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Ana Santos Pinto | Eduard Soler | Sinan Ülgen
Moderated by José Manuel Rosendo

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TURKEY-EU RELATIONS IN A COMPLEX NEIGHBOURHOOD
This Lisbon Talk focused on the complex relations between Turkey and the European Union, taking into account some of its neighbour countries.

Ana Santos Pinto, researcher at IPRI-NOVA, expert in Southwest Asia geopolitics, Eduard Soler, researcher at CIDOB, expert in Turkey and regional security issues in the Mediterranean and Middle East and Sinan Ülgen, expert in European affairs and founding partner of Istanbul Economics, talked about Turkey, refugee and migrant issues, relations in the Eastern Mediterranean and bilateral relations. The talk was moderated by José Manuel Rosendo, journalist, expert on Turkey and Middle East affairs.

Ana Santos Pinto points out that the priority of Turkey today is to reaffirm its regional power by being more assertive politically and military taking into account 1) the internal dynamics changes on the concept of the regime, more nationalistic, a different narrative on Turkey’s and Ottoman historic heritage, 2) the declining of economic growth which affects foreign investments, the relationship with different actors and with the EU and NATO and 3) the fragilities of the democratic regime, the limited freedom of expression, and the tight control of the media and the judiciary.

In recent times one of the issues that has caused more concerns is the conflict between Turkey and Greece. However, Eduard Soler believes that this is not a factor that undermines greatly the relationship of Turkey with the EU. There has always been tension between Greece and Turkey and even more between Turkey and Cyprus, but there have been things that have changed recently.

The fossil fuels findings, which under different circumstances could have been an incentive for cooperation among the countries around the Eastern Mediterranean, have instead increased the temptation of a negative sum game (someone is happy to lose if the neighbour of its rival loses even more). The issue of fossil fuels has changed somehow the terms of the debate. The other aspect that has changed is the involvement in this Eastern Mediterranean matrix of complexity because there is not only one tension, but several sources of tension of external regional actors, of actors that are not from the Eastern Mediterranean, of actors such as the Gulf countries, but also France and to some extent Russia that have been also meddling in this crisis trying to work in the region for its favour.

There have always been obstacles in the relations between the EU and Turkey and also within NATO, but in October or November 2020 the situation was even denser, so there has been an attempt by different parties to try at least to show good willingness and, in any case, the EU-Turkey relation is much broader than only the Eastern Mediterranean crisis.

What about the Turkish public opinion regarding a possible membership of the European Union? Sinan Ülgen refers that from the standpoint of public opinion, the EU membership goal remains popular. That has always been the case in Turkey. A look at the polls since the beginning of this century shows that there is almost always a majority
support for EU accession. The peak was the year when the negotiations were announced (2004) when the support for EU accession was about 74%. Since then, that number has come down but still is slightly above 50%.

Sinan Ülgen points out that the interesting thing is a related phenomenon. When Turkish people are asked whether they believe Turkey will become an EU member, the “yes” response is around 20%. That is the first paradox, 50% support EU accession, but only 20% believe that it will ever happen. This is perhaps the exact opposite in some European countries where the support for Turkey’s EU accession is very low - between 20-30% - but the percentage of people who believe that Turkey will become an EU member is 60-70%.

The second interesting aspect is the rather remarkable shift in terms of who supports EU accession. There is a strong nexus between public support for EU accession and Turkey’s political environment. As the government has become less committed to the EU process, support for EU accession within the electorate of the ruling party and its domestic ally (the nationalist MHP - Nationalist Movement Party) is dropping. In return, support for EU accession within the electorate of the Turkish opposition has increased considerably reaching almost 70%. This is an interesting dynamic because whereas the opposition electorate beforehand looked at this as a project that was more closely aligned with the agenda of the ruling party, today their support for EU membership is more closely linked to the understanding that the EU access would not only help Turkey economically, which was always an argument in the past, but also would help Turkey to address its shortcomings in the area of the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms.

The credibility of the accession dynamic has been greatly undermined by a set of external factors such as the Cyprus problem, which nobody knows how to solve, or by the former president of France, Sarkozy, who stated openly that he was against Turkish accession, despite France having signed the commitment to start the accession talks with Turkey back in 2004.

These aspects impact the public support of the voters of the ruling party and of the opposition electorate that is supportive of EU accession, because they see this as a reaction, as a policy prescription to the erosion of fundamental rights, democratic rule and freedom of expression.

What is the sentiment of the EU towards Turkey? Eduard Soler highlights that there are many EU policies towards Turkey, not just one. There are the ones from the EU institutions, but when it comes down to the level of Member States, not all see the issue of Turkey equally. It is not the same to be a neighbour as Bulgaria, which may think twice before pushing for sanctions because it harms the country or to be as Greece and Cyprus who see Turkey as a regional rival and as a country with whom they still have territorial and national conflicts. Turkey means differently for Germany that has at least 3 million citizens who are either Turks or German of Turkish background or for countries such as Spain and Portugal that have very few Turks.
It is also not the same to be a country where the issue of Turkey is very much part of the political debate, like France, where in moments where the elections come closer there is always the temptation to use Turkey as a scapegoat to various problems or other countries where Turkey is just a foreign policy matter and never comes down into the domestic agenda.

Therefore, as there are very different views within the EU about what to do with Turkey, political calculations add to different understandings of interests, ideas and also of values.

Ana Santos Pinto remarks that the problem is not only that the EU has different policies regarding Turkey. The main problem is that the EU cannot agree on the instruments and it cannot agree on the plan of how to deal with Turkey. There are many crises to solve, namely the refugees’ crisis. Nevertheless, there is something that is consensual - Turkey is a very important partner to the EU both in the regional context and also in the case of NATO and more broad alliances. The fragility of the EU is that it cannot agree on what to do.

More than 3 million Syrian refugees are in Turkey. This poses an internal importance inside Turkey and gives the Turkish government a negotiation leverage towards the EU which fears this issue. This is one of the major topics because migration is a large topic inside the European Union: it is a politicized topic for Member States and for citizens who sometimes do not see the difference between an economic migrant and a refugee. Turkey knows that this is a leverage not only on the issue of opening the borders, but also on the consequences it has inside the political debate in all Member States, without exception. Eduard Soler reminds that the EU reaction is of fear in this matter which is not a good framework for cooperation.
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