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The Thorny Path: Turkey–EU Relations in Perspective

Suhnaz Yılmaz

The Helsinki Summit of 1999, during which the EU recognized Turkey's candidacy status, was a milestone in Turkey-EU relations. However, the real turning point took place in 2002, with the initiation of a series of reforms in Turkey, finally indicating a genuine political will to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria. To the surprise of many European leaders, this drastic reform and democratization process suddenly made the starting of accession negotiations with Turkey not just a possibility in the distant future, but an immediate concern that sparked an unprecedented debate in the Union.

In the last two months of 2002, two developments with significant repercussions shaped the political agenda in Turkey. First, the moderate Islamic politicians of the Justice and Development Party, who present themselves as 'Muslim Democrats,' had an overwhelming election victory. Despite the Islamic roots of the party, they made it very clear from the outset that relations with the EU formed the highest priority in their foreign policy agenda. In this period, the United States also displayed strong support for Turkey's European ordeal.

Then, the European Union's Copenhagen summit delivered yet another mixed message to the Turks. On the one hand, there was disillusionment regarding the setback in negotiating an earlier date for starting accession talks and the uncertainty of the path ahead. On the other hand, the Turkish leaders have been successful in getting a firm 'rendezvous date.' In this respect, 2004 is certainly going to be a very critical year in determining the future course of Turkey-EU relations. The implementation of the reforms in the domestic scene and the developments concerning Cyprus in the international arena will play a particularly important role in determining how much Turkey will advance on its thorny path towards full membership.

This commentary aims to provide an analysis of the interplay between domestic and foreign variables in shaping Turkey's relations with the EU. The study, in its first part, examines the important changes in Turkey that brought it much closer to fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and critically assesses the remaining obstacles. The second part of the paper argues that, while Turkey is preoccupied with tackling its challenging problems, there are also pressing issues for the Union countries to address. How does the Union want to define itself, its borders and EU citizenship, particularly in the wake of its new enlargement? And where will Turkey fit in this new picture? The
answers to these questions will not only determine the future course of Turkey-EU relations, but will also be critical in defining the physical, cultural, and psychological boundaries of Europe and what it means to be European. Within this framework, this article stresses the importance of open societies and the significance of co-existence rather than the clash of civilizations.

**Copenhagen Summit: Before and After**

On the eve of the Copenhagen summit, the government and opposition, as well as business circles and civil society, displayed a concerted effort to set a firm date to start accession negotiations before the next wave of EU enlargement in 2004.

There was, and is, also significant public support. The expectations concerning economic benefits and democratization have been the underlying reasons of the public enthusiasm regarding EU membership. As indicated by the results of the 2001 Eurobarometer survey conducted among 3050 people over a wide geographic and income distribution covering 17 cities, 64% of the people stated that they supported membership, while 30% were against it and 6% of those who were interviewed had no specific idea. The anticipations regarding economic improvement, the decrease in unemployment and inflation, free movement of Turkish nationals in EU countries, and improvement of democracy were cited as the top three reasons for favoring EU membership.¹

Immediately after the Justice and Development party came to power, its leader Erdogan started touring European capitals to gain support for Turkey’s cause. While the Franco-German camp remained reluctant, contacts in Britain, Italy, Spain, Greece and Belgium were encouraging. Given the strategic significance of Turkey as a critical ally in a military campaign against Iraq and as a good model for the Muslim world, the United States strongly supported Turkey’s efforts.

In the Copenhagen Summit of December 2002, European leaders made a momentous move finalizing the Union’s biggest enlargement by agreeing to take in ten more countries by May 2004. As for Turkey, the Union decided on a review in December 2004 to evaluate its progress in fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria. If everything went well, negotiations could start “without further delay” meaning not earlier than 2005.² While Turkish leaders succeeded in establishing a firm ‘rendezvous date,’ they were concerned that the newcomers (particularly Cyprus) might block Turkey’s path.

To alleviate Turkish fears, twenty-five countries of the enlarged Union issued a joint statement endorsing Turkey’s accession process.³ While this was a promising development, it did not provide any guarantees for Turkey.
Obstacles on Turkey’s Path

Turkey still has important political and economic obstacles on its path towards membership. Their resolution is not only critical for Turkey’s integration with Europe, but is also essential to democratic consolidation and economic development at home. The Union countries are particularly concerned with Turkey’s large population, troubled economy, volatile neighborhood, and cultural and religious differences. Moreover, European leaders are already facing problems regarding the financial and bureaucratic burden of the current enlargement. Hence, the process of accession will be neither quick nor easy. In the meantime, although somewhat disappointed by the Copenhagen decision, it is crucial for the Turkish leaders to give impetus to the reform process.

Despite the resistance from the nationalist MHP (Nationalistic Action Party), the outgoing coalition government introduced thirty-four important constitutional amendments on a number of previously taboo issues. In August 2002, the Turkish Parliament adopted a comprehensive reform package of historic importance. These radical changes which were made as a part of the Third EU Reform Package included highly controversial issues such as the abolishment of the death penalty at a sensitive time, when the fate of jailed Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Öcalan was being decided. The removal of the ban on education and broadcasting in languages other than Turkish, thus, providing educational and broadcasting rights to the Kurdish minority was another very significant development. In the areas of Radio/TV broadcasting and education, these constitutional reforms also need to be supplemented by the adoption of implementing secondary legislation within one year. With the Third Package, human trafficking also started to be treated as a criminal offense.4

When the Justice and Development Party came to power, it also introduced a new reform package to enhance democracy and individual liberties. In response to the Commission’s numerous warnings concerning the shortcomings in the fight against torture, the new government has vowed zero tolerance on this. Moreover, it formally ended the fifteen-year state of emergency in the last two provinces in the South Eastern parts of Turkey, which are heavily populated by the Kurds. Since 1987, the Turkish government had imposed emergency rule in this region to undermine Kurdish separatist activities. During the emergency rule, the security forces had extraordinary powers to conduct investigations and to detain suspects. People in the region welcomed the end of emergency rule and more than a thousand gathered in Diyarbakir city center to celebrate what they perceived as a return to normalcy. Improving human rights and democracy, particularly for the Kurdish minority, will be an important test. The recent developments in Iraq make this
issue particularly sensitive and significant.

Another complicated issue is curbing the military’s role in politics. The Islamic roots of the Justice and Development Party and the strong public perception of the army as the guarantor of the secular state make it much easier for the new government to treat this controversial issue within a European framework.

In August 2003, the Turkish Parliament ratified the Seventh Adjustment Package to the Copenhagen Criteria of the Union. The Seventh package is a milestone in Turkey-EU relations because for the first time the political leadership in Turkey had to tackle the sensitive question of civil-military relations and it made an attempt to limit the role of the National Security Council (NSC). The new reform package significantly curbs the influence of the military in politics, at least in principle, through measures including reducing the areas of responsibility and executive powers of the NSC, increasing the number of civilian members on the NSC, and subjecting military expenditures (which were not publicly audited in the past) to the inspection of the Court of Accounts. These rather revolutionary reforms were highly welcomed in Brussels. After making the major legislative changes to meet the Copenhagen criteria, the Turkish government’s main challenge now is the implementation of these reforms in all areas.

In addition to giving impetus to reforms, while not much emphasized, a major investment in education targeting an improvement of the education system and opportunities will yield high returns for Turkey in the long run. It will also significantly contribute to Turkish-EU relations. Currently the Europeans are apprehensive about the size of Turkey, but a young, well-educated population could be an asset in a rapidly ageing Europe in the near future.

Cyprus: The Gordion’s Knot

In foreign affairs Turkey will be hard pressed until December 2004. Bilateral problems with Greece over the Aegean, as well as Cyprus will have important repercussions for relations with the Union. The Justice and Development Party has already presented a more moderate approach to the future of the divided island. Consequently, Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis was the first foreign leader to congratulate Erdogan on the election victory and Erdogan made Athens one of the first stops in his European tour. While there are negotiations going on regarding the bilateral problems in the Aegean, Cyprus will be the most pressing issue.

The December 2003 elections in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) were seen as an early referendum on the UN-sponsored Annan Plan to reunite the island ahead of accession to the European Union in
May 2004, whether or not it remains divided. The parliamentary elections, however, ended in deadlock with no clear victors. The opposition parties that were advocates of the UN plan and the governing parties which opposed it, split the 50-seat parliament winning 25 seats each and neither side received a strong enough mandate to take control of the parliament. With these election results, the Turkish Cypriot people have indicated that they want a settlement and to join the EU, but they also want to make sure that their rights, sovereignty and security will be protected.

At the time this article was written, the discussions of President Denktash with all the parties concerning who would form the government and how were still ongoing. The even distribution of the parliamentary seats among the two blocks, the polarized positions of the parties concerned, as well as the lack of a clear signal due to competing views within Turkey regarding the future of Cyprus, make the task of forming a well-functioning new government extremely challenging. However, given the narrow window of opportunity for a solution on the island until May 2004, it is also an urgent and critical one.

If there is no agreement by May, by admitting a divided Cyprus to the EU, the Union countries would be exporting a very complicated foreign policy problem. The stalemate on Cyprus also threatens to jeopardize Turkey's plans for starting accession negotiations with the EU and would further weaken the hand of Turkish Cypriots and Turks in the post-May 2004 period when the Greek Cypriots as a full-member of the EU would negotiate from a position of enormous strength. Under these conditions, it is essential to form a broad-based coalition government in the TRNC, which could restart negotiations and display a genuine political will with support from Turkey towards reaching an equitable and mutually acceptable solution.

Turkey has major concerns, particularly regarding territorial issues in Cyprus, but the UN proposal for a settlement presents an opportunity that all sides should take seriously. However, the EU decision concerning admission to the EU of a divided Cyprus, while the Turkish case is still rather unclear, certainly provides asymmetric incentives and leverages for the parties concerned and it also weakens the position of pro-EU forces in Turkey and the TRNC in taking bold steps towards a mutually acceptable compromise solution.

In any case, as is also clearly indicated by the 2003 EU Commission Progress Report, Turkey will be hard pressed to reach a deal on Cyprus in 2004. The European Commission has warned that the absence of a settlement could become "a serious obstacle" to Turkey's aspirations of starting formal accession talks with the European Union. For the first time a direct link was established in an EU report between the resolution of the Cyprus problem and
the starting of negotiations with Turkey. While this strong tone was relatively softened in the EU’s Brussels Summit Presidency Conclusions by underlining “the importance of Turkey’s expression of political will to settle the Cyprus problem” and stating that in this respect the settlement of the Cyprus problem along the lines of the Annan Plan “would greatly facilitate Turkey’s membership aspirations,” both of these reports have been sending a clear signal of increased pressure on Turkey regarding Cyprus.8

The US Factor in Turkey-EU Relations

In order to have a better understanding of Turkey-EU relations, it is also essential to have a triangular approach by integrating the US factor. The role of the United States in promoting closer ties between Turkey and the EU has indeed been critical. Nevertheless, this impact should not be overemphasized, since American influence on decision-making by the EU elites remains limited over decisions concerning ‘deep integration.’ Moreover, the widening transatlantic rift under the Bush administration, particularly in the wake of the war in Iraq, further limits American influence over Brussels.

After the major setback Turkey experienced at the Luxembourg summit of 1997, the support by the Clinton administration was very helpful for achieving a favorable turn in Turkey-EU relations in the Helsinki Summit. However, the limits of the US influence were revealed in the context of the Copenhagen Summit, when explicit pressure by the Bush Administration to accelerate the progress for Turkish membership appeared to have backfired. There were three underlying reasons for this difference. First, in Helsinki it was merely giving candidate status to Turkey, whereas in Copenhagen the issue was about determining a date to start accession negotiations which made the prospects of Turkey’s membership much more concrete and imminent. Second, as a result of the hawkish and often unilateralist policies of the Bush administration particularly concerning Iraq, a number of European countries led by France and Germany were reluctant to yield to US diplomatic pressures.9 Third, in the aftermath of 9/11 and on the eve of the War in Iraq, while the US favored Turkey’s closer integration with the EU as a strategic asset, for the Union countries expanding the EU borders to Turkey’s volatile neighborhood that has been further destabilized by the developments in Iraq was perceived as a security liability.10

The long-standing strategic partnership between Turkey and the US was also challenged during the early months of 2003 in the context of the War on Iraq. The decision of the Turkish Parliament on March 1 refusing to authorize the deployment of US troops to Iraq via its territory was interpreted as a major blow by Washington resulting in a serious setback in relations.11 What is significant for our purposes is the effect of this tension in Turkish-US
relations on Turkey’s relations with the Union. This question becomes more complex and pertinent at a time when the Iraq War gave way to a major rift in the transatlantic alliance as well as creating deep divisions within the EU itself.

The war on Iraq and the subsequent problems with the US has pushed Turkey closer to the EU. First, the Turkish Parliament’s decision indicated that despite its shortcomings Turkey had a functioning democracy even under heavy US pressure. Second, while straining Turkey’s relations with the US and Britain which are the major supporters of Turkey’s European quest, this decision ironically brought Turkish position closer to EU’s powerful Franco-German core which have traditionally been a major center of resistance to Turkey’s EU membership. Finally, the war has helped to swing the pendulum within Turkey’s domestic politics further in the direction of the ‘pro-EU coalition’, which had already been gaining more strength since the Helsinki Summit of 1999. The realization that an over-reliance on a security triangle formed by Turkey’s close ties with US and Israel as an alternative to European integration is not a viable option for Turkey further empowered the ‘pro-EU coalition’ and accelerated the reform process on the economic and democratization fronts.

While short-term dynamics appear to favor closer relations between Turkey and the Union, it should also be stressed that achieving a smooth and rapid progress towards EU membership would be extremely difficult in the absence of US support. Thus, it is critical from a Turkish perspective, that relations with the US are restored and placed on a sound footing. This is also important for the future course of Turkey-EU relations: The restoration and enhancement of the Turkey-EU-US triangle will not only assist Turkey’s quest for EU membership, but it would also enable Turkey to develop a more balanced relationship with the United States. This, in turn, will enable Turkey to develop a multi-dimensional foreign policy and to play a more effective and constructive regional role.

These projections for Turkey’s prospects, however, should be qualified by the fact that serious obstacles need to be overcome in relations with both the EU and the US. In doing this, instead of a passive attitude based on an over reliance on the vague notion of ‘geo-strategic importance’, a proactive strategy designed to enhance relations with the EU and the US simultaneously is essential. Yet, the ability to develop and implement such a strategy depends heavily on the interaction of contending forces in Turkey’s domestic political scene and the intricate dynamics of transatlantic relations.
Shaping the New Europe

While Turkey is dealing with its challenging domestic and international problems, there are also questions for European Union countries that they have long been delayed. First, how does the Union want to define itself and EU citizenship, particularly after the new wave of enlargement? And what should be done about the future of Turkish-EU relations?

On the European front, in addition to the issues highlighted by the Copenhagen criteria, there are also significant concerns regarding Turkey's size, economic problems and volatile neighborhood. The question of Turkish admission has also initiated an intensive debate about the definition of Europe and the future of the Union. While many view it as a 'common project of shared values and destinies' and emphasize multiculturalism, there is also an opposing group whose views were voiced by the former French President and European Convention Chairman Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. They tend to define Europe in culturally exclusive and religious terms and strongly object to Turkey's membership arguing that it would mean 'the end of Europe.'

This view overlooks the historical development of Turkey's relations with Europe and the Union. Throughout the Cold War, as a member of NATO, Turkey was acknowledged as an indispensable European country essential for the continent's security. Even Giscard d'Estaing's predecessor, General Charles de Gaulle, argued back in 1963 that Turkey was a European country and therefore eligible to join, while at the same time that he was vetoing the membership of Britain. Turkey has already signed an association agreement with the European Community in 1963 and established a Customs Union in 1996. It has been officially admitted as a candidate country at the Helsinki summit of 1999.

Moreover, if the Union is defined exclusively in religious and cultural terms, where would Europe's own substantial Muslim population fit? And most importantly, what about the other core values and the open societies that the EU claims to stand for? These complicated issues also found resonance during the heated debates in the EU Brussels Summit in December 2003 over the question of whether there should be an ascription to Christianity in the EU constitution.

At the most fundamental level, an open society is characterized by the rule of law, respect for human rights and minority opinions, and freedom of thought and expression. Instead of an exclusive and rigid political and social structure, it is based on participation and inclusion. The concept underlines the positive aspects of democracy and it is supposed to define the core values of European identity. At this critical juncture, it is crucial that these values and open societies prevail in shaping the future of Turkey, the EU and the relations between them.
In conclusion, the EU serves as a powerful external anchor for Turkey in stimulating reforms that give impetus to democratization and economic recovery. On the domestic front, Turkey has made a giant step towards fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria by introducing key changes through legislation. However, fully implementing them in practice will be essential and will serve as the real challenge. In the foreign policy arena, the Cyprus issue will dominate the agenda throughout 2004 and will be the most complicated problem that Turkey needs to overcome on its thorny path towards membership. In assessing the Turkey-EU relations another important external factor, which needs to be taken into consideration is the impact of the United States. Finally, the developments concerning the EU’s own internal dynamics regarding how it wants to define its borders, whether it desires to be a genuine global power and finally which core values will prevail in the Union, will not only determine the course of Turkey-EU relations, but will also shape the future of New Europe.
Endnotes


12 The term open society was coined by the French philosopher Henri Bergson and developed further by Austrian philosopher Karl Popper in his 1945 book Open Society and its Enemies.