

## Analysis

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**Summary:** After 1999, a virtuous cycle in Turkey's EU engagement mobilized disparate groups in Turkey around a reform agenda. Since the mid 2000s, a comedy of errors seems to have turned this course into a downward spiral. The negotiation process is technically blocked for reasons that are not related to Turkey's democratization. Turkish democracy advocates have lost the sense that the EU is their ally in the struggle for increased rights and freedoms in the country. A new virtuous cycle will require the alignment of diverse stakeholders. In the face of heightened concerns about press freedom, rule of law, and separation of powers, Turkish democrats and Turkey's European friends can rediscover their joint interest in standing up for rights and freedoms in Turkey.

## Europe and Turkey — Back to the Future?

by *Diba Nigar Göksel*

For the past few years, distrust in European commitments and confidence that Turkey no longer needs the EU anchor has been seeping deeper into the Turkish public discourse. Rather than focusing on what is seen as an “unrewarding” and arduous EU accession process, it has seemed more rewarding for pundits and politicians to focus on Turkey's rise as a center of gravity for its neighbors. Recently, the chain of uprisings in the Arab world has added new dimensions to this debate, with varying opinions about whether Turkey is a model for the Muslim world.

The six-hour-long (or -short) visit of French President Nicholas Sarkozy to Turkey on February 25, 2011 was emblematic of problems in Turkey's EU engagement. Pres. Sarkozy was greeted at the airport, by the metropolitan mayor of Ankara — who even expressed his reluctance to do so— rather than by a Turkish Cabinet Minister. Pres. Sarkozy reiterated that the French public opinion was against Turkey's membership and that he favored an alternative formula. The fact that he chewed gum in meetings made headlines in Turkey, as it was taken as a sign of disrespect. A seasoned Turkish columnist called Pres. Sarkozy the “most honest Euro-

pean leader,” explaining that Pres. Sarkozy expresses his opinion openly while other European leaders also want to exclude Turkey from the EU club, but find other pretexts to justify this.

### The Downward Spiral of Turkey's EU Course

After 1999, a virtuous cycle in Turkey's EU engagement mobilized disparate groups in Turkey around a reform agenda. Since the mid 2000s, a comedy of errors seems to have turned this course into a downward spiral.

The negotiation process is technically blocked for reasons that are not related to Turkey's democratization: namely, the Cyprus deadlock and the perception of an existential non-European Turkish identity. As a result, Turkish democracy advocates have lost the sense that the EU is their ally in the struggle for increased rights and freedoms in the country. Legitimate calls for Turkey to implement the *acquis* end up getting lost among what are seen by many as pretexts to exclude Turkey.

The constellation of the country's political parties in Turkey after the mid 2000s was such that there has not been



competition in pledging EU standards of democracy. Quite the contrary, particularly after 2006, leading opposition parties were mobilized *against* many of the reforms required for EU integration. This conjuncture not only reduced pressure on the government to meet EU standards but also led Turkish skeptics of the government to argue that the EU process would inevitably favor AKP. Rather than uniting around the EU prospect and competing to reach EU benchmarks, the actors of the polarized domestic scene were further divided by the bizarre dynamics of Turkey's accession process. In the past couple of years, the pro-reform opinion-makers in Turkey have also not been particularly engaged in keeping the EU torch ablaze.

This situation was aggravated by the hazardous combination of populist political positioning in both Turkey and Europe — with both sides cashing in on popular sentiments, thus entrenching the stalemate. Political rhetoric has real consequences. The more resentment is stirred up among the Turkish public by politicians pointing to Europeans discriminating against Turkey, the less support remains for the arduous steps that need to be taken to meet European standards. European advocates of Turkey's membership in turn have a weaker hand in their struggle against Turco-skeptics.

Concerns about the decreasing leverage of the EU in Turkey have been exacerbated with the resurrection of the Cold War notion that Turkey can leverage its strategic value (which is, in today's context, its soft power in the Muslim Middle East) to get away with its democracy deficits.

Confident that the EU process would chug along but lose its leverage to impose structural change effecting power balances, the Turkish government has been in a comfortable zone. The risk that Turkish public frustration towards the EU may turn into indifference has grown.

### Is a Positive Spiral Possible?

Counterintuitively, a virtuous cycle *can* be born out of this negative course of events. It will, however, require the alignment of diverse stakeholders, as was the case in the early 2000s.

Liberal intellectuals, a circle that has played a part in the country's "coalition for reform," have been expressing disillusionment about the stalling of democratization initiatives

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and the increased intolerance to criticism that has accompanied the consolidation of power by the new ruling elite. The prime minister heightened concern when, in response to criticism, he underlined that it is not the opinions of intellectuals but the votes that count.<sup>1</sup> Such rhetoric has slowly been spreading the sense of the need for more checks and balances.

Last week, a wave of arrests of investigative journalists — for alleged links to a plot to topple the government — appears to have sparked a new dynamic.<sup>2</sup> Amidst outcry about the arrests and in face of heightened concerns about press freedom, rule of law, and separation of powers, the need for structural change to protect civil liberties is being voiced across a wide spectrum of society.

In its report released on March 9, 2011, the European Parliament also expresses deep concern about these developments. European institutions can play an important role in the environment of deep-seated distrust in domestic checks and balances. Turkish democrats and Turkey's

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.birikimhaber.com/Haber/Roportaj/27012011/Erdogandan-Altanlara-cevap-var-Halk-liberallerin-dilini-anlamiyor.php>

<sup>2</sup> Suzan Fraser, Turkish journalists jailed over alleged coup plot, *Washington Post*, March 6, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/06/AR2011030600322.html>



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European friends can use this opportunity to rediscover their joint interest in standing up for rights and freedoms in Turkey.

For this European involvement to bear fruit, though, it needs to be reinforced with reassurance from the political arena of Europe. There are some hopeful indications to this end. Carl Bildt, the Swedish minister for foreign affairs, noted in Turkey last week that there would be an effort to “to activate the silent majority of Turkey’s supporters” in Europe so that dissenting voices are not disproportionately heard and the commitments made to Turkey are kept. Developments in intellectual circles in Turkey-skeptic societies is also somewhat heartening. Counterarguments to culturalist approaches to Turks are being voiced to at least compete with the vocalized prejudism. Among policy circles, analysis based on the principle of fairness and emphasis of the need to offer visa-free travel to Turkish citizens is moving forward in the European public debate.<sup>3</sup>

The change in the leadership of the main opposition party, CHP, has brought much-needed optimism, albeit cautious, to a segment of the Turkish society.<sup>4</sup> On issues ranging from freedom of expression to the needs of Turkish citizens of different religious faiths, the new leader of the party, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, is signaling that his party will set the bar higher for the government with concrete proposals.<sup>5</sup> Though the prospects that he can carry through with this agenda are doubted, the possibility in itself stimulates the long-stale political climate.

Worry about the recent twists in the arbitrary power projection patterns of Turkey has generated calls for international institutions’ impartial involvement.<sup>6</sup> As underlined by human rights activist Orhan Kemal Cengiz last week in a discussion about the future of Turkey’s democracy, rejuvenating the EU compass can ensure Turkey does not spiral further into ideological and institutional clashes. Progress towards EU accession offers a win-win formula, around which rival ideological and interest groups can still rally. It

<sup>3</sup> ESI report “A very special relationship. Why Turkey’s EU accession process will continue” November 11, 2010, [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)

<sup>4</sup> Amberin Zaman, “Turkey’s New Opposition Leader: Deciphering Kemal Kilicdaroglu,” *On Turkey Series*, February 24, 2011, [http://www.gmfus.org/galleries/ct\\_publication\\_attachments/Zaman\\_NewOpposition\\_Feb11.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/galleries/ct_publication_attachments/Zaman_NewOpposition_Feb11.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Kemal Kilicdaroglu, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Winter 2010/11, [www.turkishpolicy.com](http://www.turkishpolicy.com)

<sup>6</sup> Semih Idiz, “Dış müdahale artık şart oldu,” *Milliyet*, March 4, 2011

is important that this case is also made to the Turkish public in order to ensure that politicians face constituencies that will also hold them accountable for progress towards EU benchmarks.

For the accession process to continue, any Turkish leadership is going to need a voter base that still believes in the viability and value of Turkey’s EU membership. Derailing Turkey’s accession process is not in the interests of EU states either. The populism that seems to pay off for politicians today is likely not to be a welcome inheritance for future leaders there either. Public opinion in both Turkey and in Europe will ultimately take on a life of its own and determine what becomes of this accession process.

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In response to recent worrisome developments in Turkey, a glimpse of the potential for the Turkish intellectual elite to rally around a common and principled cause has been apparent in the past week. Hope that this solidarity be sustained and locked into the EU accession process has been sparked. However, the risk that personal clashes and infighting, ideological divisions, a sense of fatalism, and subservience to existing power hierarchies will dampen this potential is also sadly real.

### What is at Stake?

Turkey’s potential strategic value for the EU has taken a higher profile with recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. However, it is not time for overconfidence. As



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Turkey transitions and the backlash to this transition takes unpredictable forms, the country's EU vocation becomes ever more important, not less.

Turkey's soft power in its neighborhood is largely a factor of a transformation that has been driven by European conditionality — as well as economic growth that still relies on European investors' confidence and needs European governance standards to be sustained. The inflow of ideas from Europe, benchmarks set by the accession process, funding for NGOs from European sources, and political pressure from EU institutions have empowered Turkish civil society and steered legislative reform. Today, Turkey's intellectuals and activists, who are struggling on many fronts at once, deserve faith in their European credentials. They also need European support in pursuing their agenda. How Turkey deals with the challenges that lie ahead will also be critical in determining whether Turkey can continue to inspire its neighbors — Muslim or otherwise. A fresh drive is needed in both Turkey and Europe to set the Turkey-EU agenda back on track.

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