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THE FUTURE OF EU–TURKEY RELATIONS

TRANSACTIONAL BARGAINING CONTINUES

Fundamental questions about Turkey's EU path have been brushed aside for the last ten years. With enlargement back on the agenda, the EU-Turkey relationship seems to be moving towards even more transactionalism, lacking any prospect of meaningful integration.

Having stalled for more than a decade, EU enlargement has regained prominence on the EU's agenda during the past year, driven by Russia's war on Ukraine and the subsequent deterioration of European security. In response to the new situation, the EU is now trying to absorb Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and also the Western Balkans into its political and economic sphere.

This inevitably raises the question of what to do about Turkey, the applicant country that signed an association agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1963 and secured its candidacy in 1999.

During the last ten years under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has withdrawn from liberal

democracy, particularly regarding the rule of law and citizens' democratic rights. At the same time, Turkey has systematically constructed its own version of strategic autonomy and multi-vector foreign policy, within which the EU and the US, the country's traditional Western allies, have become just one dimension among others, deprived of any priority. The EU currently estimates that only ten per cent of Turkey's foreign policy decisions converge with those of the Union. In this respect, the Turkish parliament's decision to finally ratify Sweden's NATO application will ease the situation to some extent in the short term.

In the intricate depths of the relationship lies a fundamental question about power. The EU's

decision-making mechanisms imply a reinterpretation of national interest, where the partial pooling of state sovereignty into the Union's supranational bodies is perceived as being in the state's own interest. It is questionable whether such reinterpretation was present in Turkey even during the most promising reform period from 1999 to 2005. It is obvious that the current Turkish regime, with executive power vested in the hands of the President without any major checks and balances, is incompatible with the Union's political system.

A similar problem concerns the negotiation framework. Contrary to what the talk of negotiation suggests, the Union's enlargement is not a negotiation process between equal

actors. Instead, it requires the candidate to implement the EU's common legislation package and relevant practices. It is highly questionable whether this is an appropriate form of engagement when the applicant country sees itself as constantly striving to break free from what it regards as a humiliating dependency on Western powers. Consequently, it is systematically seeking an independent role in world politics.

Enlargement serves as an effective foreign policy tool only when the membership prospect is credible, and the applicant country is at the same time domestically committed to implementing the major reforms required for full membership. In the case of Turkey, such a situation only existed for a relatively brief period between 1999 and 2005.

Based on history, it can be argued that even if Turkey were to suddenly transform into a full-fledged liberal democracy, it would not be accepted by the existing members. One of the main reasons for this is the power balance mechanism in the current EU, as it would make Turkey the largest and most powerful member of the Union. In addition, there are influential conservative constituencies in today's

EU that have long challenged the very idea of Turkey being a European country, and therefore reject its membership.

These fundamental questions have been brushed aside by both the EU and Turkey for over a decade. The Commission repeatedly publishes its country-specific progress reports on Turkey. However, the inevitable criticism within these reports has only resulted in mockery and ridicule from the Turkish authorities. Anyone who has been following this topic for more than a few years will readily recall the highly publicized displays of Turkish ministers throwing Commission reports into the bin in front of the cameras.

The present status of this relationship is reflected in the conclusions of the December 2023 European Council meeting, where Turkey is not even mentioned under the heading of EU enlargement, but rather classified as a separate category of Turkey-EU relations. According to the meeting conclusions, the issue will be back on the table at the Council's 2024 meetings, and the discussions will be based on the so-called Borrell report, which scrutinizes the current state of EU-Turkey relations.

The Borrell report focuses on exploring ways to better address some of the key interdependencies between the EU and Turkey, such as trade and migration. It suggests that practical steps forward could include modernizing the existing Customs Union and finding ways to expedite visa applications to the Schengen area for certain Turkish citizens, such as businesspeople, academics, and students. This would be contingent upon Turkey playing a constructive role in the Eastern Mediterranean, and complying with the EU's sanctions against Russia. In this way, the Borrell report further consolidates the existing trend whereby the EU-Turkey relationship has become thoroughly transactional, with no prospect of closer integration on either side.

The EU clearly wants to proceed with the current method of maintaining Turkey's candidacy, while in practice arranging relations outside the negotiation framework. To optimize this arrangement, it would be important to agree on common rules of engagement, duly improving the predictability of EU-Turkey relations in the process. /