

*FEUTURE Voices***ADVISING ON THE F(E)UTURE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU-TURKEY RELATIONSHIP****SINAN EKIM
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At the H2020 project “The Future of EU-Turkey Relations: Mapping Dynamics and Testing Scenarios” (FEUTURE) ends, there seems to be this understanding that we have worn out any chance of or any willingness for a reset in the EU-Turkey relationship. As a result, every policy recommendation put forward on how to fix the relationship seems to be in the realm of speculation, without offering any actionable substance on how to move forward. Granted, there is an element of truth to this. But even if there is no willingness for a reset, this does not mean that there is no need to do so.

Certain elements that have dominated the discourse on both sides, and even animated the sides to pursue deeper integration in the first place, have not gone away: Europe and Turkey continue to be bound to each other through multiple dimensions, established as a result of geopolitical proximity and then further entrenched through numerous, multifarious interactions over several centuries. Simply put, this inter-connectedness is what makes the EU-Turkey relationship special, and it is what makes it difficult to let go - and this is not going to change. Of course, the reason why there is so much activity within these areas is often not because of volition, but convenience and obligation. It is certainly not an easy relationship - and definitely not one that is destined for a “happily ever after” - but there is so much at stake that trying to make it work is simpler and more to everyone’s benefit than agreeing on a way out.

Many will in fact agree that we have to move the relationship out of the strict confines of the accession process, especially now that the enlargement process is in slow motion. But if not through the accession process, there is still the need to operate within some sort of an institutionalized framework – which will allow the EU and Turkey to keep open multiple channels of communication across multiple levels of government, and intensify dialogue on key subjects, without having to massage the conversation into an action-plan on how to revive membership negotiations, but still foster a closer cooperation than any transactional arrangement would allow for.

In the final synthesis paper, FEUTURE puts forward a new framework for the relationship. Termed “Dynamic Association”, our framework is centered around the modernization of the Customs Union. As things stand, there are two major challenges that so far have obstructed the start of the negotiations, and therefore launching this project. The first one relates to Turkey’s democratic



deficit. Ankara will have to stop its slide into authoritarianism – and push through a series of reforms to rebuild its legal and democratic edifice – for the EU Council to be able to approve the start of the negotiations. It would nonetheless be useful if the EU clarified in more concrete terms the benchmarks to be fulfilled for this purpose; the political benchmarks for the start of the Customs Union talks will arguably need to be lighter and different than the conditions attached to the revitalization of the accession talks.

The second major hurdle for the opening of the Customs Union negotiations relates to the deep erosion of trust. The EU is worried that the Turkish leadership will instrumentalize the decision to initiate these negotiations. In other words, Ankara will use it for regaining the confidence of the international financial and investor community, but will fail over the longer term to agree to and implement the reforms necessary for the modernization of the Customs Union.

But quite possibly a different and more creative approach to the Customs Union negotiations could help to overcome this crisis of confidence. The idea would be to retain the principle that the whole package will enter into force once the negotiations are fully completed, but at the same time allow for a gradual, provisional and partial implementation of the different components of the Customs Union package.

Accordingly the different components of the Customs Union package would be negotiated sequentially. The negotiations for a new topic would only be initiated if the parties have come to an agreement over the previous topic. Once an agreement is reached, the mutual commitments under the concluded component of the deepened Customs Union would enter into force temporarily by way of an Association Council decision. The commitments would gain a permanent nature only if there is an agreement at the end of the negotiations over the full package.

Under this framework, of key importance will be the sequencing of the topics. The principle should be that each side would sequentially and alternately introduce a topic of priority. Thus for instance the EU may want to start the whole negotiations with the dispute settlement regime. The negotiations would not move to a new topic until an agreement is reached on dispute settlement. The agreement would enter into force by way of an Association Council decision without waiting for an agreement to emerge on other topics. Then Turkey may want to negotiate its priority theme of facilitating the conclusion of new free trade agreements with third countries.

A key contribution of this new approach would be the revitalization of the anchoring role of the Customs Union. As opposed to waiting for three to four years until the full package has been negotiated, the principle of gradual and sequential implementation of the commitments would keep the Customs Union as a topical issue with concrete deliverables that can be used to retain the interest of the public opinion. This is even more critical for Turkey, where the public has abandoned any realistic expectations from this relationship and therefore has lost interest in a future within the EU.

Instead of the traditional “big bang” approach which delivers the full package at the end of the negotiations, this approach would create a much larger pool of mini deliverables. This would allow Turkish policy makers to communicate with their public throughout the negotiations and at each critical step when a new agreement is reached and is provisionally implemented. This would



constitute the grounds for a more pro-engagement dynamic to emerge in Turkey and possibly in the EU as well.

When it comes to trade and investment, the EU has leverage over Turkey. The Turkish economy needs to keep attracting trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) in order to sustain a healthy growth. So far, one of Erdoğan's winning narratives has been that he managed to push through a train of reforms that transformed Turkey into what became known as an economic success-story, and the Turkish middle-classes have experienced a significant improvement to their welfare standards. The domestic environment following the failed coup attempt, as well as Erdoğan's accusatory stance against the West mainly throughout the election seasons in Turkey and several European countries, have curtailed trade relations and has been a drag on FDI inflows. The truth of the matter is Turkish prosperity still depends on a sustained engagement of the Union – a reality that will work to the EU's advantage when insisting on a rules-based approach to deepening economic ties, and require political reforms that would harmonize Turkey's rules and institutions, both political and economic, and align its regulatory standards, with those of the EU.

Furthermore, the EU should finally fulfil the promise of visa liberalization, when Turkey completes the 72 benchmarks, laid out in the visa liberalization roadmap. This would carry import in two ways. First, it would inject a much-needed dose of sincerity into the EU's arguments on conditionality. If Turkey manages to successfully fulfil the criteria and the EU holds up its end of the bargain, this could effectively do away with any suspicions on the Turkish side regarding Europe's integrity and double-standards. Second, visa liberalization – by easing Turkish nationals' travel into the EU – would help forge closer people-to-people contacts, and even expand economic activity by facilitating easier interactions among businesspeople and entrepreneurs.

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In line with the incremental approach our framework proposes vis-à-vis the deepening of the Customs Union, the EU could also consider restructuring its visa regime with Turkey even before the complete removal of visa requirements, as Turkey fulfils the conditions attached. This could include reducing the amount of paperwork an applicant needs to fill as a part of the visa application process, decreasing the cost of the visa and even shortening the visa processing times. These steps would go a long way in restoring a sense of confidence to the relations, and could even encourage the Turkish side to complete the remaining conditions more quickly, trusting that the EU will respect the terms of the agreement at the end.

It must be kept in mind, however, that Turkey-EU relations are more than politics and economy. This means that deliberations cannot be confined to only high-level dialogues at the very top, between officials responsible for political and economic portfolios. There is need for the opening of various channels of communication that will trigger closer interaction between the governments at various levels and portfolios, engaging actors and institutions that are invested in the process in different ways.

This improvement to bilateral contacts should include a greater and more active engagement of Turkey's civil society. Measures that were introduced in the aftermath of the failed coup-attempt, the state of emergency that remained in effect for almost two years, and the new constitution that entered into force after the most recent parliamentary elections in Turkey have curtailed civil society's capacity to evolve, but it still remains impressively resilient. Both sides should encourage



people-to-people ties, continue backing international, European and regional mechanism with established programs in Turkey and expand cultural and educational programs that bring Turkish nationals – including students, activists, businesspeople and entrepreneurs – outside the country and in closer contact with their European counterparts.

This type of more frequent contact on a broader spectrum could also be supplemented by a more innovative communication strategy, and help remedy the damage done by historical depictions, cultural stereotypes and political scapegoating. Instead of invoking negative rhetoric and fuelling stereotypes, the EU leaders should stress that the Union is comfortable with its diversity, and foremost and above all, it remains a community of shared values, to which Turkey could seek membership if it can prove that it does indeed respect these values and norms. This will, however, present a challenge – and even a greater one if populist parties secure a decisive victory in the EU elections in May 2019.

Despite the often-incendiary rhetoric and threats that it may be on verge of doing so, Turkey has still not broken away from any Western institutions. The EU could use this as leverage, and insist that Turkey should respect its values and norms if it desires deeper and closer cooperation/integration. Although it seems like a pipe-dream to expect any improvements to Turkey's democratic credentials these days, and many are rightfully wary of any normative expectations being built into any sort of agreement with Turkey, the EU still has the power to pull Turkey towards a space of common virtues, and given recent developments, Turkey has less power to resist.



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ABOUT FEUTURE

FEUTURE sets out to explore fully different options for further EU-Turkey cooperation in the next decade, including analysis of the challenges and opportunities connected with further integration of Turkey with the EU.

To do so, FEUTURE applies a comprehensive research approach with the following three main objectives:

1. Mapping the dynamics of the EU-Turkey relationship in terms of their underlying historical narratives and thematic key drivers.
2. Testing and substantiating the most likely scenario(s) for the future and assessing the implications (challenges and opportunities) these may have on the EU and Turkey, as well as the neighbourhood and the global scene.
3. Drawing policy recommendations for the EU and Turkey on the basis of a strong evidence-based foundation in the future trajectory of EU-Turkey relations.

FEUTURE is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Wessels, Director of the Centre for Turkey and European Union Studies at the University of Cologne and Dr. Nathalie Tocci, Director of Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome.

The FEUTURE consortium consists of 15 renowned universities and think tanks from the EU, Turkey and the neighbourhood.

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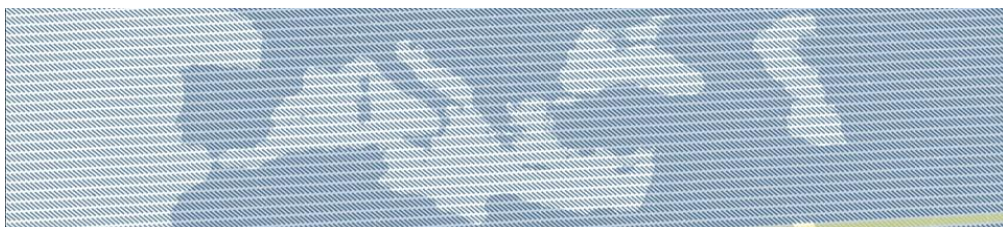
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