Turkey - Europe’s Estranged Sibling?  

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Executive Summary

Uncertainty over Turkey’s direction as well as over the EU’s future economic and strategic cohesion has further challenged the already complex discussion of Turkey-EU relations. The shape that Turkey-EU relations will take may be unclear; however, there are steps that can be taken that are mutually beneficial in the short term and increase the likelihood of a positive scenario in the longer term.

There are two relatively positive scenarios for Turkey-EU relations. First is Turkey becoming a member of a more flexible, multi-layered EU; the other is Turkey becoming a democratic partner deeply integrated with the EU and aligned in spreading positive values and governance standards within the eastern and southern neighbourhood. The realization of either scenario requires overcoming mutual prejudices and their reflections in political rhetoric and decisions, as well as support for Turkey’s pro-democracy civil society, firm positions regarding the balance of powers in the country, enabling visa-free travel for Turkish nationals, and developing joint neighbourhood initiatives.

Such steps can prepare the ground for accession to continue more seamlessly in the future, if and when the formal blockages are lifted. Otherwise, they will still enable the oft-mentioned shared economic interests to be maximized, a less friction-ridden and more pluralistic domestic environment in Turkey to come about, and positive synergies in the neighbourhood to be capitalized on. Therefore, these feasible formulas should be supported by those in the EU and Turkey who might differ about whether the endgame is membership or not.

On the other hand, the negative scenario is that Turkey ends up being neither an EU member nor a democratic, aligned partner, adopting more of the regressive trends common to its neighbourhood, such as the drive for unchecked power and loss of pluralism, and becoming strategically unfocused or intent on setting up an ‘alternative pole.’ Some of Ankara and EU member state capitals’ approaches today are playing directly into such a lose-lose scenario.

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1 This piece is an expanded version of a policy piece by this author published by German Marshall Fund in December 2012, entitled: Turkey and the EU: What Next?
The EU Commission is cognizant of the intractable stalemate of Turkey’s accession negotiations. However, it recognizes Turkey and the EU’s shared strategic and economic interests, as well as the importance of Turkey’s adoption of EU governance and political standards. Hence, the Commission has been geared at strengthening the “positive agenda” with Turkey.

The positive agenda aims, among other things, to maintain the harmonization of legislation at the technical level as a preparation for accession to continue – if and when EU institutions and the political environment are ripe. The logic is to keep motivation alive, even if it appears to be on artificial life support.

Skeptics, however, have rejuvenated the debate about "privileged partnership" that would “define” Turkey’s exclusion from being a full member of the European family. This approach holds that the increasing resentment on the Turkish side suggests that keeping Turkey in the ‘waiting room’ is not only dishonest but also detrimental. Moreover, the sustenance of unfulfilled expectations creates bad blood that hinders cooperation with a potentially friendly neighbour and strategic partner. Perceiving Turkish embrace of another role, namely leadership in the Muslim neighbourhood, this line of thought instead argues for supporting Turkey as a regional power in order to “tame” the southern neighbourhood.

This article will examine various dimensions of both lines of thinking, arguing that it is an evermore important time not to lose leverage over Turkey and to bring the country further into the European fold. This must be done even if – or precisely because – the ultimate form in which Turkey will fit into the evolving EU structure remains uncertain. Despite economic and institutional challenges faced by Europe, the Union can take a number of steps benefiting EU member states, Turkey, and the neighbourhood alike. Likewise, from official Ankara to Turkish civil society, a proactive and positive engagement is needed in order to shape a constructive relationship.

For the EU, opening new channels of alignment can rebuild trust and add impetus to the European integration of Turkish nationals. Making the process more about the people and fostering further structured interaction will also offer the chance to overcome rifts in perception and identity – which are ultimately social and political constructs rather than inherent traits. In addition to abandoning its adversarial style in interacting with EU counterparts, the Turkish government
needs to systematically address concerns about its democratic credentials.

Whether membership is to follow or not, for a healthy relationship, what is needed today is not a break up or a pre-nup, but rather opportunities to interact more, collaborate, and overcome divergences.

**Turkey’s perception of systematic exclusion**

Since 2004, Turkey has watched the challenges to its accession become steeper just when it was most expected to move ahead. Cyprus’ accession into the Union has led Turkey’s accession talks to indefinitely stall. EU lessons from past enlargements have led to stricter membership criteria for all candidates, requiring not only legislative approximation but also demonstrated implementation, while some countries have introduced referendums as a step to determine their final decision for future enlargements. Turkish participation was welcomed at Council Summits until 2007, after which invitations ceased. Populist approaches to cultural diversity (read Islamophobia and racism) have had implications for enlargement and integration debates, increasing negative pressure on Turkey’s accession prospects. While certain provisions of the Ankara agreement of 1963 are still not implemented by the signatory EU member states, the unanimous vote to offer Turkey candidate status in 1999 and to start membership negotiations in 2005 is recalled with a tinge of regret in discussions along the conference circuit where policymakers interact with analysts.

Nowadays, preoccupied with internal economic and governance-related challenges, EU players have an aversion to talking about any form or shape of enlargement – be it for the Western Balkans\(^2\), Eastern Neighbours, or Turkey. The aspiring Western Balkan countries and Eastern Partnership Neighbours of the EU are also negatively affected by the EU’s preoccupation with its economic and governance-related challenges. However, countries in the Western Balkans and even EU aspirant neighbours across the Black Sea receive relatively more encouragement from EU politicians about their belonging to the European family. The EU is widely perceived in Turkey as having given false promises and then tossed Turks aside, hiding behind excuses about formal procedures or European public opinion. This aggravates Turkey’s sense that it is being “encircled” and should “push back,” thereby driving the reflex of ‘hardball’ in Ankara.

\(^2\) With the exception of Croatia which is set to join in 2013.
Cynicism about the EU reflects in Turkish public opinion polls that depict both the favourability of EU membership and the percentage who believe Turkey will ever be an EU member to be dropping dramatically. According to respondents in a recent study, France is the most likely country to place obstacles in Turkey’s path to the EU.¹

**Ankara’s conduct – Heightening, rather than alleviating, concerns in the EU**

particularly in the last several years, Ankara has played into some of these trends both with worrisome elements in its democratization track record and conduct of foreign policy.

*Towards unchecked power?*

In its recent Progress Report (October 10), the European Commission noted a range of concerns over issues such as media freedoms and human rights. However, as the process is blocked for other reasons, this report merely served as an affirmation with a *feel-good effect* for government critics. The report was dismissed and discarded by authorities – at least in their rhetoric. This underlines the root problem of Turkey-EU relations today: the EU does not offer Turkey anything which is indexed to Ankara’s performance in political standards, therefore EU conditionality is ineffectual.

Ankara’s bargaining approach to issues that are, if anything, more in the interest of Turkish nationals (and close neighbours) than the EU, have raised concerns about the inherent strategic and democratic vision of the government. For example, a couple of years ago Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suggested that the EU should open the Energy chapter of accession negotiations if it wanted Turkey to be supportive of the Southern Corridor, and recently the Minister for EU Affairs said the EU should open the Justice chapters (23 and 24) if it wanted leverage over Turkey's judicial reforms.

Prime Minister Erdoğan’s statement that his government “want[s] to see a religious generation emerging in this country” is reflected in a wide range of policies enacted in the Turkey, from education reform to Internet censorship on the basis of “public morality.” “The values of the majority” are increasingly put forth as a justification for policy changes that challenge the tenets of a liberal democracy.

The rising popularity of a strong-leader, entrenchment of a loyalty-

³ Poll conducted by the German-Turkish Foundation for Education and Scientific Research (TAVAK).
driven political model, and more keenness on flaunting its affinity, solidarity, and close links to Muslim brothers rather than to European friends also consolidate concerns that Turkey has an inherently non-European disposition. This view was recently aggravated when the Turkish Prime Minister suggested capital punishment could be reintroduced in light of constituency preferences.

Meanwhile, excessive consolidation of power and majoritarianism in Turkey is growing. While the EU accession process “corrected” undemocratic elements of the Turkish political system such as civil-military relations, it has failed to engender alternative checks and balances such as an independent judiciary. In fact, EU-inspired reforms have also been perceived as consolidating rather than checking power, such as the 2010 constitutional reform in Turkey that strengthened the executive in practice. The recent appointment of a controversial name as Ombudsman has also dimmed hopes that this new EU-inspired reform will serve to check executive power.

Turkish society stands out in its divergence from other European societies with regard to value perceptions and positions on basic strategic questions. Such revelations support the perspective that the Turkish society is not European after all, and reduces the motivation of Turkey’s friends in Europe to push Turkey’s case.

While popular will is better represented politically and economic means have improved, these have not necessarily yielded a more democratic culture. As the traditional “statist” segments of the previous establishment have been stripped of its ability to engineer society and monopolize power, the political culture promoted by the conservative leadership is taking twists that considerably resemble their once-adversaries. Cinderella’s glass slipper, pluralistic democratic culture, just does not seem to fit, reinforcing the question: Is Turkey the stepsister trying in vain to wear it?

**Neighbourhood outreach – complementary or contradictory?**

Domestic and foreign policy are intricately related, particularly in the case of Turkey-EU relations. While Turkey’s domestic political state of affairs is indicative of Turkey’s compatibility with European values and principles, one of the central arguments for Turkey’s EU accession considers the positive role Ankara might play in stabilizing the

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neighbourhood that Turkey and the EU share – to the east and to the south.

In this framework, a central question is what is the model that Turkey represents? Moreover, for Turkey to affect the hearts and minds of Arabs across the “transitioning” Middle East and North Africa and to play a leading role in this region, does its Islamic identity need to become more pronounced? And, if so, what does this mean for Turkey’s Europeanization – or potential EU accession?

While Turkey’s democracy has marked significant progress on some fronts in the last decade, it has endured regression on others. Ultimately, when it comes to checks and balances on the authorities, it is hard to claim the record is positive. Moreover, there are a number of fundamental issues on which Turkey has not settled with a model itself. The relationship between religion and state, the civilian sphere and the military, even the parliamentary versus presidential nature of the system is in a state of transformation. Those driving and advocating for change on these fronts do so claiming that the previous system did not work well. This suggests that Turkey has not yet discovered a formula of success. It is working on improving a flawed system, and it is unclear as to what the new structures and balances will deliver.

One thing is clear: Turkey’s experiments offer food for thought. Turkey is an example through which it is possible to foresee some challenges and vulnerabilities that may be experienced in other Muslim democracies across the region. This is valuable, but far from grounds to claim a “model.”

Compared to regional states, one of Turkey's relative strengths is its diverse segments of society that have consistently struggled for more rights and liberties. In fact, these circles have often been inspired by European literature, education, or counterparts, and have also been empowered by the European integration processes of Turkey. Though the form in which the critics of Turkish authorities will prevail is unknown, their presence and experience suggests that European ideals are also valid for Turkish counterparts (this may be self-evident; however, is not necessarily so to Europeans who see Turks to be existentially more fit for “non-European” models).

Furthermore, the Turkish experience suggests that a religious agenda aids the creation of solidarity networks and developing grassroots outreach and affinity. The Turkish case also depicts that repressing
and restricting conservative Islam is not sustainable; nevertheless, keeping the playing field fair is a challenge that needs to be ensured. It is yet to be seen how Turkey will sustain its diversity and political competition if the EU were to leave the equation in terms of ensuring checks and balances in the country. This point is intricately related to Turkey’s role in the Southern Neighbourhood of the EU. While there is significant enthusiasm about Turkey fostering progress towards enshrining democratic political culture in this region, such a trend is not readily visible.

When explaining Turkey’s added value in the region, government representatives from Ankara often give the example of Prime Minister Erdogan’s speech in Egypt in September 2011, when he pointed out that a secular state does not necessarily mean its people are not religious. Not only was this statement, which was perceived as a praise of secular state administration, negatively received among the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but the Turkish Prime Minister refrained from such talk thereafter, and the stance was not followed up with any concrete steps geared to protecting the rights of Egyptians advocating for a secular political system. Ultimately in November 2012, the Egyptian constitutional assembly ignored the protests of Christians and liberals and approved the draft of a new constitution enabling restrictions on certain freedoms on the basis of Islamic law. Ankara is not taking a visible position on behalf of the secular-minded in this country. Likewise in Tunisia, secular activists have noted the Turkish government party (AKP) extending significant support and capacity building solely to the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate Ennahda.

Another shortcoming in Ankara’s credentials of regional outreach is its questionable track record in terms of delivery. Ultimately, despite its attempts, Ankara’s ruling party did not convince any of the regional leaders to reform, abandon power, or be part of a solution – from Syria’s Bashar Assad to Iran’s Ahmedinejad, Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir or Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi. In 2006, the AKP also created the expectation that they could persuade Hamas to recognize Israel, renounce violence, and accept past peace agreements. Despite strong relations and a claim of steering these actors in a constructive direction, concrete results are hard to find. Moreover, Doubts have been raised about Ankara using its regional weight along lines of sectarian divides, increasing polarization.

A similar track record can be observed in Turkey’s ambitions to solve regional deadlocks in the Caucasus (2008-2010) or within Lebanon
(2011). The consistent hard-line anti-Israel stance of the Turkish government has also arguably hampered Ankara’s ability to play a leading role in regional frictions involving Israel.

In short, despite its popularity and continual rhetoric of peace and understanding, Turkey's efforts to make a difference on the ground on behalf of pluralism have been starkly limited. In fact, it has been doubtful that AKP forerunners have pursued rhetoric about human rights, pluralism or institution building in their discussions behind the scene with the Islamist counterparts they have close relations with in the region.

Moreover, a recent poll by the Turkish think tank TESEV reveals a drop over the last year in Arabs’ perception of Turkey as a model and approval of the latter's regional influence.

Another challenge to the notion of Turkey working with the EU to stabilize the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the lack of coherence within the Union itself. Though “strategic dialogue” between Turkey and the EU is a much-discussed concept, in concrete terms, it appears to be reduced to conducting more regular and intensive foreign policy consultations at the foreign minister level on a range of issues. The EU remains divided itself; a serious attempt for developing a more coherent common foreign policy is not expected for at least a couple of years- after the European External Action Service (EEAS) is reviewed in 2013. It is not clear how this can translate into tactical or operational-level alignment.

Moreover, the rhetoric Ankara employs in order to assert itself as a regional power or emphasize its indispensable role for the “weakening West,” has increased concern about how further difficult it would be to reach a consensus in the EU if Turkey were a member state.

In the last year, Turkey has been viewed as a spoiler in NATO. Ankara wrangled over the EU’s participation in the NATO Chicago summit of May 2012, and continues to block cooperation between Israel and NATO. No less because 21 of the 28 NATO member states are also EU member states, strains with Turkey in NATO naturally ignite concern about its prospective seat in EU institutions.

However, this does not mean Turkey does not matter in the

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5 From the Desk of the Editor, Turkish Policy Quarterly, Fall 2012,
neighbourhood. While Ankara does appear to desire the same end results in the neighbourhood it shares with the EU, and both parties’ assets are complimentary. There is potential for synergy, however it cannot be taken for granted.

Turkey’s interests converge with Europe’s vision for its neighbourhood. Turkey benefits from economic interdependence, diversification of energy transport routes from the region, the resolution of regional conflicts, democratization and stability across its neighbouring regions. Additionally, Turkey’s economic and democratic development contributes to its traction in the neighbourhood. Though tactics and short term political interests do differ on occasion, Turkey and the EU ultimately benefit from the same dynamics taking hold in their joint neighbourhood.

It is also true that Turkey’s assets are complementary with those of Europe. While Ankara does wield influence in the region partially due to its Muslim identity, there are many other facets to Turkey’s influence that are not related to the government or state. Turkey’s appeal is often a factor of its bustling cities where different lifestyles can coexist, competitive business, dynamic civil society, popular soap operas depicting cultural resemblances, conservative Muslims running internationally prominent businesses and other such non-state realities. Thus, integrating Turkish civilian players into European initiatives can capitalize on a degree of the Turkish potential.

The EU has been particularly negligent about seizing opportunities to capitalize on the potential of Turkey’s independent civil society, thereby creating both opportunity costs and fuelling a sense of exclusion among the most EU-prone Turkish circles.

**What can the EU do**

The mode of showdown surfacing in platforms where Turkey and the EU interact (often relating to Cyprus) is merely exacerbating resentments that could prevent future collaboration. If there ever was political expediency in managing the relationship through wrangling, its lifespan is surely dwindling. There is a need to break this downward spiral by taking some steps without delay.

*Integrating people and non-state organizations*

Regarding the broader population, visa-free travel is possibly the single most effective way to rejuvenate positive sentiments. More
people to people contact will be the most effective way to dispel myths and address mutual prejudices. A mutually advantageous formula is providing Turkish nationals with the opportunity for visa-free travel in return for Turkey meeting conditions related to border control and the fight against illegal migration to secure the Schengen border of the EU.\textsuperscript{6} This would also improve Turkish effectiveness in border services, curbing organized crime, and treatment in Turkey of legitimate asylum seekers from third countries. Progress on this front was marked in the summer (June 2012) when the EU Council offered a visa liberalization process for Turkey and the two sides initialled a readmission agreement. The next step, to be taken in late 2012 or early 2013, is to present to Turkey the “visa liberalization roadmap” which will list all the conditions that Turkey will need to meet. If and when Turkey carries out the requirements, which domestic constituencies should advocate, any wavering on the EU side will firmly demonstrate EU double standards. In this sense, this issue is also a litmus test for the EU.

Turkish civil society is another area where there is a potential to be harnessed for the sake of Turkey’s democratization, Turkey-EU relations, and neighbourhood outreach. One of the ways this abstract rhetoric of strategic synergy can be substantiated on the ground is through mobilizing and integrating Turkish civil society in a structured form.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) engages civil society of the EU’s six eastern neighbours in a structured form. Critical Turkish civil society would benefit from the empowerment provided by direct dialogue with Brussels. Designing such a process for Turkish civil society could empower the increasingly marginalized yet critical civil society organizations (CSOs), link them to EU counterparts in a sustained manner, and regulate NGO-government dialogue. As a result, a watchdog function can be developed which might help compensate for the growing problem of weak checks and balances in the country.

Moreover, incorporating Turkish counterparts into EU-based platforms designed for the eastern and southern neighbourhood would deliver mutual benefits. Otherwise, the potential multipliers of Turkey’s Europeanization experience are not utilized and Turkish civil society representation in the neighbourhood is often reduced to those who carry counter-European visions. From the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum to the Civil Society Facility that was established last

\textsuperscript{6} For detailed analysis, see: http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=446.
year and the European Endowment for Democracy which is currently being set up, considering Turkish participation would be beneficial. Turkish counterparts can deliver and utilize solidarity and advocacy in such platforms. Both the policy community of the EU and Turkish NGOs themselves need to be involved in a discussion about how to engage Turkish counterparts in these instruments. The civil society marginalized from power after the transitions in North Africa is currently in the process of articulating and designing NGO activity. Training, twinning, exchanges between journalists, activists, small businesses and universities could – in some cases – be more effective then fostering political ties in ensuring contribution to a healthy political environment.

Ankara–Brussels... and Paris

Among other things, the EU “positive agenda” launched this year involves “intensified dialogue and cooperation on political reforms” and “supporting efforts to align with the acquis, including on chapters where accession negotiations cannot be opened for the time being.” Accordingly, working groups have been set up to aide Turkey’s alignment with eight chapters of the acquis. A similar limited procedure was initiated with countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Western Balkans in 2011. Clearly, this formula does not solve the essential problem of formal stalemate; however, it is a way to work around it for the time being, ensuring that time spent in the waiting room is not wasted. A necessary complement to this track would be to make the Turkish people aware of how this bureaucratic process affects their daily life. In this sense, the communication of the political leadership is critical.

France has played a significant role in bringing about Turkish bitterness towards EU. In 2007, President Nicolas Sarkozy blocked seven chapters of the acquis from being negotiated with Turkey, reasoning that Turkey is “not a part of Europe.” This move struck a considerable blow to Turkish Europeanization, for it marked exclusion based on civilization and existential grounds, leaving no leverage to encourage Ankara for improvement in any area by Turkish democrats or EU institutions. Noticeably, in October 2011, the same President said in Tbilisi, Georgia, east of Turkey: “When I am in Tbilisi, I feel I am in Europe.”

With the election of Francois Hollande as French president this year,

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expectations that France normalize bilateral relations with Turkey and revive EU leverage over Ankara have risen, first and foremost by unblocking the five negotiation chapters.

Today, Paris appears interested in having a more positive relationship with Ankara, and President Hollande is set to visit Ankara in early 2013. The two countries’ approaches to the Syria crisis have been harmonious. France is eager to rebuild a policy towards the Arab countries in which Islamists have taken prominent leadership positions. The appearance of France’s “civilizational” snub of Turkey does not bode well for its ambitions in this geography. If Paris unilaterally prevents progress on Turkey’s accession negotiations in 2015 – when it is also expected to be in the forefront of the centennial commemorations of Turkish massacres of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire – this would show France in an ever more anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim light. In any case, opening the chapters currently blocked by France will not open the floodgates of Turkey’s EU accession. From the Cyprus problem to eventual ratification of accession by each EU member state (some by referendum), less controversial and more legitimate chances to stall Turkey’s membership nevertheless lie ahead.

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As long as Turkey is recognized as a member of the European family, it might not be urgent to define the parameters of the relationship. These parameters are bound to be dynamic, as is the shape of the EU itself.

Needless to say, a central determinant of how Turkey can fit in is the evolution of the EU. The prospect of a new model in which members have variable integration levels on different issues like security, monetary policy, trade, or mobility could enable Turkey to join an “outer circle” that requires less cohesion, rather than being the “odd man out”. While any such re-modelling in the EU is bound to be a complicated and long-term, and cannot be counted on yet, the Turkish debate should also keep abreast of such prospects. In addition to considerations of changes in EU institutional architecture of integration, the likelihood that a global vision to rally around will start taking shape in the EU after the current crises are surpassed will also change the terrain of Turkey-EU relations.

The development of the Turkish political scene vis-a-vis the EU is also
not linear. While there are expectations of more nationalism and polarization in Turkey as the presidential elections in 2014 near, these trends are also not to be taken for granted. For example, there is a notable difference in rhetoric about the EU within the traditional AKP camp. As also noted by the French Foreign Minister in his recent article for Turkish Policy Quarterly\(^8\), President Gül has underlined that Turkey’s relations with the EU, the US and NATO are “not just a foreign policy and security choice, but are based on common values” which he concluded should lead Turkey to continue down the road of reforms.\(^9\) Besides democratic deficits, challenges in the neighbourhood and economic turbulence can speed up internal reassessment of Turkey’s need for a more solid EU integration process.

If however the EU accession track remains idle, existing but indexed to Cyprus or civilizational differences, any government in Turkey can capitalize on having an EU track – be it while attracting foreign direct investment or posturing in the neighbourhood, without being held accountable for democratic governance or the values it propagates. Under these circumstances, a Turkish government would have no incentive to reignite the accession process, and the EU is in effect contributing to regression in Turkey. Turkey demonstrated progress towards democratization in 2005, leading to the start of negotiations. If negotiations are to be blocked today, this should be so because Turkey is no longer demonstrating the same positive trends.

Link to Laurent Fabius’s text:
FRANCE AND TURKEY: NEW HORIZONS FOR A LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP
