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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Romania

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. Long-term support for Turkey's EU accession

Romania's official position on EU-Turkey relations – and the generally positive stance towards Turkish EU-membership – has remained largely unchanged during the recent past, mostly due to the dynamism of bilateral relations, but also the country's commitment to pursue an EU open-door policy. However, in recent years, public opinion in Romania has grown more critical towards Turkey.

The roots of diplomatic relations between Romania and Turkey go back to the 19th century, but it was after the collapse of the Communist regime in Romania that bilateral relations improved particularly and they kept a positive rhythm since then. Given the very good cooperation and intensive dialogue, the countries signed the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership during the visit of Romania's President in Turkey in 2011.

Even before its official accession to the EU on 1 January 2007, Romania openly and strongly supported Turkey's membership and the opening of new chapters of negotiations. This support came as a natural consequence of an excellent track record of collaboration between the two countries on multiple levels (including mutual interests and challenges in the Black Sea region). It is also important to underline that Turkey was also one of the main supporters of Romania in its accession to NATO (which took place in 2004).

After joining the EU, the supportive position towards Turkey's membership within the government as well as the opposition was even strengthened. Traian Băsescu, former President of Romania (until 2014) and Klaus Iohannis, the current President, expressed their strong support towards Turkey's EU membership, qualifying the strategic partnership between the two countries as excellent.

When it comes to the public opinion's position regarding Turkey's EU accession, there was no major difference compared to the official position until most recently. According to the Eurobarometer from 2008, Romania even recorded the highest percentage (among the EU member states) of citizens who supported Turkey's membership – 64 percent. Moreover, according to the Transatlantic Trends survey conducted in 2009 only the Romanians, namely 51 percent of them, thought that the Turks shared Western values, whereas on the other hand barely a third of Turkish people (34%) believed they shared common values with the West.

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.

1.2. Is Turkey still “one of us”? The narratives behind Romania’s support for Turkey’s accession

With a rare and wide consensus support coming both from the political elites but also the population as a whole, Romania became one of the most favourable nations towards Turkey’s accession. However, this has been considered as a given and no substantive debate took place in Romania on this key aspect.

What is the narrative behind Romania’s consistent support for Turkish membership? From an identity perspective, Turkey was not described as “the other” but rather as “one of us”. A mix of value-based and interest-based factors was related to this: A well-integrated Turkish community in Romania, the Turkish entrepreneurs which were part of an early wave of entrepreneurs in post-communist Romania, the growing commercial contacts in the 1990s and, later, the tourism industry, created a close relationship between the populations of the two countries.

Officials of both countries built upon this privileged report, but added another dimension: an interest-based security narrative focusing on the aim of regional stability in the Black Sea region. This dimension has become particularly critical following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. More recently, during the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, Turkey pledged to send troops and military equipment to the Alliance’s effectives in Romania and to increase cooperation with NATO’s deployments in the East.

From an economic perspective, Turkey remains vital for Romania’s interests in the Black Sea region and its commercial ties. In the recent years, however, there has been a clear shift from an identity-based debate – in the sense of shared values and identities – to a debate based on pragmatic interests regarding regional security and Turkey’s strategic role in this respect.

A second important change is that a value-based debate covering human rights issues in Turkey emerged. For the time being, the two countries have maintained a privileged relationship, but the latest events in Turkey have also impacted the debate in Romania. At the official level, Romania remains a strong supporter of Turkey’s accession, based on pragmatic reasons. However, criticism related to democracy and human rights became more prominent. Romania has firmly condemned the coup d’état, but also underlines the need to respect democracy and human rights. In this respect, Romania follows the official position of Brussels.

It is also important to underline that recently a growing number of civil society leaders, as well as mass media outlets in Romania condemned Turkey’s breach of democratic principles and the deterioration of human rights in the country. The general support for Turkey seems to be fading rapidly in the last years.

1.3. Energy and security – key to EU-Turkey relations

The most intense debate in Romania regarding the different policy areas surely relates to the security dynamics implied by Turkey’s possible EU membership. Geopolitically speaking, Turkey has a unique position, which raises two complex issues. On the one hand, if Turkey became a

member of the EU, EU's borders would move closer to the Middle East, a region characterized by growing conflicts and wars. This possibility would imply that the EU would be sitting on a powder keg, having no other option but to get involved in the ongoing and often unpredictable disputes. For instance, the recent refugee crisis – to a large degree determined by the conflicts in the neighborhood – caused many debates among the member states on how to handle it. On the other hand, there is the fact that Turkey, as an EU member, would somehow counteract the Russian influence in the Black Sea Region.

Going hand in hand with countering the Russian influence in the region is the energy security issue – another policy area that pertains to EU-Turkey relations. Debates in Romania revolve around the necessity to reduce the dependence on Russian gas. For instance, the Southern Gas Corridor, an initiative meant to reduce EU's dependence on Russia, is believed to be a crucial project. Within this complex equation, Turkey is a key player for EU's energy security. From this perspective, if Turkey becomes an EU member, it would be a great asset because it would involve more cooperation, stronger ties and the certainty that the Turkish energy market would be integrated in the EU.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Key concerns on the Ankara–Bucharest–Brussels triangle

According to prevalent ideological and political orientations, Romania strongly supports Turkey's accession to the EU and will continue to do so, given that Turkey “will respect democratic values, human rights and fundamental freedoms” – as president Iohannis cautiously declared after the failed coup d'état in Turkey of July 2016. His statement came in a context where the stabilization of the internal situation in Turkey was vital for the entire EU and also NATO. This position seems to have been adopted by all political parties in Romania as there is a wide consensus on the necessity of having strong ties with Turkey. Certainly, if the European Commission was to officially condemn or suspend negotiations with Turkey for human right abuses (in case of a possible reinstatement of the death penalty), Romania would also roughen its position, no matter how “privileged” the relationship between the two countries is.

Whereas the government remained silent and preferred not to officially condemn the massive arrests and human rights abuse, there were some signals contrary to the official position beyond the political elites and also among former high ranking officials. For instance, over fifteen civil society organizations signed an open letter to the President of Romania, the Prime Minister and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, asking to adopt a firm stance regarding the human rights violation in Turkey. Also, well-known Romanian analysts condemned the fact that Romania has not denounced “the attack on the rule of law” that is happening in Turkey and defined Romania's attitude in its relations with Turkey as “subservient”.

Shortly after the coup attempt, both Romanian and Turkish citizens protested in front of the Turkish Embassy against the extreme measures taken by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to punish those considered responsible for the putsch. Another example are the reactions of Cristian Diaconescu, former Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as Mircea Aron, Head of the Superior Council of Magistracy, who expressed their deep concerns with regard to the situation of Turkish prosecutors and judges.

What is more striking is how the public perceives the current *status quo* in Turkey. Romania is now facing the largest protests in history in support for rule of law and anti-corruption, with hundreds of thousands of protesters shouting, among other slogans, “Against the Erdoganization of Romania”. They also have banners against “Erdogan of Romania”, referring with this to Liviu Dragnea, the leader of the Social and Democrats.

Thus, regarding the future EU-Turkey relations, the Romanian debate is divided between two dimensions: the political, official one, that implies a strong support for Turkey’s accession and on the other hand the more critical voices among the civil society and citizens. These two dimensions used to converge until recently, but now the Romanian civil society reacted in a rather surprisingly critical manner to the domestic developments in Turkey by openly condemning the violation of the rule of law. Hence, support for Turkey’s accession is fading rapidly.

2.2. Bucharest maintains its course

The slow pace in the negotiations between EU and Turkey created an “open door” for discussing other forms of keeping Turkey close to the EU – the so-called “privileged partnership” or “strategic partnership”. Highly debated in Western Europe, especially France or Germany, this concept was rarely discussed in Romania, at least regarding the framework of relations between the EU and Turkey.

However, at the bilateral level, Romania did take up the concept, signing in December 2011 a “strategic partnership” with Turkey, which identifies key cooperation areas such as security, energy and trade. However, going further and debating this concept as part of a wider EU-Turkey relationship is low on Bucharest’s agenda for the time being, as Romania – at least at official level – remains a strong supporter of Turkey’s integration in the EU. In April 2015 and March 2016, during official state visits, Bucharest reiterated its support for Turkey’s full accession to the EU. No discussion emphasized a differentiated integration.

There are several reasons for such a perspective. Turkey is Romania’s main trade partner outside of the European Union, a possible European security policy in the Black Sea is impossible without Turkey’s full support and Romania pushed in the last years for a trilateral cooperation with Turkey and Poland, especially on strategic and security themes. Thus, keeping Turkey close to the EU is essential from both an economic and security perspective.

2.3. First cracks appear in Romanians' official views on Turkey

Although there are no major shifts for the time being in Romania's official position following the recent events in Turkey and especially the post-coup crackdown, first cracks seem to appear. Two recent events that affected the debate on EU-Turkey relations in Romania could be underlined: the state-level agreement between Romania and Turkey to build a mosque in Bucharest, and secondly the failed coup d'état in Turkey and the events that followed.

Turkey's intention to finance a large mosque in Bucharest, which was supposed to include also a center for Islamic studies, triggered a wave of protests in Romania. It was probably the first time that such an identity and religion-related issue dominated the debate, in the sense of Turkey being viewed as "the other", as a large non-Christian country. The agreement, which was unclear for most of the population due to faulty communication by the government (no previous debate on this agreement was held, nor any communication on the matter took place), split not only the political sphere, but also the population. Xenophobic rhetoric dominated the debate.

It was also this topic that brought Turkey again into the spotlight and consequently the Erdoğan regime's crackdown on the opposition, human rights violations or its declarations supporting the Islamic values occupied the first pages of news agencies and TV stations. On the other hand, Romanian politicians came under fire for the agreement with Turkey. Numerous voices accused them of a "vassal policy", remembering the times when Romania was merely a vassal state to the Ottoman Empire.

Secondly, it was the coup d'état and especially the crackdown that followed which made headlines in Romanian media. Although Romanian officials promptly condemned the coup, they have also stressed the importance of Turkey's respect for democratic values. Voices in Romania's civil society vocally condemned the crackdown in Turkey, the diminishing respect for democratic values and increasing violations of human rights. In recent years, the Romanian media and civil society are paying more attention to what is happening in Turkey and the headlines are, most of the times, negative.

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

3.1. The emergence of critical views on Turkey's role in the EU

What needs to be underlined, again, is that Romania remains a supporter of Turkish integration into the EU at the official level. However, two events in the neighborhood managed at some degree to change Romania's views on Turkey's role in the EU. Firstly, the Syrian conflict and the resulting flux of refugees. In this context, Turkey was widely criticized for its role and for its bellicose rhetoric against the EU. In light of Erdoğan's anti-Western rhetoric and of the refugee situation, a fertile ground for anti-Turkey rhetoric, or rather anti-Erdoğan rhetoric, was created, which affected the views of Romanians of Turkey's role in the EU negatively.

On the other hand, Russia's military intervention in Ukraine reminded Romania that Turkey is essential for the security in the Black Sea region. Following the annexation of Crimea, it became more and more clear that a European policy in the Black sea region is impossible without the full support of Turkey. Therefore, the recent "friendly" relationship between Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is not seen with good eyes from Bucharest.

3.2. Cooperation in the Black Sea region

There are some key areas of cooperation between Turkey on one side, and Romania and the European Union on the other regarding their neighborhood. Some of them are also mentioned in the action plan of the Strategic Partnership between Romania and Turkey (see above).

Economic cooperation in the wider Black Sea region is a key aspect, as the EU is Turkey's main import and export partner, while Turkey ranks 7th on the EU's import and 5th in export markets. Romania has a similar relationship with Turkey, since Ankara is Romania's top trade partner besides the EU countries. Energy and energy security rank high on the agenda of the trade relationship between the EU and Turkey, as the diversification of energy supply routes and sources is crucial for the EU's energy security. There have been discussions on integrating the Turkish energy market into the EU, through pipeline interconnectors and LNG terminals. However, with the Southern Gas Corridor, which will be able to meet up to 20 percent of EU's gas needs, Turkey will also become a key transit country for gas routes, thereby enhancing its importance.

Turkey's strategic location is crucial not only for energy security and economic cooperation, but also has an important role for the stability of the Black Sea region. Generally, Romania pledges for "more" Europe in the Black Sea region and considers this region as one of the key concerns on the EU's agenda for external and security policy.

3.3. A slight change of the debate

The recent global developments have not changed the political/institutional debate on EU-Turkey relations – Romania sticks to its support towards Turkey's accession. One example is President Klaus Iohannis' statement regarding the refugee crisis: before his participation at the European Council, on 15 December 2016, he declared that he will "insist on the necessity of continuing the implementation of EU-Turkey Agreement on migration and will sustain dialogue and communication with the Turkish authorities as an essential element in view of Turkey being a key partner of EU, as well as an important partner within NATO".

However, several analysts expressed their concern that after the failed coup Turkey would strengthen its relations with Russia and isolate itself from the EU and NATO. The overall hope is that Turkey will maintain its path towards the EU and its membership in NATO after the internal situation has stabilized and that Turkey will reconsider its long-term interests. However, alternative scenarios emerged, including having only an economical or military cooperation with Turkey in the future.

Links & Further Readings:

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- Interview with Paul Ivan, <http://www.digi24.ro/opinii/interviu-un-dosar-care-va-spori-tensiunile-intre-ue-si-doua-tari-rebele-ungaria-si-turcia-556024>
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- Joint press statement, *Turkey - EU High Level Energy Dialogue Meeting*, January 2016, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/documents/ing%20son.pdf>

- Mircea Aron reaction to the massive arrests in Turkey, <http://www.evz.ro/reactia-presedinteleui-consiliului-superior-al-magistraturii-despre-situatia-judecatorilor-si-procurorilor-din-turcia.html>
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