

Crises and Elections: What are the Consequences for Turkey's EU Bid?

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Abstract

The economic crisis in Europe and the political tension in Turkey are bad news for Turkey-EU relations. The EU crisis has weakened Turkey's traditional allies, made European public opinion more reluctant to enlarging the EU further, deteriorated the EU's image in Turkey and had an ambivalent effect for the prospects of conflict-resolution in the Eastern Mediterranean. More recently, Turkey has entered a zone of political turbulence that has created serious concerns in the EU. With these crises in the background, Turkey and the EU will hold crucial elections. The May 2014 European elections will offer a certain picture of the impact of the economic crisis on European citizens' views regarding the European project, which will have a significant influence on many EU policies, including enlargement. With the rise of anti-establishment and populist forces, the number of MEPs that vehemently oppose Turkey's membership in the EU will increase. This could have an unexpected effect: if they employ an aggressive Islamophobic discourse regarding Turkey, mainstream parties could be forced to reaffirm the need for a fair treatment of Turkey's candidacy. Yet, European politicians and EU institutions will think twice before making any gesture that could be interpreted as supporting or rewarding the Turkish government, unless there is a consistent effort to reduce domestic political polarisation and to bring the reform process back on track.

The EU crisis is not only an economic one. National democracies are also in a critical situation, and citizens have lost trust in the European institutions. National governments and the EU are being blamed for not having been able to find a quicker way out of the economic crisis, the North-South divide has widened, and all sorts of anti-establishment forces are taking advantage of citizens' disenchantment and fears.

Although the causes are radically different, Turkey is also in the midst of a political crisis with economic implications. Turkish politics are very tense since the Gezi events in June 2013, and particularly since the corruption scandal broke out in December 2013 with a criminal investigation against several AKP figures. Some controversial political and administrative decisions taken since then have damaged Turkey's image abroad. For instance, the new law tightening Internet control and the new regulation on the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) have overshadowed previous progresses, such as the September 2013 democratisation package. Moreover, political tensions have affected the economy negatively, and the Turkish central bank was compelled to raise the interest rate to stop the Lira's fall in a moment when other emerging market economies were also suffering a financial crisis and an intense pressure in the global markets.

With these crises in the background, the year 2014 opens a new political cycle for both Turkey and the EU. For Turkey, this process starts with the local elections in March, followed by presidential elections in the summer and parliamentary elections foreseen for June 2015. For the EU, the European Parliament elections in May 2014 are also a key moment. Anti-establishment, Euro-sceptic and populist forces are expected to do well in these elections. How will all this affect Turkey-EU relations in a context in which the economic crisis in Europe has not been overcome and Turkish politics are increasingly tense?

The Crisis in Europe: How Does It Affect Turkey?

When discussing the effects of the European economic and financial crisis on Turkey's interests, it is quite natural to look at the negative effects on trade and investment flows as well as on Turkey's worrying current account deficit. Yet there are at least four less-evident political effects of this crisis for Turkey and for Turkey's relations with the EU.

The first effect is that some of Turkey's traditional allies in the EU find themselves in a weaker political position. This is the case for southern European countries such as Portugal, Spain and Italy, which have traditionally pushed for a revitalisation of Turkey-EU relations and which, as a result of the crisis, have to focus on their domestic problems.¹ In the case of Italy, this is aggravated by political instability. This is taking place at the very same moment in which the crisis and the "enlargement fatigue" have created an introspective mood in the EU. Moreover, a traditional ally of Turkey, the United Kingdom, has announced a referendum on EU membership by 2017, which affirms that it wishes to renegotiate its relations with the EU and is studying how to restrict the free movement of persons. Such a position harms the British capacity to shape key decisions on the future of the EU, including enlargement policy. Hence, the role of Germany and, to some extent, France becomes more important. Angela Merkel's recent statement that she is positive about the accession talks but sceptical of the membership perspective sums up the position of both countries.²

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1 For a more detailed analysis see Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Crisis and Decline in Southern Europe: Implications for Turkey", in *Franco-Turkish Papers*, No. 8 (July 2013), <http://www.ifri.org/?page=contribution-detail&id=7773>.

2 "Merkel reiterates doubts on Turkey's EU membership, but supports talks", in *Today's Zaman*, 4 February 2014, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=338454.

The second effect is that the crisis has eroded EU citizens' trust in the European institutions. This has specific repercussions for public attitudes towards future enlargements of the EU. Comparing the responses to the Eurobarometer surveys of 2008 and 2013 shows that opposition to EU enlargement has increased by 13 points across the Union (see Annex). This trend is particularly clear in countries severely affected by economic or political crises, such as Cyprus (+33 points), Italy (+22), Spain (+21), Slovenia (+21) and Bulgaria (+21), but also in countries such as the Czech Republic (+24), Slovakia (+21) and the Netherlands (+18), where popular opinion has strongly opposed bailouts for southern Europe or where eurosceptic movements are growing. We can also observe that in countries such as Austria, France and Belgium, where right-wing populist parties are also strong, the increase in anti-enlargement attitudes is slower, but this is mainly due to the fact that the level of opposition was already very high. The UK is an interesting case, as rejection to enlargement is only at 55 percent and has only increased five points in the last five years despite the rise of UKIP and anti-migration discourses.

Third, the crisis in Europe may have contributed to the deterioration of the EU's image among ordinary people and elites in Turkey. The perception that Turkey was performing better than the EU in economic terms and the promises that Turkey would rank in the top ten economies by 2023 spread the feeling that the EU anchor was not as essential as it used to be, or at least that the EU needed Turkey as much as Turkey needed the EU.³ The image of the EU and the support for EU membership among Turkish citizens have dropped since the mid-2000s. According to the 2013 *Transatlantic trends*, only 44 percent of citizens were in favour of joining the EU, compared to 73 percent in 2004.⁴ The 2013 Eurobarometer showed that only 38 percent considered joining the EU to be a good thing, while in 2004 62 percent had given a positive response.⁵ It remains to be seen whether the recent political and economic turmoil in Turkey will alter the Turkish population's attitudes towards the EU. The good news is that the margin for improvement is very large because in recent times the level of disappointment and mistrust has reached a peak.

Fourth, it also remains to be seen whether this economic crisis could impact the territorial disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result of the Greek crisis, Athens could have an interest in resolving its conflicts with Turkey as a way to reduce its high military spending.⁶ Cyprus also suffered a devastating financial crisis due to the exaggerated size of its banking sector and the over-exposure to the Greek sovereign debt. This has increased the strategic importance of offshore gas findings and could offer a new set of incentives for finding a solution to this conflict.⁷ However, the crisis has also fuelled the rise of extreme nationalists and Europhobic forces in Greece and, to a lesser extent, in Cyprus, and has undermined the popularity of incumbent governments. In these circumstances it might be more difficult for Athens and Nicosia to push for bold decisions, as this could feed a nationalist rhetoric in both countries.



The Political Tension in Turkey: How Does It Affect Relations with the EU?

The Gezi protests in June 2013 were a test for EU-Turkey relations. The European Parliament released a very critical declaration that was met with strong words by the Turkish government. Erdoğan himself affirmed that he does not recognize any decision the European Parliament takes on Turkey and asked the European parliamentarians to look at how the police was repressing demonstrations in EU countries.⁸ The Commission also criticised the Turkish government on the management of this crisis, but Commissioner Füle wisely combined those messages with statements asking everyone not to give up on Turkey's accession process.⁹ As for member states the reactions were quite diverse. Germany, Austria and the Netherlands opposed the opening of a new chapter in the accession negotiations, considering that this would send the wrong signal.¹⁰ On the contrary, some Foreign Affairs ministers, like Emma Bonino and Carl Bildt, argued that engagement with Turkey was even more needed.¹¹

In fact, following Gezi there were some positive moves that indicated that EU-Turkey relations were gaining momentum. In October 2013 the Commission released a progress report, which was quite constructive, and although it pointed out the need for important political reforms, it recognised that there had been substantial advances and welcomed the adoption in September of a "democratisation package".¹² A few weeks later, after three years of paralysis, the EU opened chapter 22 of the accession negotiations, which deals with regional policy.¹³ Even more importantly, on December 16, the EU and Turkey signed the readmission agreement, which opened up the possibility of establishing a visa-free regime by 2015.¹⁴

The plans of the Turkish government were to build on this much-awaited decision to boost the accession process. Yet just the day after, on December 17, the Financial Crimes and Battle against Criminal Incomes Department launched a large-scale operation that resulted in the detention of almost fifty people accused of corruption and

3 Egemen Bağış, then-Minister for EU Affairs, repeatedly used those words. See, for instance, Betül Akkaya Demirbaş, "EU needs Turkey more than Turkey needs it, says Bağış", in *Today's Zaman*, 7 January 2011, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=231759.

4 German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trend Survey 2013*, <http://trends.gmfus.org/transatlantic-trends>.

5 European Commission, Annexes to *Standard Eurobarometer 62* (Autumn 2004) and *Standard Eurobarometer 80* (Autumn 2013), http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_arch_en.htm.

6 Despite the budget cuts, Greek military spending as a percentage of GDP (2.3%), remains in comparative terms among the highest in Europe and the third-highest in NATO, just behind the US and the UK. See NATO, *Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence* (PR/CP(2014)028), 24 February 2014, p. 6, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_107359.htm.

7 See International Crisis Group, "Aphrodite's Gift: Can Cypriot Gas Power a New Dialogue?", in *ICG Europe Reports*, No. 216 (April 2012), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/cyprus/216-aphrodites-gift-can-cypriot-gas-power-a-new-dialogue.aspx>; and "Divided Cyprus: Coming to Terms on an Imperfect Reality" in *ICG Europe Reports*, No. 229 (March 2014), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/cyprus/229-divided-cyprus-coming-to-terms-on-an-imperfect-reality.aspx>.

8 "I don't recognize European Parliament decision, Turkish PM Erdoğan says", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 13 June 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=48730>.

9 Ștefan Füle, *EU-Turkey bound together* (Speech/13/517), 7 June 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-517_en.htm.

10 See Andrew Rettman, "Germany to delay Turkey talks until October", in *EUobserver*, 24 June 2013, <http://euobserver.com/enlargement/120625>.

11 See Ian Traynor, "Turkey's EU membership bid falters as diplomatic row with Germany deepens", in *The Guardian*, 21 June 2013, <http://gu.com/p/3gn2h/tw>; Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Turkey: The EU must not "freeze" talks*, says Bonino, 27 June 2013, http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Sala_Stampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2013/06/20130627_turchia_bonino_ue.htm.

12 European Commission, *Turkey 2013 Progress Report* (SWD(2013) 417 final), 16 October 2013, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=celex:52013sc0417:en:not>.

13 Eduard Soler i Lecha, "A New Chapter in EU-Turkey Negotiations: a Step too Small", in *Notes internacionals CIDOB*, No. 78 (November 2013), http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/notes_internacionals/n1_78.

14 Gerald Knaus, "EU-Turkey Relations: A Visa Breakthrough?", in *Global Turkey in Europe Policy Briefs*, No. 11 (March 2014), http://www.iai.it/pdf/gte/gte_pb_11.pdf.

bribery, among which were relatives of several ministers and figures close to the governmental circles. Turkish politics then entered a zone of turbulence. Political tension rose with the approval of administrative decisions and the adoption of new regulations, which created serious concerns in Turkey but also in the EU.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan affirmed in the New Year's Eve speech that 2014 would be a key year for Turkey-EU relations and an occasion to revamp full membership talks with the EU and speed up democratization reforms.¹⁵ However, during his first visit in five years to the European institutions, EU leaders expressed their concern about recent political developments. José Manuel Barroso said after talks with Erdoğan that "whatever the problems are, the solutions should respect the principles of the rule of law and the separation of powers".¹⁶ Herman Van Rompuy also stressed that Turkey, as a candidate country, ought to respect the political criteria, including the application of the rule of law and separation of powers. He said that "it is important not to backtrack on achievements and to assure that the judiciary is able to function without discrimination or preference, in a transparent and impartial manner".¹⁷

In order to revitalise the accession process and for the EU to remain engaged in the consolidation of Turkish democracy, one possibility is to open chapters 23 (basic rights) and 24 (justice, freedom and security). However, if political tension in Turkey is on the rise, European political leaders may think twice before making moves that could be interpreted as backing the current Turkish government, particularly while the country is in the midst of an electoral period.

Speed up or slow down the negotiations process? Member states will have the last say on this, but the new European Parliament and, even more so, the new European Commission will also have a key role in taking one or the other direction.

The New Political Configuration in Europe and the Implications for Turkey's Accession Negotiations

The May 2014 European Parliament elections mark the beginning of a new political cycle in the EU. The European citizens will be electing a Parliament that has gained powers since the Lisbon Treaty entered into force. According to the Treaty, the European Council will propose a candidate to be President of the Commission, taking into account the results of those elections. This proposal will then be put before the Parliament for approval or rejection. That is why European political parties have nominated their candidates to head the Commission and have attempted to raise awareness about the importance of these elections by affirming that European citizens, through their vote, will be choosing the European government for the next four years. Not only that, but with the appointment of the new Commission, other key posts will be renovated, such as the President of the European Council and the Vice-President of the Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

The results of those elections will offer a certain picture of the impact of the economic crisis on European citizens' views regarding the European project. In these elections it is not only relevant which of Europe's main parties (social democrats or conservatives) comes first, but also how many votes and seats mainstream parties will lose, who will benefit from it and what this will mean for the sustainability of the European integration project. In that sense, all European policies

15 "Erdoğan promises EU talks will speed up in 2014", in *Today's Zaman*, 1 January 2014, http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=335494.

16 Quoted in Ian Traynor and Constanze Letsch, "Brussels urges Turkish PM Erdoğan to redraft law purging police and judiciary", *The Guardian*, 21 January 2014, <http://gu.com/p/3m43y/tw>. See also European Commission, *Statement by President Barroso following the meeting with Prime Minister Erdoğan of Turkey* (Speech/14/43), Brussels, 21 January 2014, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-43_en.htm.

17 European Council, *Remarks by President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy after his meeting with Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan* (EUCO 16/14), Brussels, 21 January 2014, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/140694.pdf.

could be affected by the results of these elections. Enlargement in general, and Turkey's accession negotiations in particular, will not be an exception.

According to the polls, the two main political forces will share power in the EU institutions. In other words, for the next four years the EU governance is likely to be based on a grand coalition both in Brussels and in Berlin. What does this mean for Turkey and for Turkey-EU relations? Social democrats have traditionally been more favourable to Turkey's accession process while Christian democrats have been more reluctant, some of them still insisting on the need to study alternatives to full membership. Thus, in line with the agreement reached in Germany between the CDU-CSU and the SPD, the following form of compromise is likely to prevail at the EU level: let's keep the process going but with no particular interest in giving a boost to it. That said, this approach might be nuanced in one or another direction depending on who is appointed for the key posts, such as Commissioner for Enlargement.

The strength or weakness of smaller political parties will also have a certain impact. The new Parliament will be more fragmented and pro-integration parties will lose support. This could undermine the role of the Parliament as a natural ally of the Commission in pushing for a bold enlargement policy. Moreover, some of Turkey's traditional allies are not expected to do well in these elections. This is the case of the Liberals, who are expected to be the big losers. With some exceptions, members of this group as well as the Greens have maintained a pro-enlargement stance and have vocally opposed any discrimination against Turkey's candidacy based on cultural or religious arguments. At the same time, they have been very active in pushing for more ambitious political reforms in Turkey, understanding that these are two sides of the same coin.

The rise of anti-establishment parties of a very different kind is likely to be one of the main characteristics of the new Parliament, reflecting, and in some cases anticipating, profound transformations in member states' politics. Some of these parties are right-wing populist forces that are eurosceptic and in some cases even europhobic and which aspire to exit from the EU or fundamentally change the nature of the Union. This is the case of the National Front in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the *Vlaams Belang* in Flanders, Austria's Freedom Party and the Sweden Democrats' Party, which have already constituted a European alliance and are expected to perform well in the May elections. If so, this will increase the number of voices against the prospect of Turkey joining the EU. However, this can have an unexpected effect: if those MEPs use racist and Islamophobic ideas against Turkey, this could force mainstream European political parties to reject those arguments and advocate a non-discriminatory policy.

Finally, the rise of left-wing parties like Tsipras-led Syriza and unclassifiable forces like the Five Star Movement in Italy is also expected to be one of the main novelties in the European Parliament. For those political forces Turkey will not be a priority. However, their attitude regarding EU-Turkey relations will very much depend on the evolution of the political situation in Turkey and whether they perceive that supporting the accession talks contributes to the defence of human rights, political freedom and social justice in Turkey. Another element to take into account is that groups such as the Five Star Movement support direct democracy and criticise elite-driven decisions that don't take into account the people's will. Thus, the need to take into account European citizens' views regarding future enlargements could become one of their demands.¹⁸

18 See, for instance, the conclusions on enlargement of Senator Luis Alberto Orellana in the Foreign Affairs Committee, 6 November 2013, available at: <http://www.listacivicaStellepavia.it/?p=6538>. See also the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee resolution of 28 November 2013 on the European Commission communication Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2013-2014, <http://www.senato.it/leg/17/BGT/Schede/docnonleg/26176.htm>.

Conclusion

Political tension in Turkey and the economic crisis in Europe do not help to re-energise Turkey-EU relations. Yet this is not the end of the story. Precisely, in a situation of crisis neither of the two parties is willing to be held responsible for a failure in the negotiation process. For both the EU and Turkey, business as usual seems more affordable than taking the risk of aborting the whole process. For the European Union, this would suppose opening a crisis with a strategic partner, and the EU has enough crises to deal with at this moment. For an individual member state, the eventual costs of doing so are even bigger, which is why not even Cyprus has been either able or willing to halt the negotiations completely. The AKP government is also not willing to be pointed to as the main party responsible for a breakdown in the negotiating process. A good part of the opposition and the national and international media would consider it a failure of

the government's foreign policy or even a corollary to an Islamising foreign policy. On top of that, in times of economic uncertainty, this could negatively impact an already vulnerable Turkish economy.

Assuming that neither the EU nor Turkey has an interest in putting an end to this process, what could be the effect of the next European Parliament elections? The most decisive element will be the rise of right-wing, eurosceptic and populist political forces in Europe that argue that Turkey has no place in the EU. This could have an ambivalent effect. It will increase the number of anti-Turkey voices in the Parliament but, depending on the aggressiveness of their arguments, this could push mainstream parties to reject such attitudes and consequently, support a fair treatment of Turkey's EU candidacy. Yet for them to do so some cooperation from the Turkish side is needed, namely reducing political polarisation and bringing the reform process back on track.

Annex

Table 1. Public opposition to further EU enlargement

	Spring 2008 (%)	Autumn 2013 (%)	Variation
Austria	63	76	+13
Belgium	48	62	+14
Bulgaria	8	29	+21
Czech Republic	26	50	+24
Cyprus	23	56	+33
Denmark	41	51	+10
Estonia	25	40	+15
Finland	50	65	+15
France	60	70	+10
Germany	58	69	+11
Greece	38	51	+13
Hungary	23	32	+9
Ireland	31	46	+15
Italy	37	59	+22
Latvia	26	38	+12
Lithuania	16	20	+4
Luxembourg	59	64	+5
Malta	15	25	+10
Netherlands	46	64	+18
Poland	12	26	+14
Portugal	31	49	+18
Romania	8	18	+10
Slovakia	21	42	+21
Slovenia	21	42	+21
Spain	16	37	+21
Sweden	36	40	+4
United Kingdom	50	55	+5
EU27*	39	52	+13

* Data for Autumn 2013 refer to 28 member countries, after the accession of Croatia on 1 July 2013.

Source: European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 69* (Spring 2008) and *Standard Eurobarometer 80* (Autumn 2013), http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_arch_en.htm.