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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Czech Republic

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. Gradual erosion of Czech support for Turkey's EU membership

In a 2009 study, Kratochvíl et al. explained that the Turkish accession to the European Union (EU) had never been a real issue in the Czech Republic. This argument is still valid today: while the political circles and a few interested persons engage in the debate on accession, there is only very little public debate on this topic. Part of the explanation is that Czech media generally pay less attention to events abroad. Also, the prospective Turkish accession attracts little attention because the likelihood of Turkey entering the EU is regarded as too low.

On the political level, the Czech Republic traditionally supported, at least rhetorically, the Turkish membership in the EU, provided that agreed conditions are met. This position was even supported by a majority of rather Turkey-sceptic voices.

The underlying reasons for this were the two countries' good mutual relations, building on profitable business contracts and the geographic and strategic position of Turkey. This was perceived as important in light of both EU-Turkey relations and, more importantly, relations between Turkey and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Although these overall trends are more or less stable, there have been some shifts in recent years that influenced the debate. One of the key reference points was the Czech Republic's accession to the EU in 2004. The Czech attitude towards Turkey, which had previously been viewed as a NATO partner and a possible economic partner, has from then on been influenced by the attitude of the EU, as well as by broader EU-membership related concerns.

Therefore, the political and ideological context of the Czech discussion about the Turkish EU accession changed. Historically, the Czech political representation supported Turkish EU accession for two reasons. First, as a new member state the government of the Czech Republic considered it appropriate to support those who shared the same ambition to join the EU. Shortly after the Czech Council Presidency in 2009, Štefan Füle was approved as Commissioner for Enlargement, and at this point the Czech Republic also highlighted its support for Turkey's accession process to the EU. However, support for EU enlargement tends to gradually fade away as the memories of the Czech Republic's own accession recede into history.

Second, Czech Eurosceptics (such as ex-president Václav Klaus, who was in office until 2013) supported the Turkish accession as a way to dilute the European Union and put the breaks on the deepening of the integration process. However, in 2014 the new President Miloš Zeman and a pro-European centre-left government led by Bohuslav Sobotka (Czech Social Democratic Party) took office. This pro-European government rejects the idea of promoting Turkey's membership

¹ The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

as a way to dilute European integration and at the same time finds it increasingly difficult to find alternative argument in favour of the Turkey's membership in the EU. The growing authoritarianism in Turkey and the spread of Islamophobia among the Czech population and political elite also contributed to the erosion of the Czech support for Turkish EU membership. Lately, the recent developments in Turkey, namely the failed coup attempt of July 2016 and the post-coup situation, have affected the debate in the Czech Republic. Even though the Czech diplomacy still supports the continuation of accession negotiations because of the need to keep communication channels open, there is hardly anyone who would believe that this process can really result in EU membership for Turkey. Therefore, the issue of EU membership has dropped out of the debate for the time being. Nevertheless, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs still stresses on its website the fact that the Czech Republic supports the Turkish accession process.

1.2. Turkey: The Other in an oriental soap opera

There is a mix of narratives regarding Turkey in the Czech debate. While politicians and businessmen focus more on the costs and benefits of Turkey's accession and the quality of its relations with the EU, the public debate is more identity and value-oriented.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the official government's discourse stress Turkey's role in the refugee deal, together with its regional role. Czech economic interests also play a vital role, as exports to Turkey are growing, and the Czech Republic has reached a positive balance of trade with Turkey in the recent years. A telling example of the politicians' interest-based discussion is the news reports on the latest visit of the Czech Foreign Minister to Turkey. It was reported that he took advantage of this trip to discuss both the fate of two jailed Czech citizens and an endangered Czech investment project linked to the Turkish power plant Yunus Emre.

The public debate, however, focuses more on the cultural and value-based distinction between the EU and Turkey. Lately, the post-coup trials and anti-Kurdish operations in Turkey only add to this perception bringing issues of human rights to the fore.

Looking at newspaper articles' headlines from the past three years, we can witness a worsening in the media's portrayal of Turkey, despite the fact that the two countries' mutual business relations have continued to be on positive terms throughout that period.

Czech citizens remain largely unconcerned about Turkey's possible membership in the EU, probably because it is no longer seen as feasible. Turkey is perceived as a) a summer resort country – in this regard it is rather the security situation in the country which attracts the ordinary citizens' attention; b) a football champion – a large part of the articles on Turkey concern sports; and c) a producer of soap operas, such as *The Magnificent Century*, which has been aired in the Czech Republic in recent years and has helped to define Turkey's image in the country. This highlights the gap between the official narrative and public perception. Even though these images bring Turkey closer to the public eye as a strong and important country,

they portray it as an overly traditional country that is more part of the Middle East than of Europe and underline its cultural distinctiveness to an even greater extent.

To sum up the analysis, the prevailing narrative is that Turkey is seen as the Other, and then there are discussions on how and whether it can be regarded as a possible partner.

1.3. “Engagement” with Turkey on migration and security issues amid worsening perceptions of Turkish economy and democracy

For a long time, Turkey has been perceived as one of the rising economies and economic cooperation played an important part in political discussions regarding EU-Turkey and Czech Republic-Turkey relations. As recently as 2013, Czech officials argued that “business should come first” when discussing these relations. The focus on economic relations is understandable given the steady grow of trade volumes even in times of economic crisis. The Czech trade balance with Turkey is in surplus.

Despite the continuity in business relations between the Czech Republic and Turkey, trade and economic relations gradually ceased to be the main area under discussion. A more pro-European Czech government since 2014, the war in Syria and the refugee crisis shifted the attention from the economic ties to security and migration issues. Turkey is no longer perceived as a dynamic emerging economy. On the contrary, Czech officials increasingly see Turkey as a difficult and increasingly authoritarian country, but still an important or even indispensable partner for the EU in a volatile region.

The Czech government cautiously welcomed the March 2016 deal and agreed with the provision to grant Turkey visa-free regime, but only after the required conditions were met. However, the relations soured after threats by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to “flood Europe with refugees”. In November 2016, the President, the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic openly rebuked Turkey’s “blackmail”. President Zeman additionally called for the recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Czech Parliament.

The prospect of a visa-free regime with Turkey elicited little opposition on the political scene or in the media, apart from few far-right deputies in the Czech Parliament. While the visa-free regime itself was barely discussed in the media, opinion polls by Sanep showed however an overwhelming opposition by the Czech population to granting Turkey a visa-free regime, even under the conditions set by the EU. 86 percent of respondents rejected the visa-free regime while only 9 percent agreed with the proposal. The public opposition seems to correlate with the surge of Islamophobia and the rejection of the EU plan to introduce refugee quotas.

Regarding the deteriorating status of democracy in Turkey, Czech officials are reluctant to directly address the problem. They do point out that Turkey should meet the conditions set out by the EU for visa-free regime and progress towards EU membership. However, there is little appetite for political confrontation on the issue. Nevertheless, the authoritarian tendencies in Turkey, highlighted by the purges after the failed coup attempt in 2016, are often highlighted in

the Czech media. Interestingly, the criticism of autocratic tendencies in Turkey and the “sultan Erdoğan” is one of the few common points shared by both the liberal and the more nationalistic (and Islamophobic) media.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. The uncertain future: rising authoritarianism and continuing purges

At present, the dominant perception is that the Turkish accession is for the time being and the years to come out of question, yet that some form of cooperation must be saved. The key concern is the rising authoritarianism in Turkey and also, in relation to the Turkish position in NATO, the (in)stability of the Turkish army and of the country in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in 2016.

In context of the present debate, it is necessary to mention that the current President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, and his supporters, tend to reinforce the anti-accession camp by including criticism on Turkey in their broader populist narrative.

What presently connects both the pro-accession and anti-accession camps is the concern for the human rights situation and style of governance in Turkey. Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged that Turkey can be better supported in its transformation process if it is firmly on its path towards the EU, including possibly accession negotiations.

As explained above, different interests motivate the political elites, the economic ones and the public, yet growing uneasiness (at best) is seen among all these groups.

To conclude, with the latest developments – the worryingly dropping standards of human rights in Turkey, the unfavourable developments in the Turkish economy, the Turkish army in disarray and the Turkish state apparatus being destabilized by massive dismissals – the best that can be hoped for is a functional cooperation between the EU and Turkey.

Truth be told, many of those who still advocate for the Turkish EU membership see the value in the negotiating process itself rather than in the prospective Turkish membership. The conditionality attached to the accession process is perceived as a useful tool for pushing reforms in Turkey in line with European norms of democracy, rule of law and good governance. For them, the ultimate goal is not Turkish membership itself, but cooperation with Western oriented Turkey and reforms in Turkey. The accession process is instrumental for both of these goals, thus they hope that Turkey would stay in the EU accession negotiations more or less forever.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that at this point the EU (and the member states) cannot keep its (their) value standards and still continue accession negotiations with Turkey. Various Czech political parties have made statements about this dilemma: for them it is not possible to see the Turkish accession taking place under the present conditions, yet everybody is aware of the importance of Turkey in many different regards.

2.2. No discussion about “privileged partnership” or other alternative institutional setups for EU-Turkey relations

Concepts of differentiated integration such as those of “privileged partnership” or “strategic partnership” between the EU and Turkey do not figure in the Czech discussion. Senior officials and diplomats acknowledge the importance of Turkey for Europe’s security. The “strategic” importance of Turkey is reflected in its NATO membership, which is not questioned by the Czech politicians. The NATO membership is accepted as a fact also by the media discourse, even though some tabloid press speculate about the possibilities of estrangement between Turkey and NATO due to the deterioration of democracy in Turkey and increasingly anti-Western attitudes of the Turkish government and pro-government media.

Given the unpredictability of the future direction of Turkish domestic and foreign policy, there is little appetite in the Czech Republic to go beyond these ad-hoc agreements (like the recent migration deal) and institutionalize some form of permanent “privileged partnership”. Even though Czech politicians understand that EU membership for Turkey might be off the table (and some of them argue that the door to the EU has already been firmly closed), they offer no alternative institutional setup for EU-Turkey relations. Instead, the Czech diplomacy, probably out of fear of angering and estranging Turkey, prefers to continue with what can be called a “pretence” of accession negotiations.

2.3. The most consequential event in Turkey: the failed coup attempt

One of the dominant issues in the debate in 2015 and 2016 was the so-called EU-Turkey deal on migration, especially its costs and credibility. In this regard, the perceived occasional Turkish attempts to blackmail the Union with this refugee deal caused severe worries.

An especially strong theme was the connected debate on visa-free travel for Turkish citizens, which resonates within the broader Czech debate on migration at a time when there are very vocal anti-immigrant groups (especially anti recent Arab/Muslim immigrant).

Another issue claiming a big share of the public attention, although only for a short time, was the upsurge of terrorist attacks in Turkey. As Turkey is among the prime destinations for the Czech summer tourism, the security situation is closely followed, especially when the attacks hit Istanbul or other often visited cities.

Yet these developments were soon to be overshadowed by the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016. The failed coup also had a severe impact on the Czech business, as business between the countries lay at the core of Czech-Turkish relations.

At the moment of writing, the top issue that keeps re-appearing among various sections of the Czech society, including both professionals working in politics as well as the broader public, is the fate of two Czech citizens who were arrested in Eastern Turkey on the grounds of their alleged support to terrorism – they were aid workers in the Syrian conflict, yet the Turkish charge is that, instead of neutrally helping all the people concerned, they sympathized with and

fought on the side of the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG). In this regard, the difference between Turkey and the EU is reiterated – as someone can be labelled as a terrorist in Turkey while not being perceived as such in Europe.

The failed coup attempt and its repercussions keep influencing the debate in the Czech Republic. While in the beginning there was support for the elected government, the scope of the purges pushed things too far. Therefore, while the need for cooperation with Turkey is undisputed, no one sees a chance for further accession talks with the country at this moment.

3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene

3.1. Migration and (in)security: refugee crisis and the war in Syria

Generally speaking, the migration crisis dominated much of the political discussions in the Czech Republic in the past two years. The issue of the migration crisis has been highly securitized. The Czech Republic and the Visegrad Four saw the migration crisis as a potentially existential threat to the EU. The extent of the securitization of the migration crisis is evident from the fact that Czech and other central European politicians and political commentators were ready to pursue quite extreme back-up plans to the migration crisis like raising a hard “alternative Schengen border” along the Greek-Macedonian and Greek-Bulgarian border.

In this context, it is understandable that the main policy area of EU-Turkey relations discussed in the Czech Republic is migration and security. The EU-Turkey statement on migration of 18 March 2016 that has become known as the refugee deal sparked an intense debate about the political and strategic aspects of EU–Turkey relations. However, these discussions focused solely on the state of Turkey's democracy and on its role in the migration crisis and the war in Syria. The conflicts in Ukraine and North Africa (Libya) did not change the Czech perceptions of Turkey since Turkey is not perceived as a relevant player in these regions.

3.2. Weakening prospects for economic cooperation, reluctance to cooperate in the military sphere

Currently, preferences for cooperation focus on security issues such as the fight against terrorism (even though the Czech Republic and Turkey do not always agree on who is a terrorist) and migration (keeping the March 2016 agreement between the EU and Turkey alive). Economic cooperation is and will be an important topic of bilateral relations. However, the failing Czech investment project of the Turkish power plant Yunus Emre (for which the Czech Republic provided generous state guarantees), the decline of the Turkish lira, the purges in Turkish state institutions and the deteriorating security situation dampened the enthusiasm for doing business in Turkey.

While Czech politicians often indulge in hawkish rhetoric regarding the need to fight terrorist groups like ISIS, they do not expect substantive military cooperation between the Czech Republic

and Turkey in the fight against terrorism. The Czech general public remains sceptical towards military interventions in the Middle East. The track record shows that the Czech Republic prefers indirect involvement in the fight against terrorism, e.g. supplying light arms to Peshmerga in Iraq or selling fighter jets to the Iraqi government. The Czech Republic will also continue to support states hosting refugees (especially Turkey and Jordan).

3.3. Turkey: regional, not global actor

The Czech debate on EU-Turkey relations is primarily affected by the local and regional developments in the European Union and in the Middle East, rather than global developments. With regard to the European context, a connection can be observed between Czech Eurosceptic discourses, the fear of Islam in the wake of the migration crisis and the debate about EU-Turkey relations.

As already mentioned, the war in Syria and the migration crisis highlighted the geostrategic relevance of Turkey for the European Union. Yet, the acknowledgement of Turkey's importance did not lead to a more positive attitude towards Turkey and in fact the opposition to the prospective Turkish membership in the EU has increased.

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