

How Turkey and Brussels can prevent a blow-up

By Asli Aydintasbas

To put it mildly, “Europe doesn’t know what to do with Turkey”. Turn the perspective around and translate that phrase into Turkish and it reads: “Turkey hasn’t decided whether it belongs to Europe or not.”

Always difficult, even torturous, the relationship between the European Union and Turkey has hit new highs and new lows in the last year. There was the refugee deal, the summits and photo-ops of a type that had been absent for almost six years. There were steps toward visa liberalisation and the opening of frozen accession chapters. But there were also threats and accusations. In Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron, in an effort to convince British voters to stay in the EU, had to pledge that Turkey would not become an EU member until the year 3000. Meanwhile, in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made it a part of his routine stump speech to accuse Europe of supporting terrorism.

Confusingly, Turkey and Europe have never been so close, and yet so far apart. In the sorry history of accession negotiations since 2005, Ankara has never come this close to its final destination, and never made so much progress on the visa liberalisation that Turks hold close to their hearts. And yet Ankara has never been more sceptical of European values and intentions. Similarly, Europeans have finally seen the value of Turkey, but they have never seemed so willing to disown their core principles as during this past year’s negotiations.

Something is off, both for Europe and Turkey, and this is the summer to fix it. Turkey and Europe have to step out of this self-defeating cycle before it destroys trust and credibility on both sides.

A new type of bond, a new narrative, and a new framework is needed for an honest Turkish-EU relationship that is durable and produces results. Such a relationship would be mutually rewarding but also legitimate, because it would be based on more than just transactional deals among bureaucrats.

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For this to happen, both Turkey and Europe need to engage in a good deal of soul-searching to find the right type of framework. Here are some ideas:

- Both Ankara and Brussels should question whether the linkage between the refugee crisis and Turkey's accession is a good idea. Initially, both Turkey and Europe seemed tempted by this quick – and arguably dirty – transaction. For Europeans, the deal helped stem the inflow of refugees in 2016. For Turkey, a sudden boost to its dormant accession process eased its isolation in the region. But expectations run high and the public on both sides have not been shown the merits of the handshake. The refugee deal remains extremely unpopular in Turkey and Europe. It should have been love, but it feels like a forced marriage.
- Ankara should decide whether or not it really wants to be a member of the EU. To help Ankara make this decision, European leaders need to get very specific about their benchmarks and have an honest discussion with Turkish leaders. Right now, there is a sense in Ankara that almost everything is negotiable.
- Europe should not disown its core principles on democracy and human rights in discussions with Turkish leaders and in negotiating a refugee deal. If the EU is – as is often claimed – a union of values, then the free pass that Turkey is being given at the moment is problematic for Europe's core identity. This type of "flexibility" is also confusing to Turkey. For decades, European leaders told the Turkish public that the European order is based on principles of liberal democracy. But the refugee deal more closely reflects the nineteenth-century European order, in which various powers made cynical deals for the sake of stability. Are we dealing with states and their specific interests, or with a union that has fixed membership criteria?
- With polls on Brexit showing a close race, the future shape of the EU is on everybody's mind. Why should we shy away from discussing alternative frameworks for the future of the EU-Turkish relationship, which has remained a taboo in accession talks? Turkey should not see "privileged partnership" or "multi-tier partnerships" as insults, but should continue to question and if necessary

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redefine its interaction with Europe. Currently, the situation on the ground is dynamic, but the definitions are not.

- With all the energy invested in the Turkish-European dialogue, it is quite remarkable how little conversation there is beyond the accession process itself. In particular, Turkish-European dialogue on Syria could be useful for both sides. That Europe is investing so much in the refugee issue but not in a resolution to the Syrian war remains puzzling. Europeans seem to have outsourced the Syrian issue to the United States and Russia. Meanwhile, Turkey is offering solutions – such as creating safe or ISIS-free zones, building new satellite towns on its borders, or supporting the divided Sunni opposition to topple the Assad regime – that are beyond its means. Turkey and Europe should talk about Syria. There is room not just for dialogue but for joint action to stabilise Syria and bring about an orderly transition. The Geneva process, the creation of safe zones, humanitarian aid inside Syria, engaging with opposition forces that control swathes of territory, the fight against Islamic State (ISIS), and the delicate military balance in Aleppo are all aspects of the Syrian crisis that would benefit from Turkish-European discussions.
- Europe can play a role in easing Turkey out of its regional isolation by providing a platform to facilitate Turkish-Russian, Turkish-Israeli, or even Turkish-Egyptian normalisation processes. Similarly, Turkey can be a bridge, bolstering Europe’s economic and political ties with Iran, Iraq, and in particular Iraqi Kurdistan.
- Turkey’s Kurdish issue threatens the immediate and long-term stability of the country. It is intimately related to the refugee and Syria issues. As it stands, the Kurdish issue directly impacts Europe’s security and Turkey’s democracy, yet Europe does not seem to have a “Kurdish policy”. Neither side should shy away from this highly sensitive subject in the framework of Turkish-European dialogue.

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