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TURKEY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: A difficult but critical relationship

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Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's blatant act of disrespect towards EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during a summit in Ankara on April 7th, 2021 (popularly known as "sofagate") is a recent example of the complex and difficult relationship between Turkey and the EU.

For many years Turkey has been knocking at the EU's door but, time and again, the obstacles to accession have been too great, and many Turks believe that they will never ultimately be able to join.

The AKP's rise to power and President Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian leanings, combined with his ambitious foreign policy, mean that Turkey and the EU seem to be drifting apart. But the strategic importance of this relationship forces them to find paths for dialogue and cooperation.

On April 7th, 2021, Turkey and the European Union (EU) held a meeting in Ankara, led respectively by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and European Council, and EU Commission Presidents, Charles Michel, and Ursula von der Leyen. After the meeting, the leaders moved to a room where Erdoğan and Michel sat in two chairs, while von der Leyen was left standing and had to sit on a side sofa, opposite the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. The images were beamed around the world and went viral on social networks. This incident happened shortly after the announcement (on March 20, 2021) that Turkey would be withdrawing from the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women, which was signed in Istanbul in 2011. At the Ankara meeting, von der Leyen expressed concern about the withdrawal.

An issue of great importance to the EU that was discussed at the meeting, was the extension of the controversial March 2016 Joint Declaration on Migration, which eased the return to Turkey of Syrian refugees. The Commission's spokesperson, Eric Mammer, stressed that Mrs. von der Leyen should have been seated exactly like Michel and Erdoğan, but that the EU did not want to create an incident over the issue. When asked about the incident the Italian prime minister, Mario Draghi, responded that it was behaviour characteristic of a dictator, but that there was no other option than to collaborate with Turkey to preserve our interests. The Commission's mild reaction and Draghi's comments show that, while relations between the EU and Turkey can at times be stormy, pragmatism can also prevail.

A long and winding road towards Europe

For over 60 years Turkey has been knocking at the European door. In fact, since the republic's foundation by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, the country has seen Europe as the main pole of attraction on its path towards modernisation. After World War II, Turkey benefitted from the Marshall Plan, it joined the Council of Europe in 1950, NATO in 1952, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1961. It is also a member of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). In 1963, the European Economic Community (EEC) and Turkey signed the "Ankara Agreement", an association agreement that included an "evolution clause" that opened the way towards a deeper relationship¹. It was followed by an Additional Protocol in 1973. In 1987, Ankara applied for membership of the EEC.

The Customs Union agreement, which entered into force on December 31, 1995, has benefitted both parties immensely. Total trade between Turkey and the EU has increased more than fourfold, amounting to € 132.4 billion in 2020. The EU is Turkey's number one trade partner and its main source of foreign direct investment (65.5% annually between 2008 and 2017). Turkey, meanwhile, is currently the EU's sixth biggest

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trade partner, representing 3.6% of the EU's total trade with the world in 2020. Two-way trade in services amounted to 26.5 € in 2019². Turkey has aligned its legislation with the EU's "*Acquis Communautaire*" on customs legislation, the removal of technical barriers to trade and intellectual property protection.

A significant step in the process of Turkey's accession was achieved at the December 1999 Helsinki European Council, which declared that "Turkey could join the EU based on the same criteria as other candidates" (the so-called "Copenhagen Political Criteria", which include

basically the respect of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms and the protection of minorities). Between 2001 and 2005, Turkey made great efforts to improve its democratic credentials. Thirty-four amendments to the constitution were introduced and eight packages of legislative reform were approved³. A "National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis" (further updated in 2003, 2005 and 2008), and a Reform Monitoring Group were established. Opinion polls showed that 75% of Turks wanted to join the EU.

But, over the following years, the Turks watched as other countries, with – in their opinion – no better democratic credentials, received more financial assistance, and joined the EU (former Eastern Bloc countries, plus Cyprus, Slovenia, and Malta in 2004, Croatia in 2013), while they were left behind. In the case of Cyprus, it was granted access to the EU without solving its bilateral conflicts with neighbours. Many Turks believed that political will was lacking on the European side, and a cultural and psychological gap impeded their accession. Thus, they started to describe the EU as a "Christian Club", in which Turkey would never be admitted, no matter what efforts it would make to fulfil the criteria for membership.

EU negotiations begin and soon stall

The Cyprus conflict became a big obstacle to Turkey's accession to the EU. In a referendum held on April 24, 2004, the Greek Cypriots rejected UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Peace Plan, while the Turkish Cypriots voted in favour of it. Just a week later, a divided Cyprus joined the EU as a full member. Two twin regulations that had been drafted by the Commission to support the Turkish Cypriots and put an end to their economic isolation, were rejected by the EU Council. This angered Ankara who thought that the Turkish Cypriots were being punished despite their efforts to achieve peace.

A few months later, the EU Commission concluded in its Regular Report that Turkey had sufficiently fulfilled the conditions to begin accession negotiations and, on October 3rd, 2005, the Council gave the green light to start. But, in December 2006, the EU suspended

1. According to Article 28: "As soon as the operation of this Agreement has advanced far enough to justify full acceptance by Turkey of the obligations arising out of the Treaty establishing the Community, the Contracting Parties shall examine the possibility of the accession of Turkey to the Community".

2. In December 2016, the Commission proposed that Customs Union agreement should be modernised and to extend bilateral trade relations to areas such as services, public procurement, and sustainable development. The EU council has not yet adopted the mandate.

3. These reforms included, among others, a significant presence of civilians on the all-powerful National Security Council, allowing the Kurdish language to be taught in schools and to be used for broadcasting, reforms of the Anti-Terror Law and the Criminal Code, making it more difficult to close political parties, abolishing the death penalty, approving a new Civil Code that recognised full equality between the sexes, the lifting of the state of emergency in the south-eastern part of the country and the recognition of decisions by the European Court of Human Rights as a basis for retrials.

negotiations on eight of the 35 chapters due to the refusal by the Turkish government to apply the 1995 Customs Union agreement to all new member states, in particular Cyprus. The Turks refused to recognise the Republic of Cyprus and to open their ports and airports to Greek Cypriots. The suspension of negotiations produced great bitterness on the Turkish side that expressed its conviction that the EU would never accept it as a member, whatever efforts it would make to reach that goal. On the EU side, the tide of further enlargement had begun to ebb, and some member states began insisting on finding other alternatives to full membership for Turkey. Opponents also mentioned the risk of increased migration from Turkey if that nation became member.

From Kemalism to an Islamist government

The Republic of Turkey, founded by Kemal Atatürk in 1923, was different from the Ottoman Empire. The empire had indeed been Turkish (Ottoman dynasty, language), but it also was Islamic (“sharia” was the basis of both legislation and social organisation), and multinational in its structure (several nationalities were included within the empire). By contrast, the republic was based on three main principles. 1) *Secularism*: although 98% of Turks were Muslims, the state kept religion under tight control in mosques, schools, and universities, and declared itself officially “secular”. 2) *Nationalism*: no different ethnic groups were recognised or given specific rights (especially kurds) – except those mentioned in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (Greeks, Armenians, and Jews)–. Some historic events, such as the 1915 massacres of Armenians, were considered “taboo” and could not be acknowledged or discussed. 3) *Statism*: a powerful state (“Devlet”), kept tight control over the economy and society. As for foreign policy, the terrible experience of World War I meant that the republic should not be involved in foreign adventures, following Atatürk’s motto: “Peace at home, peace in the world”.

Based on these principles, “Kemalism” became the official ideology, and a strong personality cult grew up around Atatürk (literally, “Father of the Turks”). This ideology was present in schools, universities, official life, and the media. The 1928 constitution abolished “sharia”, and the republic subsequently adopted the Swiss Civil Code and the Italian Criminal Code as the basis of legislation. A ban on “madrassas” (Koranic schools), women’s face veils, and the fez, was decreed, and the Latin alphabet was adopted.

The judiciary, the prosecutors, the High Education Council (YÖK), and the bureaucracy took the role of “guardians” of Kemalism, especially against Kurdish separatism and political Islam, which were considered the republic’s greatest threats. Between 1960 and 1980, three military coups were staged to preserve the Kemalist system (the EU suspended relations during the periods of military rule), and a “post-modern coup” ousted the coalition government of Tansu Çiller and the Islamist Refah Party of Necmettin Erbakan in 1997.

The 2001 economic crisis was a turning point in the life of the Turkish republic. It caused great suffering to large parts of the population, wiped out a completely discredited political class and opened the way for the accession to power, in November 2002, of the Justice and Development Party (“Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi”, AKP), which has an Islamist ideology. The AKP was led by former Istanbul major Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a strong believer in Islam as a political force. Despite its conservative ideology, the AKP received wide support from Anatolian small-scale entrepreneurs (many of them deeply religious)⁴ and much of the working class. Under the able economy Minister Ali Babacan, the AKP government continued the economic reform programme set up by former World Bank Vice-President, Kemal Derviş, which led to a decade of

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robust economic growth (Turkey tripled its per capita income between 2002 and 2010). A strong economy and political stability helped the AKP to consolidate power.

But the AKP also used reforms to reduce the power of the “Kemalist establishment” and push its Islamist agenda. With the excuse of promoting human rights, it forced the acceptance of women wearing the headscarf (“türban”) on university campuses (a highly symbolic issue on which a ban had been placed for decades), the access to higher education of graduates of Islamist schools (“imam hatips”), and the appointment of large numbers of imams to preach in mosques. This led to a harsh reaction by Kemalists,

4. During the years of Turgut Özal’s presidency (1983-1989), when wide structural economic reforms were introduced, a new business class arose in the Anatolian heartland, that was culturally conservative and devoutly Muslim. It embraced liberal economics and led to the growing influence of religious leaders, like Fetullah Gülen, who emphasised the moral and social aspects of Islam. Gülenist ideas helped build a strong social base of support for the AKP.

with several coup plots and a lawsuit seeking to close the party presented at the Constitutional Court (2008). The AKP's response was to introduce certain constitutional amendments, via a September 2010 referendum (the 1982 Constitution had been drafted by the military), which aimed to curb the tutelary powers of the military and the judiciary. In July 2011, prompted by another planned coup (the "Ergenekon case"), the AKP moved forward to establish full hegemony, putting pressure on the independent press, and consolidating its hold over academic institutions, the police forces, judges, prosecutors, and in part on the Constitutional Court.

The path to "illiberal democracy"

The 2008 financial crisis had a big impact on the Turkish economy. As the trade deficit and inflation grew, so did the dissatisfaction of the middle-classes with the government. In May 2013 massive demonstrations in Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul were brutally put down by police. In 2014 Erdoğan won his first presidential election and immediately moved to change the constitution, with the aim of concentrating all powers in

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the figure of the President of the republic. He attacked the independent media, imposing huge fines on the Doğan Group and jailing many journalists. He also acted against human rights activists and opposition parties, such as the Kurdish People's Democratic Party ("*Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP*"), whose charismatic leader, Selahattin Demirtaş and other party leaders were accused of links with the PKK terrorist organisation, and have been in prison since November 2016.

The failed coup of July 2016 gave Erdoğan the opportunity to stage a "final blow" to the Kemalist establishment and to the Fetullah Gülen movement, which was accused of being behind the conspiracy⁵. In fact, the President was the main beneficiary of the botched coup (which he called "a gift from God"), as

he quickly moved to eliminate all opposition. The wide purges in the military ranks, the civil service, the courts and the academia and the further suppression of the press that followed, raised concern in Europe and in the US.

A referendum won by a fine margin (51% vs. 49%) on April 16th, 2017, finally enabled Erdoğan to change the constitution. A "super-presidential" structure was established, giving the President power over the Council of Ministers, the appointment of judges and prosecutors, as well as of 12 of the 15 members of the Constitutional Court (among candidates proposed by various higher legal bodies and experts in law). The President can declare a state of emergency, in which case presidential legislation is placed beyond the control of the Constitutional Court⁶. Since the referendum, thousands more university professors and civil servants have been sacked, journalist jailed, and media punished. Erdoğan has ordered a case be heard at the Constitutional Court to close the pro-Kurdish DHP on the grounds that it supports terrorism. A considerable number of Turks have fled and sought asylum in EU and other neighboring countries⁷.

As my British former colleague, Ambassador Sir Peter Westmacott, has written, this has been another missed opportunity: "The remarkable degree of national solidarity sparked by anger at the effrontery of the (July 2016) coup plotters provided an opportunity to bring the country together, not to drive people apart; to

regain the momentum of reforms and modernization it had enjoyed under the AKP a decade earlier. But it was not to be." (Westmacott, 2021, p. 319). Political commentators, like CNN's Fareed Zacharia list Turkey among the "Illiberal Democracies".

Erdogan is fixated on 2023, when the next presidential election is to be held. As the economy continues to deteriorate faster, the currency loses value (-12% against the US dollar in January-July 2021), the Central Bank benchmark rate hits a record 19% (despite Erdoğan's pressure on Governor Sahap Kavcıoğlu), and inflation increases (17% year-on-year since May 2020, 18.9% in July 2021), support for the AKP and the President is diminishing. In local elections held in March 2019 Ekren İmamoğlu, from the opposition CHP party, beat the AKP candidate,

5. In 2013 Erdoğan fired a number of judges and prosecutors who had participated in an investigation into dubious financial deals made by his son, Bilal (possibly acting on behalf of his father), which were apparently devised to help Iran evade US sanctions. Erdoğan accused these officials of being members of the Gülenist base. Since then, AKP and the Fetullah Gülen movement have been enemies.

6. The Constitutional Court rules on the constitutionality of laws approved by the Grand National Assembly and executive orders from the president. It also examines individual claims related to the possible infringements of the European Convention on Human Rights.

7. See El Confidencial, "Exiliados de Erdogan en Bosnia". https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2021-04-17/los-exiliados-de-erdogan_3022468/

former prime minister Binali Yıldırım, to become mayor of Istanbul. This was a major humiliation for Erdoğan, who forced a second election the following June. İmamoğlu won again. In March 2021, Erdoğan sacked the Governor of the Central Bank, Naci Ağbal, after only five months in the job, for having raised interest rates to combat inflation.

In August 2021 huge wildfires broke out along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, followed by floods in the Black Sea area, causing devastation and deaths. Erdoğan was strongly criticized for the lack of resources at the disposal of civil emergency teams and his personal lack of empathy with the people affected. He even forbade the media to report on these catastrophes. He has also been criticized recently over his project of building a 45-kilometer canal linking the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea, due to the high cost of the project and its environmental impact.

As Erdoğan's popularity begins to wane, a few new political movements are starting to take shape. The new centre-right "Good Party" ("İyi Parti"), founded by Meral Akşener, a dissident from the nationalist MHP ("Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi"), is gaining ground among the most educated, dynamic, and advanced parts of the electorate.

From blockage of accession negotiations to backsliding

The more the AKP and Erdoğan consolidated their power internally, the less they felt they needed the EU as an anchor to justify reforms. This had negative consequences for the process of accession to the EU. In December 2016, the EU Council decided that no new areas would be opened in the accession talks, due to Ankara's autocratic drift. In July 2017, the European Parliament (EP) passed a resolution asking the Commission to suspend accession negotiations with Turkey. The reaction in Ankara was extremely harsh, accusing the EP of being indifferent towards the activities of terrorist groups, such as the PKK and the Gülenist FETÖ ("Fethullah Terrorist Organization", as the AKP government calls it).

In June 2019, the EU Council noted that "Turkey has been moving further away from the EU, and accession negotiations have, therefore, effectively come to a standstill. No further chapters can be considered for opening or closing and no further work towards the modernization of the Customs Union agreement is foreseen". The Council expressed particular concern about continued backsliding by Turkey on the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of

expression. In July 2019, new conclusions were adopted by the Council regarding Turkish drilling operations in the eastern Mediterranean that had provoked confrontation with Cyprus and Greece.

In December 2020, both sides agreed to extend the 2016 deal to limit the influx of irregular migrants into the EU. This prompted criticism from some MEPs, saying that the EU was too accommodating to Erdoğan's demands and it encouraged Turkey to extract more unilateral concessions in the future. On February 28th, 2021, Turkey announced that it would no longer prevent the passage of migrants towards Greece, de facto suspending the agreement. Shortly afterwards, many migrants crowded together near the border trying to cross into Greece. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told CNN that the migrants were being used by Turkey to obtain more concessions from the EU.

In May 2021, with 480 votes in favor, 64 against and 150 abstentions, the EP adopted a report saying that Turkey had distanced itself from European values and had continued to backslide in the fields of rule of law and human rights. The report called on the European Union

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to suspend the accession process, while maintaining cooperation with Turkey on issues such as combatting terrorism and controlling the flow of Syrian refugees. The report was dubbed biased and unacceptable by Turkey.

A neo-Ottoman foreign policy

With a leader who seemed ready to continue the necessary economic reforms, the AKP's rise to power in Turkey was greeted positively in the West. Although the AKP openly proclaimed Islam as its political ideology, it was soon presented by pundits as a model for the entire Muslim world. Many in the West saw the "moderate" version of political Islam embodied by Erdoğan and the AKP as applicable to other countries in the area, especially as the so-called "Arab Spring" uprisings gained momentum in various nations. "The early phases of the Arab Spring in 2011 allowed Turkey to appear as a beacon of change in the Sunni world" (Westmacott, 2017, p. 43).

The AKP government saw the Arab uprisings as an opportunity to expand its own influence in the region, in what was called a “neo-Ottoman foreign policy”, breaking with Atatürk’s advice not to get involved in foreign adventures. In Erdoğan’s view, this would reinforce the AKP’s popularity at home and in the whole Muslim world. Especially important was Egypt, where President Mubarak had to step down after massive street protests and Muhammad Morsi, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, became President after winning in the 2012 presidential election. In the 1970s, Erdoğan was a member of the National Student Union (MTTB), an organisation with links to the Brotherhood (Agrawal, 2021).

When Morsi was deposed in a coup led by General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi in 2013, Erdoğan refused to recognise the new regime and began a strategic confrontation with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who had backed the coup. Ankara aligned itself with Qatar, an emirate that seemed to share Erdoğan’s Islamist agenda and was being boycotted by the other Gulf monarchies. The July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey was the breaking point. Senior Turkish intelligence officials claimed that the UAE had had links to Fetullah Gülen, through

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exiled Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan. From then on, the Turkish government built a narrative that the coup attempt and the regional isolation of Turkey were products of a vast international conspiracy to sabotage a rising Turkey (Aydintaşbaş and Bianco, 2021).

The assassination of the *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi at the General Consulate of Saudi Arabia in Istanbul in October 2018, allegedly at the behest of Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, further deteriorated the already tense relations between Ankara and Riyadh. Khashoggi had been a defender of the Muslim Brotherhood and criticised the lack of support given to it by the Saudis.

Erdoğan’s assertive regional policy also put him in confrontation with the Europeans. Turkish military operations in eastern Syria in October 2019 against Syrian Kurds (PYD and YPG), prompted a strong reaction from President Macron and Chancellor Merkel, who decreed an arms embargo on Turkey. President Macron, facing Islamist-inspired terrorist attacks at home, favored the destruction of ISIS bases in Syria and disapproved of Turkey’s military attacks on

Kurdish militias who were fighting the Islamic State. In 2020 the two presidents engaged in several diplomatic spats, which escalated into a naval stand-off in the eastern Mediterranean.

Libya was another area where Erdoğan projected his “neo-Ottoman” foreign policy. He deployed an estimated 7,000 irregular forces to help the UN-recognised GNA (Government of National Accord), led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, against the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Khalifa Haftar. Turkey signed an agreement with the government in Tripoli on maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean, which it used as legal cover for the exploration of hydrocarbons in waters around Cyprus and the Greek economic zone.

Although Erdoğan’s relationship with President Trump was reasonably good, he criticised Washington’s approval of the referendum of independence in the Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017, the delivery of arms by the US to the YPG in eastern Syria, and its reluctance to extradite Fetullah Gülen, who lives in the United States. Washington, in turn, expressed concern over the planned acquisition by Turkey of S-400 air defence systems from Russia as incompatible with NATO’s, and excluded Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet programme. More recently (April 2021), tensions with Washington increased after President Biden mentioned in a speech the “Armenian genocide” by Ottoman Turks. On June 14th, 2021, Erdoğan and Biden met on the sidelines of NATO’s Summit in Brussels, with the Turkish leader speaking positively of the encounter.

More recently Turkey, which has strong historical, cultural, ethnic, and religious ties with Afghanistan and Pakistan, offered to assume the responsibility of running and protecting Kabul’s international airport. But the swift takeover of the country by the Taliban has put Ankara’s pretention on hold. It remains to be seen what Turkey’s role in Afghanistan may be, as other major powers in the region (China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran), are vying for influence after the withdrawal of Western forces. Ankara has already said that it does not want to take any responsibilities regarding the possible flow of Afghan refugees towards Europe.

With economic difficulties fueled by COVID-19 increasing, and clear symptoms of dissatisfaction among many Turkish citizens, Erdoğan seems ready to put some limits on his assertive foreign policy. He realises that it is not in Turkey’s interest to isolate itself from the West, precisely when the economy is slowing down. When addressing the AKP’ congress in November 2020, he said that his government wanted “to build Turkey’s future together with Europe”. More recently (May 2021), the Turkish Foreign Ministry

issued a statement saying that “EU membership is a strategic goal for Turkey and will be beneficial for all of Europe and beyond. Turkey will decisively continue its efforts in line with this objective.” Turkey and Greece resumed recently political and military talks.

Conclusions

Turkey’s long journey towards Europe has never been easy. The Turks are a proud people with strong feelings about their nation and culture. Their country lies in one of the world’s most unstable regions, which has affected it deeply throughout history, even when Atatürk issued his warning about foreign adventures after the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. And yet, Turkey had managed to maintain a functioning democracy, albeit not a perfect one. However, in recent years, the AKP and President Erdoğan have been moving in the wrong direction, by centralising power and quashing dissent, especially since the 2016 coup attempt. Another obstacle is Erdoğan’s aggressive foreign policy aimed at making Turkey a major geopolitical power and player, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and his ambition to become leader of the “umma”, the community of believers.

Turkey’s accession could provide the EU with a wide geopolitical reach and a democratic Turkey could play a significant role in the connection between the Muslim world and the West. Despite efforts by the Kemalist ideology to portray Turkish society as homogeneous, it is diverse. Even after almost 20 years of AKP rule, political Islam has not been able to transform the society. Religious and secular people relate with each other without much difficulty. Many Turks are deeply religious, but not many are fanatical; hardly any Turks have been involved in Islamist terrorism in the West.

Turkey has a very dynamic business class and a hard-working population. Although there is an excessive presence of the state in the economy and heavy bureaucracy, according to the World Bank, Turkey’s economic and social development performance since the early 2000s has been impressive, with increased employment and income. Poverty incidence more than halved from 2002 to 2015. In just over a decade, Turkey has increased the share of renewables – such as hydropower, solar, wind and geothermal – in electricity production from 17% to 46% (Elgendy, 2021). It is also advancing in other technologies such as the production of highly efficient drones for civil and military purposes. However, over the past few years, growing economic vulnerabilities and a more challenging external environment have threatened to undermine those achievements.

Europe is still a pole of attraction, but many Turks have become disenchanted with the accession process.

The unresolved Cyprus conflict is a major obstacle to Turkey’s accession and the EU has lost its neutrality on the issue. Keeping the Turkish Cypriots completely isolated is not fair and it has given an excuse to Turkish “hawks” to move away from the negotiating table. Although EU membership is still an appealing idea and most Turks still want to travel, study, work, or do business in Europe, currently only about 35% strongly desire access and less than 20% believe that the Europeans want them in (Hoffman, 2018). On the European side, there is not much enthusiasm either. The Commission states that: “Turkey is a key strategic partner of the EU on issues such as migration, security, counter-terrorism, and the economy, but has been backsliding in the areas of democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights”. As a result, accession negotiations have been effectively frozen since June 2018.

It is true that relations with Turkey are not easy. The growing authoritarian tendencies of the AKP and Erdoğan are damaging Turkey’s relations with the West and slowing-down the process of modernisation. They are also detrimental to Turkey’s image and reduce its international influence. The “neo-Ottoman” foreign policy is raising concern among countries in the region and contributes to instability and confrontation.

But the EU has a key interest in the political stability and prosperity of a country with 85.1 million people and a GDP of almost US \$ 800 billion, a territory of enormous geostrategic importance to Europe, that is a NATO ally and a significant player in the Black Sea, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia (including Afghanistan) and the North African regions. It is also a transit hub for gas supplies to Europe. And a fundamental partner regarding the control of migration towards the EU. Improving relations and cooperation between Turkey and Greece could bring stability to the eastern Mediterranean region. The EU should not give up on Turkey’s democratisation. Europeans, therefore, have a significant responsibility when deciding what to do with such an important neighbour and partner as Turkey. Europe needs clear ideas and leadership to find the best way to proceed, even if this is not a popular issue in European public opinion.

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