



BULLETIN

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Capitalising on Turkey's Slight Shift towards the EU

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Turkey's strategic importance to the EU's interests has grown because of developments in the latter's eastern and southern neighbourhoods. It also coincides with a recent and clear shift towards the EU in Turkish foreign policy rhetoric. Turkey's unstable neighbours have made the government in Ankara look for more reliable business allies. Yet, this coincidence is unlikely to bring the expected benefits to either side for two reasons: Turkey's continuing disregard for democratic standards, and the EU's inability to accommodate this shift due to the blocked negotiation chapters by Cyprus, France and the EU Council. Moreover, the "new focus" on EU enlargement policy may further undermine this, best tool to make the EU–Turkey partnership more effective.

Turkey's Turn to the EU. Turkey has recently shown a substantial shift in tone towards revival of the stalled drive for EU membership after a long period of stagnation. While Turkey's accession negotiations are still blocked and Ankara's commitment to EU core values remains under scrutiny, the country's highest leaders have recently highlighted the strategic importance of Turkey's EU bid. On his 11–12 November trip to Brussels, EU Minister Volkan Bozkir announced that Turkey would work to revive the EU accession process and reiterated that it remained a "strategic goal" of the country. In September, the Turkish Ministry for EU Affairs, responsible for coordinating all efforts related to the EU membership process, announced its new "European Union Strategy." It underlines three major priorities: the political reform process, socioeconomic transformation, and an effective EU communication strategy, with a view to increase public support for Turkey's EU membership among both the Turkish and European publics. The strategy will be introduced in two periods, 2014–2015 and 2015–2019. To accompany the new strategy, the Turkish government has also announced a "National Action Plan for EU Accession" in November. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has explicitly announced plans to visit European capitals more frequently in a bid to accelerate the accession process.

What Is Behind the Shift? Turkey's turn to the EU coincides with the election of Erdoğan as president in August and consequently the formation of a new, interim government that will be in place until the general elections in June 2015. The new government is working under particularly challenging conditions: Turkey's southern neighbourhood, particularly the violence in Syria and Iraq, have caused considerable security concerns; the "peace process" with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is fragile; the refugee problem, mainly from Syria, is growing; and economic growth is slowing. These factors constitute a major political risk for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which owes its success largely to the economic and political stability in the country. That stability and growth is now under serious threat.

In light of the growing Middle East turmoil, the EU remains a symbol of stability and security. Ankara's calculation is that a recommitment to the accession process would send positive signals to the electorate and to investors. Indeed, the Turkish public, which increasingly feels the tension of its unstable neighbourhood and fears losing the economic benefits acquired in recent years, is more and more in favour of EU accession. The support for integration with the EU has increased by 9 p.p. since last year, and reached 53%, according to the Transatlantic Trends survey. Moreover, Ankara also calculates that it can benefit from cooperation with the EU to mobilise European assets to properly address Turkey's own challenges, such as the increasing amount of incoming refugees. It is now clear that the Turkish

government has overestimated its capacities in dealing with the influx of Syrians and needs international support, especially as the number of refugees in Turkey may double. The shift is also meant to send a message to the international community about the reformist nature of the government and its commitment to the West. It is therefore also a tactical move for the AKP government, recently facing accusations from international media on a wide range of issues, including its human rights record and alleged support for extremist groups in Syria.

EU's Response and the "New Focus" in Enlargement Policy. EU leaders have doubts as to whether this shift in Turkey's foreign policy will be followed by reforms in its domestic policies, necessary for bringing it closer to the EU. The latest European Commission Turkey Progress Report from October 2014 shows continued concerns over the country's performance regarding the Union's core values, such as the rule of law, fundamental rights and media freedom. If some in President Erdoğan's inner circle face corruption allegations, it is doubtful Ankara will be willing to take the most fundamental steps, such as reforming the judiciary, to move Turkey closer to the EU.

However, even if there was a true commitment by Turkey to undertake reforms, there are now additional challenges to the partnership, this time on the part of the EU. Enlargement policy is understood to be the best tool to make the EU–Turkey strategic partnership more effective. But the new EU Commission, responsible for leading the processes of EU enlargement policy, has shown signs at the beginning of its mandate of a lessened commitment to that policy. Not only has the new commissioner's portfolio been renamed "DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policy" (previously, "DG Enlargement") but also the Commission's new president, Jean-Claude Juncker, has clearly stated that no enlargement will take place in the coming five years. His explicit voicing of this line, unofficially known by policymakers, was widely interpreted as a sign of a lack of commitment by the Commission to enlargement policy.

Furthermore, the Commission's "new focus" in enlargement policy is defined under the motto "quality before speed." However, whether the Commission can ensure "quality" when enlargement is not priority and the Commission's own mandate has not been strengthened, remains dubious. This question is particularly relevant for Turkey, where the Commission's capacities to assist and speed up the reform process are already limited due to the blocks on negotiation chapters by Cyprus, France and the EU Council. The Commission's tools to consolidate enlargement policy are already weakened, as the EU accession negotiations, normally a technical process, have been politicised. Similarly, the Commission's new tools to consolidate enlargement efforts, such as through the implementation of new "safety measures" to close the imbalance between the speed of negotiations in different chapters, also have been ineffective.

Ensuring Successful Continuity. Without a credible accession process, Turkey does not feel bound to contribute to shared interests, such as in foreign policy where Turkey's alignment with the EU's Common Security and Foreign Policy has considerably decreased and, on energy, where Ankara does not meet EU regulations. The Commission's decreased interest in enlargement policy challenges not only its claimed objective of consolidation but also the prospects for deepening cooperation between the two strategic partners. Even if there is no chance for an immediate speeding up of the EU–Turkish accession negotiations, the momentum is now there to show a compatibility of interests, acknowledge benefits from cooperation, and capitalise on the new opening.

The developments around the common neighbourhood require the EU and Turkey to develop a joint, comprehensive response. If properly capitalised upon, Turkey's new pro-EU rhetoric and real interest in looking for stable partners in Europe, rather than the Middle East, may give the EU–Turkey partnership a positive stimulus. The EU should first explicitly acknowledge Turkey's shift towards the EU. The EU would do well to give strong signals to Turkey's business and bureaucratic circles, for example, by inviting Turkey to Council meetings. There should be strong incentives as well, such as the possibility to address Turkey's concerns regarding the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) as Turkey risks losing \$20 billion in its international trade volume annually due to the asymmetric structure of the EU–Turkey Customs Union if it is not a part of the deal, not least that it risks exclusion from a so-called "economic NATO." The EU can also improve its image as a reliable partner for Turkey by, for example, increasing European aid for Syrian refugees, if only because of their growing number. In October, the EU increased humanitarian funding from an initial €3.5 million to €8.5 million in 2014, yet this remains too little compared to the \$4 billion spent by Turkey since the beginning of the refugee crisis.

The EU may also now capitalise on the Turkish public's increased support for EU accession to consolidate Ankara's slight shift to the EU. Focusing on civil society by increasing dialogue, raising awareness of the direct benefits to Turkish citizens from the accession process, communicating better about the accession negotiations with the larger publics, such as the possibility of opening Chapter 19 on Employment and Social Policy, can increase the significance of the EU project altogether. In addition, the EU should also implement the Students' Directive to prevent Turkish students from having a negative experience with their visa applications or from weakening their interest in the EU. It should also increase people-to-people contacts, especially as Ankara has decreased the number of Turkish students in the Erasmus Programme.