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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Lithuania

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. Turkish EU membership – no topic before Lithuania joined the EU

Before evaluating Lithuania's position on EU-Turkey relations historically, it is important to note two historical facts. Firstly, Lithuania accessed the EU in 2004. There was little debate on Turkey's EU membership before Lithuania's accession for all the attention was paid to Lithuania's fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria and other integration issues. Secondly, Turkey was already a NATO member when Lithuania accessed the Alliance in 2004. Therefore, Lithuania considered Turkey as a strong partner in the security and defence area.

1.2. Building mutual partnership

When we look at the public attitudes towards EU-Turkey relations after 2004, more positive than negative discourse is evident. Firstly, this could be explained by the fact that Turkey has supported Lithuania's NATO membership and politicians have underlined a strategic partnership between the two countries. Thus, the security narrative played an important role and the Lithuanian government has also acknowledged Turkey's geo-strategical position with regard to the whole continent. Secondly, economic relations between the EU and Turkey and the value of an already implemented free trade regime was acknowledged. Thirdly, via diplomatic channels a Turkish message has been transferred right after 2004: it is important for Turkey to be supported by Lithuania and all the attempts of support for the Turkish-EU dialogue are highly valued by the Turkish people. However, the key issue to raise doubts on Turkey's membership in Lithuanian media and public debates was identity (more particularly, the European identity). It was questioned whether Turkey is European and whether the cultural, religious and social structures of those two could be comparable and coherent at all.

1.3. Less attention for EU-Turkey relations in the last years

In the recent years, however, mutual dialogue between Lithuania and Turkey has lost its previous *pace*, and less attention was paid to EU-Turkey relations. Although there was only minor attention to the Turkey-EU relations in public narratives, the statements related to threat for human rights, violation of the rule of law and other severe governmental policies dominated. What is more, current Lithuania's foreign policy as regards EU enlargement is mostly focused on the Eastern Partnership region, particularly on Ukraine's aim for EU integration, and little attention is paid to other regions. In terms of EU-Turkey relations, the main current concerns for Lithuanian officials are EU expansion and disagreements between member states towards Turkey's perspectives, management of the migration crisis and security issues mostly related with NATO sustainability and Russia-Turkey relations.

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.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Maintaining dialogue with candidate Turkey

The discussion about future relations between the EU and Turkey in the Lithuanian governmental structures is mostly led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius. He was the first minister of foreign affairs from all the NATO and EU countries visiting Turkey after the failed coup d'état in July 2016. His main point is that both sides should continue a mutual dialogue. Turkey is defined as an important partner in geopolitical and security terms, which has an official status of candidate member to the EU and helps significantly to deal with refugee crisis. The position of Linas Linkevičius reflects the official position of Lithuania – negotiations on Turkey's membership should be continued taking into consideration Turkey's progress and reforms. Such positive position towards Turkey's integration could be considered as an endeavour to keep the question of enlargement on the table, which is relevant not only for Turkey but also for Eastern Partnership countries advocated by Lithuania.

As it is evident in Lithuanian public discourses, when tension between the EU, separate member states and Turkey is growing, the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs seems to be a mediator between Turkey and sceptical EU member states or seeker of constructive debate between all related parts – Lithuania's position could be considered as counterbalancing strict criticism from other EU member states.

At the parliamentary level, the discussions on EU-Turkey relations are based on three main areas: migration policy, the EU enlargement policy and security policy. The former one will be shortly presented in this section of the report while the latter two are presented in the final part. The three following parliamentary committees, namely the Committee on European Affairs, the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on National Security and Defence occasionally engage in discussions on these three issues while analyzing the key documents issued by the European Commission or mandating Lithuania's governmental positions before the EU Council meetings. In one of the recently issued opinions, the Committee on Foreign Affairs underlined two aspects on future relations with Turkey. First, the country is a strategic partner, the dialogue of the future membership has to continue and by the same token Turkey has to ensure the principles of rule of law and human rights. Secondly, Members of the Committee on European Affairs from different political parties tend to underline the supportive role Turkey played during Lithuania's accession to NATO. Former Prime Minister, former Minister of Defence and current chair of the Committee on European Affairs, Gediminas Kirkilas, emphasizes Turkey's support during Lithuania's path towards NATO. On the other hand, in his narrative the need to fulfill human rights and rule of law principles is strongly emphasized.

It is difficult to generalize about any differences according to ideological orientations and political parties, because in general there are not so many actors who engage in discussion about EU-Turkey relations. However, some tendencies might be noticeable. It seems that conservative politicians from Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats Party are more sceptical than the previously mentioned Minister of Foreign Affairs who represents the Social Democratic Party. For example, Lithuanian Member of European Parliament Laima Liucija Andrikiene from Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats Party said that enlargement negotiations with Turkey should be frozen as long as fundamental principles of democracy are violated. Member of Parliament Laurynas Kasciunas who is also a member of Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats Party also claimed that Turkey’s membership in the EU is a “total illusion”, although this question remains relevant because of the refugee crisis. Their attitude towards this issue is mostly based on cultural differences and the current political situation in Turkey. There are not any other examples which could present perspectives from different elites or public opinion about EU-Turkey relations. Only a few political experts have also expressed their opinion about the difficult situation and the lack of trust between Turkey and the EU which mean possible struggles in future agreements.

2.2. Turkey as strategic partner

All in all, although EU-Turkey relations are not widely discussed between different elites or political groups, a clearly expressed message, especially by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, is that Lithuania supports constructive dialogue between the EU and Turkey. Furthermore, the idea of membership should not be denied and existing member states should evaluate Turkey’s role in dealing with common issues.

Terms such as “privileged partnership” or “strategic partnership” are occasionally mentioned. For example, former Vice-minister of Foreign Affairs and now Minister of Defence Raimundas Karoblis once said that having in mind the importance of Turkey as a strategic partner the EU is concerned to maintain dialogue with Turkey. The Minister of Foreign Affairs once also mentioned Turkey as a “strategic country”. These rather rare phrases show that Lithuanian officials consider Turkey as a very important actor when it comes to EU and NATO issues and understand its role dealing with them. Security, a threat of terrorism and illegal migration are taken as the main pillars why strategic relation should be developed further.

2.3. EU-Turkey deal and failed coup d'état: key issues at the moment

As already stated, EU-Turkey relations are not widely discussed in public or official discourse. However, growing tension between the two sides raises the question of Lithuania’s position. In 2015 and 2016, EU-Turkey negotiations on how to deal with the refugee crisis and an unsuccessful coup d'état in Turkey provoked more attention towards EU-Turkey relations and problems. Although there are not many local politicians, journalists or members of academia who analyze these relations and express their opinion, various news agencies present the

ongoing situation and the most important issues, such as European Parliament resolution to freeze enlargement negotiations between Turkey and EU. One can claim current events and processes in the EU and its neighbourhood region attract more attention from the media and more information is provided to the wider society.

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

3.1. Focus on Eastern Partnership countries and Russia

Although Lithuania is following the situation in both the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood regions, the key focus remains on the Eastern Partnership countries, especially on Ukraine's struggle in its European way. Support for democracy and Europeanization in the region is one of the key lines in Lithuanian foreign policy. With regard to this, Lithuania is highly concerned on Russia's role in both the Eastern Partnership region and the Syrian crisis. Although the Syrian crisis gains comparatively a lot of attention in the media, there is a lack of a detailed in-depth analysis.

One could notice that Lithuanian media as well as politicians were closely following the development of Russia-Turkey relations in the context of the Syrian crisis. Many doubts are raised on the key motives of Russian involvement and these issues are discussed at the governmental level as well as in the media. As regards the EU itself, its rather weak position and inability to act in the Syrian conflict, especially in the recent Aleppo crisis, is claimed. This counts also for other international organizations.

3.2. Migration crisis

As regards a more detailed evaluation of EU-Turkey relations on the global scene, the migration crisis is the main focus. As already mentioned in the 2nd part of this report, migration and security issues are the most salient in the context of the EU-Turkey relations. In the parliamentary debate on the migration crisis and asylum issues, the members of the Parliament generally underline the need for the EU's strategic partnership with Turkey. Some doubts are expressed when Turkey does not fulfill the set of conditions for mutual cooperation or the news on abolition of human rights appear. The Russian factor is also considered and the relations between Erdogan and Putin are followed in a detail. As already stated before, questions on Turkey have been more common in the media or governmental narratives since the migration crises started.

All in all, Turkey's role is valued in the context of the migration crisis and security insurance in the region. When it comes to the negotiations on accession, questions of human rights and rule of law downplay the strategic partnership.

Links & Further Readings:

- “EP plenarinė sesija: Laima Andrikienė apie ES-Turkijos santykius” [EP plenary session: Laima Andrikiene about EU-Turkey relations]. *Laimaandrikiene.lt*, 2016, http://www.laimaandrikiene.lt/index.php?id=67&L=%271&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=3502&cHash=2ad3d94b23c7e03500beebdc1a64264c
- “Pabrėžė nemažėjančią Rytų partnerystės programos svarbą” [Stressed undiminishing importance of Eastern Partnership]. *Lzinios.lt*, 2016, <http://lzinios.lt/lzinios/Lietuva/pabreze-nemazejancia-rytu-partnerystes-programos-svarba/228798>
- “URM: ES turi išlaikyti konstruktyvų dialogą su Turkija” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs: EU has to maintain constructive dialogue with Turkey]. *Lzinios.lt*, 2016, <http://lzinios.lt/lzinios/Lietuva/urm-es-turi-islaikyti-konstruktyvu-dialoga-su-turkija/233345>
- Andrulevičiūtė V. (2016), *Lrt.lt*, “Turkija ir ES: ar susikerta keliai?” [Turkey and EU: do roads cross?]. *Delfi.lt*, <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/world/turkija-ir-es-ar-susikerta-keliai.d?id=72087724>
- Andrulevičiūtė, V. (2016), “L. Linkevičius: atstūmę Turkiją pasielgtume neprotingai” [L. Linkevičius: pushing Turkey away we would act irrationally], *Lrt.lt*, <http://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/3/155762/l.-linkevicius-atstume-turkija-pasielgtume-neprotingai>
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- BNS (2016), “Linas Linkevičius pirmadienį vyks į Turkiją” [Linas Linkevičius is going to visit Turkey on Monday]. *15min.lt*, <http://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/linas-linkevicius-pirmadieni-vyks-i-turkija-56-671621>
- ELTA (2016), “L. Linkevičius: džiaugiamės Turkijos visuomenės sutelktumu ginant savo demokratiją” [L. Linkevičius: we are glad about solidarity of Turkish society to defend their democracy]. *Delfi.lt*, <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/l-linkevicius-dziaugiames-turkijos-visuomenes-sutelktumu-ginant-savo-demokratija.d?id=72110578>