as a strategic partner, but Turkey’s democracy is also important and Turkey’s strategic value cannot compensate for democracy deficits. Looking to the future she suggested the following: the EU should debate Turkey’s democracy, and not the compatibility of its culture with Europe’s; the EU should engage Turkey’s population with recognition of its diversity and support civil society; and the EU reports about Turkey or European leaders today should not try to come to a final judgment.

Columnist for Milliyet Daily, Kadri Gürsel focused on the negative implications of trying to brand Turkey as a model. If countries are inspired by Turkey, that is fine, but others trying to brand Turkey as a model of Muslim democracy is problematic. Such an instrumentalization implies that Turkey is only as democratic as Muslims can be, or that because Turkey is an important model, its democracy deficits can be ignored. He concludes, that as a matter of principle, religion can not be a reference for democracy – otherwise one or the other will be compromised.

Senior Transatlantic Fellow for GMF, Ian Lesser, focused predominately in foreign policy. He reminded the audience that Turkish foreign policy has been changing for over a decade and that this was due both to international conjunctural strategic shifts, Turkish public opinion, and economics. He pointed out that it was natural that Middle Eastern countries would look to Turkey for examples, and that the interest in its neighborhood was rising in Turkey. Some aspects of Turkish foreign policy are problematic for the West, but positive aspects also exist, he pointed out – specifying improving relations with Greece and rising positive influence in the Balkans. Characterizing Turkish foreign policy as “neo-non-aligned” Lesser underlined that Turkey had no priorities in its foreign policy anymore.

The audience contributed to the debate with different perspectives. Provocative questions such as: is the importance of secularism overrated by a critical segment of those in Turkey? Does Turkey have an alternative to the AKP? Two of the speakers of this event – Schaake and Gürsel– shared their thoughts at length in this issue of TPQ.

During discussion on the potential for synergy between Turkish and EU foreign policy elaborated on in more depth at another event in Brussels the same week, organized by the German Marshall Fund, it was noted that there was no framework of coordination between Turkey and the EU in their joint neighborhood and that a “structured strategic dialogue” is necessary.

If no special initiative and incentive structure is set up to align foreign policies, it is likely that as is the case today, Turkey’s policies will sometimes contribute to
European goals –such as is the case in the Balkans today, and sometimes clash– such as has been the case in policy towards Hamas and Iran.

Even Europeans who are skeptical about Turkey’s EU accession recognize the value of Turkey and the EU collaborating on foreign policy issues. However, how do you ensure that increased foreign policy collaboration does not end up replacing the accession process?

Whether EU publics can be brought on board, is a lingering doubt. If Turkey’s EU membership is an open question, what incentive does Turkey have to align with EU policy on issues such as democratization in the neighborhood? Or if Turkey’s strategic value for the EU is already being exploited, does this not reduce the already weak drive within European countries to integrate Turkey as a member? As long as Turkey feels resentment about the course of its EU membership efforts, this tone will negatively effect strategic collaboration. Ideally, structured strategic dialogue would be a step towards accession, adding momentum to the process in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Some participants were more critical about the fundamental value of Turkey’s new foreign policy. Having zero problems with neighbors or maximizing regional leverage is not a policy per se. Turkey’s position and policy regarding a nuclear Iran or values such as human rights is not clear, one participant argued. A viewpoint from a neighboring country in the Balkans characterized Turkish policy as assertive and arrogant, saying his country did not have a problem with Turkey in the past but does now because of the new foreign policy.

While the MENA region makes headlines, another critical joint neighborhood of Turkey and the EU risks being ignored: The Black Sea region. Developments in the Middle East offer potential for Turkey and the EU to discover soft power synergy in their joint neighborhood. The track record of doing so in the Black Sea however, is not heartening.

A recent event organized by the German Marshall Fund in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, “The Black lack Sea: 20 Years Later” drew attention back to this region which is “an area of interface, splitting as well as uniting two neighborhoods defined by tremendously different political, economic, social and cultural backgrounds.” It was noted that there was a risk that this region would be neglected because of the global focus on revolutions in the EU’s neighborhood to the south.

Another focus of debate was the potential rise of oil prices, both because of the fears generated by nuclear energy after the tsunami in Japan, and because of on-
going chaos in Libya. Rising oil prices usually translate into a boost of confidence and activism by Russia, some participants pointed out. For all the talk about Turkey’s potential contribution to European foreign policy and furthering EU values, it is sobering to look at the case of the Caucasus and see the disjoint in Turkish and EU agendas. Talking about developing a common strategy and striking synergy may sound positive in theory, but in practice differences and challenges become evident.

It was interesting to observe the overlap of the perspectives of representatives of Turkey and Russia on various issues, such as in criticizing the EU for creating dividing lines in the Black Sea by “instrumentalizing” Bulgaria and Romania, or encouraging these two EU member states to represent EU interests in Black Sea platforms. They also noted the presumptuousness of the EU to now take the role of inviting Turkey and Russia to join Black Sea initiatives. The implication was that the EU, being only a recent actor in the region, does not have the credibility to take ownership as such.

While advocates of the BSEC platform, namely the Turkish and Russian participants, pointed out that common interests and the desire to collaborate form the basis of the institution, they attributed the lack of any tangible achievements to member states not utilizing the platform accordingly. Clearly, independent countries cannot be artificially coerced to engage with each other or within any particular framework.

The BSEC has certainly served a purpose, however it also has shortcomings. Critics point out that the structure of the BSEC is inefficient, the secretariat is bloated, and decision-making is slow. In addition the BSEC tries to limit the role of the EU, yet asks for help from the Union in order to deliver results.

There is arguably neither unity within the EU nor an effective policy or political will on several questions including: how to approach Russia, whether and how to prioritize democratization and solve “frozen conflicts” in the region, how to re-tailor the ENP, steps to pursue bringing Caspian energy to European markets for energy security, and other fundamental policy concerns. On the other hand, it seems the EU’s strong track record in spreading prosperity and security and assisting in transitions and institution-building, can add value to Turkey’s neighborhood policies.

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As parliamentary elections in Turkey scheduled for June 2011 draw closer, popular discourse is disheartening. While AKP resorts to nationalist and conservative arguments, the MHP is hit by the release of explicit videos of some of its candidates on the Internet by unknown sources. Meanwhile, peacefully protesting students are jailed for months, and the previously mentioned journalists are still in prison.

Emiliano Alessandri underlines the importance, for the Kurdish problem in particular, of both the AKP and the CHP backing up their suggestions for revisions of the definition of citizenship with practical proposals. A new civilian constitution which aims to defend the people from the state, not the state from the people, is crucial, he argues. He also points out that the threshold for representation in the Grand National Assembly needs to be lowered from the 10 percent it currently is. He warns that “the Kurdish issue may return to be a primarily security issue if it is not addressed with boldness and farsightedness as a political question.”

Women’s rights is yet another dimension taken up in this issue of TPQ. Vice president of Turkey’s main opposition party, CHP Gülsün Bilgehan points out that implementation of many legal reforms towards women’s equality is not consistent. She outlines the need for leadership, positive discrimination and policies that empower women by increasing their economic self-sustenance.

One can only hope that after the elections, long overdue steps to remedy structural problems in Turkey’s democracy are finally addressed with the seriousness and urgency they deserve. By the time the next elections come around, critics should feel less intimidated, the judiciary should be trusted for its independence, and a lower election threshold should enable a more representative parliament – thus leveling the playing field. Only with the guarantee of the rule of law and separation of powers can it be ensured that the struggle among political contenders is not an existential struggle for any segment of the society.

Recent concerns about the cost of being critical in Turkey have rejuvenated interest in EU leverage among Turkish democrats. While ideological and institutional polarization divides Turkey, progress towards EU accession offers a win-win formula for all legitimate interests in the domestic domain. Populism in both Turkey and in the EU risks hampering this potential. EU enthusiasts in Turkey and Turkey supporters in Europe need to join forces at this critical time to make persuasive arguments and apply pressure to overcome the hurdles afflicting Turkey’s EU accession process.
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