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THE FUTURE OF EU-TURKEY RELATIONS:
MAPPING DYNAMICS AND TESTING SCENARIOS

Game (Not) Over: Mapping Dynamics and Testing Scenarios in EU–Turkey Relations in a Global Perspective

1. Introduction

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), in collaboration with the Centre for Economic and Policy Studies (EDAM), hosted a high-level expert workshop in **Bodrum, Turkey**, on **15 October 2018**. Titled **‘Game (Not) Over: Mapping Dynamics and Testing Scenarios in EU–Turkey Relations in a Global Perspective’**. The workshop brought together a select group of 35–40 experts from think tanks, academia and government for a strategic dialogue on the future of the European Union (EU)’s relations with Turkey in a changing political environment.

The workshop was held under the auspices of the EU-funded FEUTURE project. FEUTURE is a consortium of 15 universities, think tanks and research institutes from across the EU, Turkey and Turkey’s neighbourhood, coordinated by the IAI and the University of Cologne. The event aimed to reflect on the project’s main research results and to map out EU–Turkey dynamics in terms of underlying narratives and thematic causal factors – i.e. drivers – for the purpose of substantiating a most-likely future scenario or scenarios and assessing its/their implications as well as drawing policy recommendations for both parties.

To accomplish this, FEUTURE researchers analysed the relevant drivers affecting EU–Turkey ties within six thematic dimensions (politics, security, economy, energy, migration and identity) and across four levels of analysis (EU, Turkey, neighbourhood and global). As such, the project produced six work packages, geared towards conceptualizing a likely scenario for EU–Turkey relations in each dimension. The findings of these individual packages culminated in a final FEUTURE synthesis paper, which lays out an overall scenario for EU–Turkey relations – **‘The Future of EU–Turkey Relations: A Creative Association Framework For Conflictual Cooperation’**, authored by **Beken Saatçioğlu, Nathalie Tocci, Sinan Ekim and Funda Tekin** – which was consequently introduced and discussed at the FEUTURE high-level experts’ workshop.

2. Different scenarios, different FEUTUREs: The final synthesis paper

The first panel of the workshop introduced the findings of the FEUTURE project and the conclusions of the final synthesis paper. As things stand, the paper is under revision and is therefore not yet available online. However, below is a quick summary of its key takeaways.



Guided by the assumption that politics, acting in conjunction with identity, plays a pivotal role in defining the EU–Turkey relationship, the paper:

- 1) unpacks the drivers within the six thematic dimensions, focusing on how and in what ways they produce conflict and/or generate cooperation;
- 2) discusses how the EU follows ‘differentiated integration’ with a number of third countries, and with Turkey in particular; and
- 3) develops an institutional design for the future relationship that, in the light of the fact that Turkey’s EU accession process has now become dormant, accepts conflict as an endemic feature of the dynamic but tries to mitigate it by deepening areas of cooperation.

The authors conclude that as a result of geopolitical proximity as well as numerous, multifarious interactions over several centuries, the EU–Turkey relationship has become too complex and dynamic to be captured by any single model of differentiated integration so far initiated between the Union and a third country. The paper thus suggests a new institutional framework, termed ‘creative association’, that it recommends being implemented in parallel with the accession process. This proposed association is centred around an upgraded EU–Turkey Customs Union (CU) agreement, which – the authors argue – will deepen economic as well as functional cooperation while fostering convergent trends within a rules-based framework.

Following the paper’s introduction, the panel continued with a moderated discussion on how to further improve and strengthen the document.

The new model, participants argued, should also present a way out of the current paradigm, which de facto identifies the EU as the rule maker and expects Turkey to be the rule taker. Turkey is larger and more influential than many other third countries with which the Union enjoys a model of differentiated integration – such as Norway or Morocco – and will therefore demand a more hands-on role in its future relationship with the EU. Consequently, it is important to make sure that the new framework is ultimately set up in a way that grants it a say in the decision-making process.

Some described the text as somewhat too ‘Turkey-centric’, lacking in its discussion of the political and cultural context in Europe that has complicated and frustrated the accession process. Accordingly, they asked its authors to unpack how the increasing resentment towards multiculturalism in Europe has made it virtually impossible for European politicians to move forward on membership negotiations. There is, furthermore, a united front of opposition to Turkey in the European Parliament, bringing together the far-right and social democrats. This means that as long as unanimity is required in EU decision-making, a proposal to upgrade the customs union will never pass through the Union’s institutions. These are key developments on the European side that have drained away any willingness to forge ahead, and they should be included in the revised synthesis paper.



Connected to this, participants pointed out that the paper would also benefit from some projections on the state of the EU after the European elections in 2019. Although Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has a mandate until 2023, certain leadership changes in member states as well as at the EU level could alter the state of play between the Union and Turkey, and may even reconstruct the political fabric into a pattern more palatable to enlargement – or, alternatively, could have the complete opposite effect. Participants also remarked that a number of fundamental issues – which have evolved into major irritants in the past – had been left out of the analysis. To begin with, the so-called ‘Cyprus question’ merits detailed discussion, since Cyprus has been effectively blocking the opening of several chapters in accession talks. Granted, the proposed institutional framework may eventually emerge as an alternative to the accession process, and thus one may be tempted to conclude that Cyprus’s veto power would not necessarily have to carry much weight under this framework. Nonetheless, the dispute over the island’s division will continue to create problems for both sides. If the proposed model does not foresee a way out of this conundrum, then the authors were asked to clarify how and in what ways the new framework (i.e. the upgrading of the CU agreement) could be ‘immunised’ against a new Cyprus veto.

Furthermore, some panellists suggested that the proposed framework should address the issue of visa liberalization for Turkish nationals travelling to the Schengen Area. Acutely aware of how the mere mention of lifting visa requirements would set off alarm bells across Europe, participants advised that they could nonetheless be streamlined and simplified by, for instance, decreasing the number of forms that an applicant needs to fill out and submit as well as reducing the application costs. As a corollary to this, the institutional framework should also put forward actionable solutions on how to end ‘skilled migration’ out of Turkey, which now risks escalating into a Turkish ‘brain drain’.

Some also took issue with what could be identified as the paper’s core claim – that the new model is centred around the idea of upgrading the CU arrangement, ‘pending Turkey’s return to democratic rule’. They found the phrasing of this statement problematic, arguing that it implied a return to an unrealistic ‘square one’. This is because for the new model to work, it would have to better acknowledge and address Turkey’s seemingly irreversible slide into authoritarianism and the increasingly illiberal political culture brewing in Ankara.

Needless to say, much also depends on how the proposed model will be implemented on the ground. In this regard, it was suggested that the paper should clarify how the ‘construction’ phase of the new framework would play out, detailing how its pillars and governing mechanisms would be put in place. For instance, an important point to bear in mind, according to one participant, is the stage at which ‘political conditionality’ would be triggered against Turkey – i.e. before or after the start of CU upgrade negotiations. Since the EU does not ask that the official Copenhagen Criteria, the rules that define whether a country is eligible to join the Union, be followed by countries outside the accession framework, should the sides arrive at a mutual agreement to diverge from the accession process – or should one side decide to



break off its diplomatic commitment – Turkey may be under less pressure to follow the criteria in their entirety. Alternatively, the rule of law may acquire even greater salience in the coming years, which would raise the bar to full membership even higher.

3. How to move forward: Focus on policy recommendations

The second panel of the workshop discussed whether Turkey and the EU could successfully carry out an institutional re-engineering, which would ideally result in Turkey's deeper integration into European structures and decision-making processes.

Many were sceptical of whether the two parties could pull off such a 'grand bargain' that would eventually replace the accession process. Reflecting on the past 20 years, some remarked on how Turkey's inclusion in the European fold had originally been a project spearheaded and consistently championed by the US. As participants underlined, EU member states have, from the start, not necessarily been sincere about Turkey's prospective membership – even during the early years of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) Administration, when the country seemed to be moving along a promising pattern and pursued a pro-EU reform agenda centred around democratization. It is also telling that no EU–Turkey summits were held for several years – until the migration crisis erupted in 2015 and catapulted Turkey back on to the EU agenda.

As also discussed in the first session, compared with officials in Ankara, who tend to emphasize interests, the EU leans more towards speaking the language of values and norms. According to the Union, Turkey has fallen short of upholding the rule of law in many instances – which means that, at this point, harmony between Turkey's and the EU's institutions is 'a bit too much' to ask for. This is why some participants found value in channelling the discussion towards a slightly different question – and exploring whether there was any room for institutional, or even transactional, cooperation without moving forward on the CU negotiations and demanding that Turkey fix its democratic edifice.

Some panellists were concerned about the normative expectations that were being built into the Customs Union – which is essentially a free-trade agreement. An upgraded CU could channel the relationship back into a rules-based framework; nonetheless, thinking of a modernized CU as a non-transactional institutional arrangement is a step too far. And building on this point, some participants argued that presenting the economy as an area in which the rule of law applies distorts the reality.

Indeed, to President Erdoğan, international relations are about competition between 'big' powers. This understanding also shapes the way in which he views economic relations. In this sense, it would be expected that he would have a greater appetite for a free-trade agreement, which would still result in more investments without requiring a change of policy course in Ankara or stronger democratic institutions. Some participants argued that this was something that the EU could capitalize on, and explore investment-partnership agreements. Since the EU



is vulnerable business-wise, it ought to be interested in such an arrangement – and, politically speaking, this would be the key first step that would bring its member states back to the negotiating table.

Some asked whether the Turkish democratic opposition could ‘step up’ and, with the support of business communities and think tanks, continue demonstrating to Brussels that Turkey was more than Erdoğan. Others questioned the practical value of these efforts, putting forward the idea that political realities would make any meaningful change very difficult: Erdoğan now has a mandate until 2023, and unless early elections are called – which is now also fraught process without the president’s consent – he will not be facing any real pressure to change course.

4. FEUTURE in a global context

The third panel discussed the implications of Erdoğan’s renewed mandate after the June 2018 elections for Turkey’s foreign relations. Particular emphasis was placed on the current state of the country’s relationships with the US and Russia, as well as the prevailing security situation in its neighbourhood and how it affects Turkish foreign policy.

As stated at the beginning of the panel discussion, both Erdoğan and the US president, Donald Trump, view the external relations of their respective nations through a transactional lens, which allows for rule-of-law violations to fall by the wayside without much criticism. This was one of the reasons that Trump’s election was welcomed in Ankara. In fact, Erdoğan thought that the incoming president would reverse some of the policies adopted under the Obama Administration – among other measures, ending US military support for the (largely Kurdish) People’s Protection Units (YPG) in the fight against so-called Islamic State (IS) and even finally handing over into Turkish custody Fethullah Gülen, an Islamic cleric living in the US whom Ankara claims to have masterminded the failed coup attempt in July 2016.

Given Trump’s general behaviour, however, his administration did not deviate significantly from the policies of the Obama era. In fact, issues that were raised under Obama have evolved into major flashpoints under Trump, with Ankara complaining about Washington’s disregard for Turkey’s security interests and Washington, in return, questioning Ankara’s commitment to NATO. This relationship plummeted to a new low in recent months, when the return to the US of Andrew Brunson – an American pastor who had been imprisoned in Turkey for almost two years on spurious charges of terrorism – became the defining issue for the relationship. Brunson had been released at the time of the Bodrum workshop, which the panellists interpreted as a positive step forward. Yet, they agreed that a number of issues would continue to strain the US–Turkey relationship.

Turkey has been a ‘hard sell’ in the US Congress since the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010, after the killing by Israeli commandoes of ten Turkish activists on board the ship of that name,



which was delivering aid to Gaza – then (as now) under Israeli and Egyptian blockade. Many members of Congress are pro-Israel and support the Armenian cause (namely, identifying the mass killings of Armenians in 1915 as ‘genocide’). Cases of human-rights violations in Turkey – as well as the sight of pro-Kurdish protestors being attacked by Erdoğan’s bodyguards on a visit to Washington, DC, in May 2017 – have also weighted the scales against Turkey.

The panel discussion also focused on how Turkey’s deepening cooperation with and geopolitical orientation towards Russia had become a major irritant in its relations with the US. The fact that the Turkish public views Russia very positively was also alarming, participants remarked. Some pointed out that, at least at the outset, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, sympathized with Turkey’s security concerns, having called Erdoğan immediately after the coup attempt while Western leaders put off extending their sympathies. The discussion also highlighted how some US policies ignored Turkey’s security interests, and therefore chipped away at the alliance’s cohesion. For instance, the American strategy in Syria is not explicitly sensitive to the security challenge that the PKK – the Kurdistan Workers Party, which has been waging an insurgency against Turkey for several decades – poses to the Turkish state. Furthermore, the US sanctions imposed on Iran are also viewed by Ankara as careless, inconsiderate and even unnecessary, as the accompanying regime expects Turkey to turn its back on one of its main energy providers.

Echoing what has now become the mainstream sentiment on the Western side, a few participants identified Turkey’s purchase of S-400 air-defence missiles from Russia as a major problem that could practically result in the transfer of sensitive technology and intelligence to the latter country, and thereby negate NATO’s defence and security infrastructure. Others pushed back slightly against this view, claiming that this purchase did not have to be seen as a decisive pivot away from the West and could actually be explained in practical terms: Turkey desires access to modern technology at an affordable price; Russia is willing to provide both, whereas the US Congress has created difficulties for Turkey’s purchase of similar equipment from the United States. And it must be borne in mind that Putin most likely worries about the possibility of S-400 technology being compromised in a NATO country – which will limit the scope of Russia–Turkey security cooperation.

More importantly, Russia is a feeble substitute for the Western allies, and one that Turkey does not inherently trust. Granted, Putin and Erdoğan need to cooperate in Syria – but they are ultimately pursuing clashing interests there. Therefore, as some participants underlined, Turkey is likely to realistically re-evaluate before deepening its security relations with Russia in any meaningful way. And the US and the EU need Turkey’s cooperation in several theatres of conflict, including in counter-terrorism efforts and in managing the migration flows out of Syria – which would become substantially less manageable if the country were to leave NATO.



5. Conclusions: Moving forward

To conclude the workshop, FEUTURE's Coordinator Wolfgang Wessels offered his main take-aways from the discussions held throughout the scope of the project. One paradox he highlighted concerned the future of the accession process. Although the accession process is at a stand-still and unlikely to continue in the short-run, there might be reasonable arguments for keeping it open as a channel of communication. According to Wessels, however, this also presented a dilemma: opponents to Turkey's membership were likely to interpret the 'technically open' accession process as a sign that the EU's policymakers were interested in integrating Turkey into the Union, stoke public resentment, and thereby effectively block any moves towards reform. Wessels also cautioned both parties about the increasing number of their conflicting interests – which threatens to develop a dynamic of mutually reinforcing negative positions towards vis-à-vis one another difficult to reverse. Finally, he underlined how there was no 'magic formula' for overcoming the dilemma between the need for proactive cooperation and the sides' conflicting interests.

Based on these conclusions, the FEUTURE project will release a list of "10 main take-aways" towards the end of the project's life-cycle in March 2019. The next step is the revision of the final synthesis paper in the light of the above recommendations and suggestions. Although there are currently no meetings or workshops planned to discuss the revised version, it will be made available before March 2019.

