

## Turkey-EU Relations: Past, Present – and Future?<sup>1</sup>

May 02, 2017 by [Selim Kuneralp](#)

### Past

As is well known, Turkey-EU relations have an extremely long history, in fact a history almost as long as that of the Treaty of Rome whose 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary has been celebrated recently. Turkey first applied to join the European Economic Community in 1959, barely two years after the Treaty was signed. This application was made for strategic rather than economic reasons. Turkey was a member of NATO, a much-valued organisation at the height of the Cold War, and of other European institutions such as the Council of Europe. However, its economy was very much less developed than the average of the original six members of the European Economic Community. The Turkish economy would not have survived the competition that would have come from those countries if trade with them had been liberalised at the speed that was followed among them. As is known, the Customs Union among the six original members of the European Economic Community was completed in 1969.

For Turkey, and indeed for other Mediterranean countries like Greece, Cyprus and Malta that signed Association Agreements that gave them a perspective of accession, a much longer time-frame was envisaged for economic integration. In the case of Turkey, a period of 25 years starting in 1970 was foreseen. Meanwhile, an asymmetric arrangement was put into place whereby the EEC eliminated tariffs on all industrial products imported from Turkey, though it gradually started imposing quotas on imports of textiles and clothing, products in which Turkey had an important competitive edge.

The arrangement foresaw the gradual economic integration of Turkey with the EEC. Import duties would be eliminated at a steady pace while Turkey's external trade policy would be aligned with that of the EEC at the same time. The Community *acquis* was of course in those days much less comprehensive than it is today. However, in areas such as agriculture, services, free movement of people etc., it was envisaged that Turkey would gradually align its policies with those of the EEC, so that exchanges would be liberalised and Turkey would be prepared for accession to the EEC.

What is indeed sometimes forgotten is that the Association Agreement gave a clear perspective of eventual accession to Turkey. Economic integration as embodied in the mooted Customs Union was an instrument to help lay the ground for the

---

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to the Heinrich Böll Foundation for the opportunity it has given me to express my views on Turkey-EU relations, a subject dear to my heart because it has occupied much of my professional life as a career diplomat working for the Turkish government. Since I have retired from government service 2, 5 years ago, the views that I express in this paper are exclusively my own.

I find it encouraging but not entirely surprising that the Heinrich Böll Foundation remains interested in Turkey at a time when Europe seems to have turned its back on Turkey, and Turkey on Europe. This continued interest is naturally welcome for people like me who have always been oriented towards the West. It is not altogether surprising because in my long experience of dealing with the EU, I have always found the Greens to be an unprejudiced participant in the debate on relations between Turkey and the Union. Naturally, there has always been criticism emanating from Green spokespersons but this criticism has generally been based on fact rather than on prejudice unlike some other political movements in the Union.

realisation of that objective. The perspective of accession is naturally not unconditional. The initiative remained in the hands of the EEC which preserved the right to decide when those conditions were met. However, it is clear that the principle of accession had been adopted. It was no longer a question of 'if' but of 'when' this accession would occur.

Unfortunately, things did not develop as planned. In the first place, it has to be recognised that all the Turkish governments that succeeded each other sometimes very rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s failed to exploit the possibilities offered by the Association relationship. Instead of gradually preparing the country for economic integration with the EEC, they rejected the model contained in the association relationship. Liberalisation of trade was abandoned and overturned only two years after it started. The pretext for this was the oil shocks of the 1970s which hit Turkey particularly hard, in part because the governments of the day refused to take the required structural adjustment measures which most other countries adopted. It did not take observers in Brussels and the Member State capitals long to see how insincere the rulers of Turkey were in their quest for accession and start shirking their own commitments towards it.

To my mind, the main reason why Turkey refused to follow the gradual integration path laid out in the association agreement is because it simply did not share the motivation that had led the founding fathers of the EEC to create the Community. Turkey had remained neutral in World War II. It had experienced neither German occupation, nor liberation by US or Soviet armies. It did not see why it should pool its resources with those of the EEC in order to avoid another war on the continent of Europe. The nationalist reflexes whose excesses were rightly appreciated and fought by the post-war leadership in Europe remained very strong in Turkey both then and now because Turkey has not experienced the destruction that these reflexes have produced in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Integration with Europe remained a distant objective to which lip-service was made whenever required but hardly any steps were taken to help reach that objective. The most influential actors on the domestic scene, politicians, bureaucrats, the military but also the business community looked at the objective of accession with suspicion and throughout that whole period, a lot of courage was required to keep the flame of integration with Europe burning. The various Cyprus crises of the 1960s and 1970s also helped feed a streak of anti-Western sentiment which has never been very far below the surface in Turkey throughout its existence.

It is also a fact that the political instability, punctuated by regular military coups every ten years also complicated the picture immensely throughout that period. Those coups provoked understandable reactions from Brussels and the Member States.

As a result, time was wasted throughout the first twenty five years of association with the EEC and its successors. By the late 1980s, hardly anything had been done in Turkey to prepare the country for the completion of the Customs Union scheduled for 1995. This might not have mattered too much were it not for the fact that under WTO rules the EC would have had to rescind the tariff preferences that it had started granting to Turkey in 1971. The elimination of those preferences would have spelt disaster for the Turkish economy that, under Prime Minister Özal, was reversing the protectionist policies of the previous decades and embarking on a programme of export-led growth for which the EC market was indispensable.

Özal, unlike his predecessors, was a man endowed with strategic vision who could see that the future for Turkey lay in Europe. Like the leaders of other countries that at that time and later would push for their countries' accession to the Union, he understood that the only way to break the cycle of military coups in Turkey was to

push for accession and in so doing launch a process of unprecedented reforms. One of them was the right of individual appeal to the European Court of Human Rights that required many domestic political reforms. A *de facto* moratorium on the death penalty was also introduced at that time.

It so happens that the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Turkey's application to join the EU has been 'celebrated' a few weeks ago. As Turkish politicians never fail to recall, no other country has ever been kept waiting for accession so long. However, no other country has suffered from so many handicaps: a large, rapidly growing, relatively poor Muslim population, a persistently bad human rights record etc. and met so much prejudice from its supposed partners. At the best of times, an enormous amount of good will on both sides would have been needed to overcome these obstacles. Unfortunately, good will has been a rare commodity in EU-Turkey relations. Instead, mutual suspicions and accusations have been the norm except for relatively short periods.

Nevertheless, as is well known, the EU in its response to Turkey's 1987 application did not reject it out of hand but instead recalled the terms of the Association Agreement and pointed to the customs union which remained to be completed as a stepping stone for future things. Özal and his immediate successors had the good sense to accept the scenario. In the end, the job for which twenty five years had been originally envisaged, namely the alignment of Turkey's relevant legislation and trade regime on that of the EU, as well as the elimination of tariffs on imports from the EU was completed in just 3-4 years. This happened despite rear-guard action from much of Turkish industry which feared it would not survive the floods of imports that it thought would be released once trade between Turkey and the EU was liberalised.

In the end, Turkish industry survived and indeed thrived on the Customs Union. These days, much of Turkish industry is fully integrated with its EU counterpart. No branch of industry can be said to have suffered from the competition brought about by the Customs Union and no one seriously challenges the Customs Union on those grounds. More than twenty years after its completion, the Customs Union remains in force, despite the fact that it was envisaged as a jumping board for accession which is still very far from happening. Excepting Andorra and San Marino, Turkey remains today the only non-member country to have a fully functioning Customs Union with the EU. Indeed, no member of the EU ever had a customs union with it before accession.

## **Present**

The completion of the Customs Union in 1995 coincided with the acceleration of EU enlargement. In the space of about twenty years, the EU moved from a membership of twelve to twenty seven and then twenty eight. In the euphoria that followed the completion of the Customs Union in Turkey, it was impossible for Turkey to stand aside from this process. Obtaining candidate status and thereafter the opening of accession negotiations suddenly became the major objective of Turkish policy, both foreign and domestic. Clearly, at a time when countries some of which had not even existed on the map a few years previously were following an accelerated path to accession without too much attention being given to their level of preparedness, it would have been a major humiliation for Turkey to be set aside.

And indeed, this humiliation was meted on Turkey at the Luxembourg summit of December 1997 when twelve applicant countries were given candidate status, half of them starting accession negotiations immediately. Largely because of the hostile attitude taken by Christian Democrat leaders in some major EU countries, Turkey

was denied this status and was instead offered a separate and different path via a so-called 'European Strategy' devoid of perspective and content. Naturally, this unleashed a torrent of fury in Turkey which despite the end of the Cold War and before the start of the present instability in the Middle East, remained a valuable strategic partner. Soon enough, the EU reversed its Luxembourg decision and gave it the treasured candidate status at the Helsinki Council held in December 1999, exactly two years later.

By then, additional complications appeared on the scene. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, Greece had followed a policy of blocking progress in relations between Turkey and the EU on the grounds that its own problems with Turkey had to be settled to its satisfaction before it would allow such progress to occur. This did not matter so much at a time when relations were frozen owing to military coups or political instability. Fortunately, Greece abandoned this policy at the time when relations with Turkey were warming and political reforms were introduced with the perspective of candidate status. Naturally, Greece understood that there was a better chance of containing bilateral problems with Turkey if relations between it and the EU were normalised. As a result, while the climate between Greece and Turkey improved markedly after 2000 and Greece ceased to be an obstacle to relations between Turkey and the EU, another such obstacle rapidly appeared on the scene, namely Cyprus.

Some in Turkey have assumed that there was a *quid pro quo* between Turkey and the EU and that the former gave its assent to the initiation of accession negotiations with Cyprus in exchange for the completion of the Customs Union. However, as explained by the then President of the Council to his Turkish counterpart, as non-member countries at the time neither Turkey nor Cyprus had the possibility of blocking decisions that concerned the other. However, Greece as a member country was able to block enlargement to eastern Europe, an extremely important strategic objective for east but also west Europeans in the years that immediately followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Despite the fact that Cyprus is a divided island policed by the United Nations, with one third of its territory beyond the control of its government which is not recognised by Turkey, the island has been admitted into the Union with the fiction that its northern part is also included in the Union but that the EU *acquis* is temporarily not applied there. Many people in the EU today will acknowledge that admitting the island before a settlement was found to the Cyprus problem was a mistake. Unfortunately, it is a mistake that cannot be undone.

The leaders of the EU probably hoped that the perspective of accession would encourage the parties to the Cyprus problem to find a solution to it. One might argue that a time when multinational states all around were breaking up into their separate national components, it was fruitless to force two communities separated by language, culture and religion to reunite after several decades of separation. The fact is that the international community was then and appears still to be unprepared to accept partition of the island. Half-hearted attempts were made to reach a settlement in parallel to the progress made in the accession negotiations from which the Turkish Cypriots were excluded as the EU recognised the Greek Cypriots government as the only legitimate authority on the island. The Turkish Cypriot leadership of the time was not interested in a settlement on the terms that were available. Turkey was ruled at the time by a disparate coalition only united by mistrust of the West. Prime Minister Ecevit was further weakened by serious health problems. The economy was going through an extremely grave crisis that prevented the government from taking unpopular foreign policy decisions, even if it had wanted to do so. The establishment, namely the military and civilian bureaucracies were opposed to any territorial concessions on the island without which a settlement was and remains impossible.

The Greek Cypriots themselves did not appear particularly interested in a settlement which would have required them to share power with the Turkish Cypriots, after having enjoyed the exclusive right to speak for the island over a period of several decades.

By the time the government of Mr Ecevit was replaced by one led by Mr Erdogan at the end of 2002, the accession negotiations of Cyprus were almost completed. The new Turkish government was prepared to move on Cyprus despite opposition from the establishment that it did not yet control. However, it was too late. Had the Annan Plan put to a referendum in April 2004 been ready before the Accession Treaty had been finalised, it would have been incorporated into the Treaty and the Greek Cypriots would have been unable to reject it as this would have meant rejection of the Accession Treaty and thereby of membership of the EU.

By 2004, membership of the EU was guaranteed for Cyprus as the Treaty was being ratified by existing Member States, a sign of political support for the Greek Cypriot leadership. Once ratification of the Treaty was ensured, there was no incentive for the Greek Cypriots to seek a settlement. They therefore promptly rejected the Annan Plan in a referendum held just before accession happened. The Turkish Cypriots themselves accepted the Plan in a separate referendum held on the same day.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the government of Mr Erdogan took the perspective of accession to the EU seriously, at least at first. As the leader of the party that had won the November 2002 elections and despite being prevented from being elected to parliament by a prison sentence that he had served several years earlier, Mr Erdogan embarked on a lightning tour of the then fifteen members of the EU, an unprecedented initiative. In most countries he was received with open arms as a dynamic and forward-looking leader who had succeeded the physically and politically weak Ecevit whose party only collected about 1% of the votes at the same elections.

The new government was therefore encouraged by the sincere welcome it had received in EU countries to proceed on the path of reform and meeting the political criteria needed for accession negotiations to start. Among the many reforms adopted at the time, such as abolition of the death penalty, modernisation of the Civil and Criminal Codes etc, was a longstanding demand of the EU, namely the imposition of civilian control over the military. Naturally, this was a demand that matched the government's own priorities since it could not consolidate its power without sidelining the military which had been able to overrule civilian governments on many occasions in the previous forty years.

The fact is that the assumption of power by the AKP in 2002 marked a real social revolution, much more than the proclamation of the Republic in 1923. The early leaders of the Republic came from the same background as the ruling class of the late Ottoman Empire. They looked at the West as a source of inspiration for their reforms and despised the East, and particularly Islam which they saw as a backward religion. They considered that they knew better than the people what was good for them. Unfortunately, the people had other views and rejected the model imposed on them whenever the opportunity arose. The first opportunity had arisen at the first free elections that Turkey had known, namely in 1950. The existing regime was swept aside to be replaced by a conservative, more religious-oriented elite. Nevertheless, even that political leadership came from the same urban elite as the people it had replaced.

This interlude did not last much and the military came back with a vengeance in the coup of 1960 and introduced a power-sharing arrangement which lasted until the AKP came to power.

The social and educational background of the AKP leadership is very different from that of its predecessors. Unlike the previous elites, they have their roots in Anatolia, have been educated in religious establishments and are openly devout in a manner that is totally unprecedented as far as the ruling elites of Turkey are concerned. Their orientation is much less to Western culture but they share with their predecessors a suspicion of Western motives and policies related to Turkey. Indeed, anyone talking to Turks or following Turkish media will see that this is a common trait of the average Turk for whom World War I and its aftermath seem to have happened just yesterday.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the AKP government in its first years made serious efforts to align on EU standards. It was rewarded with the opening of accession negotiations in 2005, a development that was received with elation by the Turkish nation. The economy had also recovered from the 2001 crisis, thanks to the fact that the AKP government pursued the structural adjustment reforms introduced during the crisis.

Unfortunately, this honeymoon did not last. As a requirement of the initiation of accession negotiations, the government had had to agree not to discriminate among the members of the EU. This was a promise that was politically impossible to keep in the absence of a settlement in Cyprus. During the period that had followed the 1974 Turkish intervention on the island, all sorts of restrictions, on trade, maritime and air transport etc had been imposed on Cyprus. Dismantling them in the absence of an agreed settlement would have been impossible to explain to Turkish public opinion which still felt very strongly about Cyprus.

In the event, making progress in the accession negotiations became increasingly difficult since the opening and closing of chapters required unanimity. Cyprus was able to block progress by vetoing such decisions. However, it was not alone in these efforts. France, under President Sarkozy, openly voiced opposition to Turkey's accession to the EU. Mrs Merkel was less vocal but equally sceptical. A 'privileged partnership' was mooted for Turkey as an alternative to accession. Because Turkey rejected it out of hand, it has never been possible to ascertain what this partnership might have entailed. It is doubtful that its proponents had given much thought to its possible contents.

Concurrently, and under pressure from Mr Sarkozy and Mrs Merkel, the EU took the fateful and mistaken decision to stop inviting the leaders of candidate countries to the bi-annual summits to which they had been accustomed. This was taken as a personal slight by Mr Erdogan and deprived the EU from a useful instrument for passing on discreetly unpleasant messages whenever required. It also removed from Mr Erdogan the pressure of having to present every six months a report on the reforms that he had been pursuing to align the country on EU standards.

Almost twelve years after accession negotiations started, only one chapter has been closed and barely half have been opened. Contrast this with Croatia which started accession negotiations at the same time as Turkey and has been a member of the Union since July 2013. Only Macedonia which became a candidate at the time of the opening of accession negotiations with Turkey were opened, is in a worse situation than Turkey since it has been unable to start negotiations owing to the opposition of Greece.

It is unlikely that the situation will change in the foreseeable future. If anything, it is likely to deteriorate. As the EU has lost its leverage over Turkey with the effective freezing of accession negotiations, Turkey itself has increasingly distanced itself from the EU and the values that it embodies. It is unclear whether the AKP has come to power because the majority of Turks is deeply conservative and devout, or whether Turkish society has become more conservative and devout after almost fifteen years of unprecedented and unbroken rule by a political party that openly espouses religious values. The fact is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that Turkey would fit into the EU.

Naturally, the estrangement between Turkey and the EU is also partly due to developments in the EU itself. Enlargement is no longer seen as the standard solution to all the problems affecting the continent. European values are openly flouted in several member countries. Intolerance and prejudice are on the rise even in the original members of the Union. Islamophobia has fed on the spectacular and murderous terrorist attacks that have regrettably struck several European cities, including in Turkey. Because these terrorists claim to act in the name of Islam, it is difficult for the general public to dissociate them from their religion.

## **Future**

However, the EU and Turkey cannot turn their backs on each other completely. Apart from an intense economic and trade relationship, the two parties share common interests in the Middle East. The agreement concluded in March 2016 whereby Turkey would stem the flow of refugees and migrants over its territory into the EU, in exchange for material help, the normalisation of relations, including the resumption of accession negotiations, and the lifting of the humiliating and largely redundant visa requirement for Turkish nationals, has not been properly implemented. However, it showed that the two parties had the necessary willpower to address common problems jointly. Despite lack of full implementation of the agreement, the Turkish government has not acted on its threat to reopen its borders to migrants wishing to move on to EU countries.

A more structured relationship is unlikely. Accession negotiations are not going to resume in the foreseeable future. Indeed, it might easily be argued that since the attempted coup of last year, and the crackdown that has followed it, Turkey no longer fulfils the Copenhagen political criteria. However, acting on such a conclusion would not be meaningful because it would have no impact other than pushing Turkey even further away from the EU, surely not a development in the interest of the Union.

A Cyprus settlement might have had a positive effect by permitting the unblocking of chapters but despite intensive negotiations, it has not been possible to reach it. A majority of people on both sides of the island and the governments of Greece and Turkey appear to be unwilling to make the mutual concessions which a settlement would require. Indeed, it is likely that pressures in Turkey for annexation of the North will surface if the negotiations are perceived to have broken down irremediably. It is difficult to imagine the EU remaining indifferent to the annexation of part of the territory of one of its member states, partly because of the example that this would set for others. However, it is equally difficult to imagine what sanction the EU could adopt in such an eventuality that would not damage its own interests more than those of Turkey.

Relations with Greece have also started to deteriorate since the EU has lost its leverage over Turkey after the freezing of accession negotiations. Disputes over rocks in the Aegean Sea that had been pushed under the carpet after the initiation of accession negotiations in 2005 have now been resuscitated, perhaps because

Greece is seen to be blocking progress in the negotiations over Cyprus. Inflammatory statements are being exchanged like in the bad old days of the 1990s and an accident involving naval vessels or warplanes cannot be excluded.

In this rather pessimistic situation, one flickering candle has been lit. The Customs Union had been designed in the 1960s and has not been updated since it came into force more than twenty years ago. It does not cover agriculture, services or government procurement, sectors which naturally have a large potential for increased exchanges between the two sides. The main reason why it has not been updated is naturally because the Customs Union would have become redundant had the accession negotiations borne fruit. Now that these negotiations have been effectively suspended, the idea of updating the Customs Union to include all the sectors that it does not cover has been mooted. Both sides seem keen to advance in that direction. However, it is also clear that this will not be easy. Liberalising trade in agricultural products is a difficult objective to reach owing to the large differences in competitiveness between the two sides. An agreement on services would need to include road transport where the Turkish companies are highly competitive. This is likely to be difficult to achieve because liberalisation in that sector would face opposition from a number of Member States, particularly as the question of whether the EU has competence on cross border road transport agreements with third countries does not seem to have settled. Liberalisation in trade in services would also require some increased movement of service providers, another difficult decision for some if not all EU countries. On the Turkish side, it is not clear why in the present state of bilateral relations; Turkey would agree to open its juicy procurement market to competition from EU suppliers. Finally, in the light of the experience of the Canadian FTA, the perspective of ratification by 38 national and sub-national parliaments cannot be terribly encouraging for would-be negotiators. An agreement fully within the competence of the EU and therefore not requiring national and sub-national ratifications, including that of Cyprus might be envisaged but it is unlikely to be very ambitious.

On 16 April, President Erdogan won a referendum that had been held at his initiative on a modification that will greatly strengthen his power and authority. In a break with a tradition going back hundreds of years, the office of Prime Minister will be abolished and Parliament will be sidelined. The independence of the judiciary will suffer a major blow.

The outcome of the referendum was not a ringing endorsement of President Erdogan. Despite a questionable campaign which was conducted without even a minimum attempt at a level playing field, he only managed to obtain 51% support and lost that of Ankara and Istanbul for the first time in his political career. However, hopes that this mixed result might induce him to soften the abrasive language that he has used throughout the campaign have been dashed when he resumed his attacks on the EU and other European institutions immediately after the referendum. Restoring the death penalty as he has repeatedly asked for, would provoke a break not just with the EU but also with the Council of Europe of which Turkey is a founding member. Such a break would be extremely dangerous for the country but would help him consolidate his domestic power. The EU would be freed of the challenge of Turkey's accession and would find on its borders yet another authoritarian leader of the type with which it is used to live.