





PANEL


Can the European Union Remain Connected to Turkey?

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On the 6th March 2019, Vocal Europe organised an expert panel discussion on the future of EU-Turkey relations under the question “Can the European Union remain connected to Turkey?”. The central part of the debate aimed to address the current contentious status of the Brussels-Ankara relationship, whilst outlining potential courses of rethinking/re-imagining the nature of the interactions both in the short and long term. The underlying theme revolved around Turkey’s place in the EU policies.

Background

The accession negotiations between the European Union and Turkey have formally been in place since 2005, but the accession process has de facto been frozen since the significant deterioration of diplomatic relations following the attempted coup in July 2016. However, Turkey remains an important strategic partner to the EU in a number of critical areas such as migration, energy cooperation, trade and the fight against terrorism.

The EU has been closely and successfully cooperating with Turkey on these matters – and it must continue to do so. Yet, the efforts to reinforce other areas such as democratization and the rule of law in Turkey have been less fruitful. In light of the current state of democracy in the country, and following the call by the Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee, the European Parliament may vote for the suspension of the accession talks on March 11.

With local elections on March 31, which will close an important electoral cycle of in Turkey, and the European elections at the end of May 2019, it is the time to debate how the EU-Turkey relation can be shaped in the future.

PANEL



Ebubekir Isik in the middle to the right

Ebubekir Isik, a policy analyst at Vocal Europe, was the moderator for the event. In his opening remarks Mr. Isik introduced the panellists and he presented an overview of the topic at hand, outlining that after the EU parliament elections in May “we might see bolder attempts to rename and redesign the current framework of the [Brussels-Ankara] relations.” He further stimulated the discussion by asking individually tailored question to every guest speaker.

Sarah Lambert from the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR) in the European Commission opened the panel with a review of latest development in the EU-Turkish relationship, with a special emphasis on the progress (or lack thereof).

As she noted “the accession negotiations are currently and actively frozen” because “in April 2018 the Commission decided that Turkey was moving away from Europe,” meaning that Ankara was “backsliding in all the core fundamental areas, [i.e.] rule of law, independence of the judiciary and human rights.” The immediate effect of the de facto suspension was that “no further work [would be done] on the modernisation of the custom union.”

“Notwithstanding [the call for suspension of Turkey’s application], Turkey remains an important strategic partner to the EU and we will continue to cooperate.” Thus, even if the country was deemed ill-prepared to join the 28th Member States, it would be important for Brussels to maintain official

communication and encourage dialogue with its southern neighbour, under the auspices of the “accession process and association agreement.”



Sarah Lambert in the middle

Ms. Lambert described an existence of “many issues with common objectives” between the EU and Turkey in the spheres of “migration, security, energy, environment and transport.” These objectives could only be accomplished through continued dialogue under the established EU institutional frameworks. As an example, the commissioner listed a meeting in November 2018:

The High Representative of the EU, Frederica Mogherini, together with the European commissioner [for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes] Hahn, who is responsible for the Turkey enlargement plan, went to Ankara...where we [had] useful and very frank discussions on a wide range of topics, both internal [and] bilateral, but also more general [on] security arrangements and [the regional situation].

Additionally, Ms. Lambert showcased the continuation of “high level economic dialogue”, which was in line with other “high level environmental [and transport] talks.” These effectively constituted the “framework to try to put [the EU’s] views on the reform agenda... particularly in the judiciary.” In her closing remarks, Ms. Lambert stated that “the Commission is directed by member states ... so the changes in the future [would] come from member states’ understanding of progress on the ground in Turkey.”



Geoffrey Van Orden in the middle

Geoffrey Van Orden, a decorated British Military intelligence officer (serving in Berlin at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall) and now the Vice-Chair of the European Conservatives and Reformist Group (ECR) in the European Parliament, was the next guest speaker. Before becoming a MEP, Mr. Van Orden also headed the secretariat of the International Military Staff at the NATO headquarters in Brussels.

With his vast experience on EU-Turkey affairs, he built upon Sarah Lambert’s remarks, adding that “Turkey is a very important strategic partner.” In his words “a strong relationship between Turkey and the EU is in the benefit of us all.” According to Mr. Van Orden, excluding “the trade deficit [of 15bn euros per year] in the EU’s favour,” “the prize of having a close relationship with Turkey was enormous.” For instance, Brussels was “neglectful of not doing more about to unite of the island of Cyprus.” In general, Turkey provided “an alternative route for oil and gas, [avoiding the Russians]”, as well as a much needed “strategic buffer” for Middle Eastern migrants. On the opposite side, he listed the prospect of economic modernisation and domestic legitimisation as the main drivers for Ankara to preserve the dialogue with Brussels.

Nevertheless, he envisioned “working towards a more pragmatic arrangement.” Since “nobody [neither Turkey, nor the EU] want[ed] for Turkey to be a full member” it would make more sense to have “a more transactional relationship between the EU and Turkey [over] an all-encompassing membership.” Otherwise, EU and Turkey would simple be keeping up the “elaborate pretence” of “wanting for Turkey to join the EU,” which would be highly unlikely. Mr. Van Orden indicated that

Brexit had altered the political landscape across the EU, inspiring leaders to pursue deeper integration:

We have to look at what is happening in the EU at the moment, particularly with Brexit. We see those, who want to see a very integrated European state, coming to the fore. The United Kingdom was always a break to this aspiration. Now there is the opportunity to push full steam ahead with [the] European political integration, driven by the German and French ideas about the European model ... This is the direction of travel at the moment and we are already [witnessing] it in terms of foreign and defence policy.

Turkey would represent an “indigestible” threat, capable of diluting the process. It would be hard to imagine “Germany accepting that a country with a bigger population than Germany, with more MEPs than Germany [to] suddenly be introduced to European structure, [since this] would distort the longstanding [Franco-German] model.”

Although, Mr. Van Orden portrayed the potential to destabilise the EU as the main underlying problem with Turkey, he outlined that “on the way [to accession] we see all sorts of [other] problems [and objections].” The negotiations have proven to be difficult as “every time Turkey was appearing to be fulfilling one set of objectives then there [were] difficulties that [were] raised in another area [– e.g. human rights and the Cyprus problem.]” Nevertheless, it is precisely these conflicts, which make “a very convenient obstacle” to “Turkey [not becoming] a full member.”

In conclusion, Mr. Van Orden advised the EU of pursuing a more piecemeal approach with a focus on particular strategic areas rather than full membership.

Takis Hadjigeorgiu is a Cypriot politician and member of the European Parliament for the Progressive Party of Working People, sitting with the European United Left–Nordic Green Left group (GUE/NGL), on the European Parliament's Committee of Foreign Affairs. He is also the Vice-Chair of Delegation to the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee.

In the beginning of his speech, Mr. Hadjigeorgiu remarked that Turkey “cannot perceive and handle its seize and its power”. In his opinion, Turkey’s relations with the EU and its neighbours are affected by its projection as a big power.



Takis Hadjigeorgiou in the middle

He agreed with Mr. van Orden that some member states do not want Turkey in the EU due to its possible high influence in Brussels, as it will have the highest share of MEPs. However, he argued that a “federalized Europe” would diminish the power imbalance between the bigger and smaller states. Mr. Hadjigeorgiou emphasised the difficulty of the talks between the EU and Turkey as most of the members of the Joint Parliamentary committee on Turkey’s accession talks have a negative view of its human rights record. Mr. Hadjigeorgiou argued that despite the Commission’s decision to suspend the accession negotiations with Turkey, the GUE/NGL supported the continuation of bilateral talks between Brussels-Ankara. However, his personal opinion differs from the one of his political group as he stated the following:

Maybe it’s a better policy to terminate the talks in order to put [Erdogan and his sympathisers] in a place, where they can see themselves - to make them rethink the future of [their]country and to give them food for thought that the termination happen[ed] because [of their]behaviour towards [their] own people (including the Kurdish people) and towards our surroundings (especially Syria).

Cengiz Aktar is a professor of Political Science at University of Athens, Columnist and EU analyst with AHVAL. In his speech, he declared that Turkey’s ascension to the EU was becoming less and less realistic. Therefore, according to Mr. Aktar it was an opportune time for the EU to “change its paradigm” as it was more logical to talk about a “post candidacy” rather than full-pledged candidacy. He, however, highlighted that many member states do not acknowledge Turkey’s failed candidacy for five reasons.



Cengiz Aktar in the middle

First, in EU’s political culture, the “concept of rupture” of relations does not exist. Instead, the EU diplomats and Member States prefer to continue talks indefinitely. Second, the EU does not know and does not have the experience on how to deal with the “failure of a candidacy” for accession. Third, Turkey is an important NATO member and it is considered a crucial partner in the fight against terrorism and in security. Fourth, migration is the second strategic area where the EU needs Turkey.

Turkey has been an important partner in helping the EU to cope with the immigration waves that started in 2015. The final reason related to the economic interests in the EU-Turkey relationship, as there are around 20,000 European companies that operate in Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey is interested in the development funds coming from Brussels to aid various domestic projects. Mr. Aktar pointed to a paradox that according to it the “financial flows continue in Turkey based on the [likelihood] of EU membership”. However, not only that EU membership is impossible today but the financial funds help Erdogan’s regime in earning legitimacy. When asked about the role of Turkish opposition, Mr. Aktar shared the following:

Turkey is run today by a Grand Coalition and the Grand Coalition comprises all parties with the exception of the HDP, the Kurdish party. We should face this. Of course, they don’t appear as such, as CHP still pretends that they are in the opposition as same as other parties. However, they are parts and parcels of the Grand Coalition which is running the country. It is exceptional, it never happened before. When you ask where is the opposition, the opposition is running the country.

In essence, Mr. Aktar exposed the fact that check and balances are almost non-existent in Turkey, since it had started exhibiting characteristics of a totalitarian state, with a made-up opposition.

Therefore, it was up to the EU to take this into account, when negotiating new FTA agreements with Ankara as there is no “economic freedom without rule of law”.



Steven Blockmans in the middle

Steven Blockmans, Head of Foreign Policy Unit at the Centre for European Policy Studies and Professor of EU External Relations Law and Governance at the University of Amsterdam, was the last panellist to round up the EU-Turkey talks.

Certainly, with the implementation on the constitutional amendment package which has concentrated powers around the presidency and has completely blurred the separation of powers with the other branches”...“I think the decision about when to call for a formal suspension of the accession process is the right signal even if it’s long overdue.

Mr. Blockmans stated that he didn’t believe that the local elections represented a last stand for the opposition to prevent Turkey from becoming an autocratic state, as Erdogan’s regime was already beyond the point of no return. He argued that the “accession process has been dysfunctional for years”, with Cyprus representing the main obstacle without a solution in sight. Thus, according to him it was time to move on to a more “functional type of relationship” - one that would be more transactional and better suited to reinforce the necessary strategic partnership.

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