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60 YEARS OF TÜRKIYE-EUROPEAN UNION RELATIONS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Hasan Deniz Pekşen

Abstract

This study aims to examine the transformation of Türkiye-European Union (EU) relations through a descriptive approach, to reveal the aspects of the relationship that remain constant and those that change, and to evaluate the past and future of Türkiye's candidacy process. The study addresses this by focusing on the turning points that shape the dynamics of the relationship and examines the direction in which the relationship has evolved after each turning point. Accordingly, the pre-EU period, the process of transformation into the EU, and finally post-millennium period are discussed. As a result, it has been concluded that economic relations are a dynamic that positively contributes to the progress of the relationship and the candidacy process, while geopolitical and security issues are dynamics that hinder the progress of the candidacy process.

Keywords: Türkiye, European Union, Türkiye-EU Relations, Türkiye's EU Candidacy

Introduction

Türkiye's European Union (EU) membership is an issue that has been around for nearly as long as the organization itself. Türkiye was a contributor and 'witness' of the almost the whole period of EU's transformation process and it had applied to the union before the current state of the EU came into being. In the earlier period, the application process was initially delayed due to domestic developments in Türkiye. Subsequently, it was linked to specific criteria during the transformation of the European Communities into the European Union.

In this regard, an assessment of Türkiye's membership process provides a unique perspective that compares the transformation pro-

cess of the European Union and its current agenda. The aim of this study is to evaluate the issues that challenge Türkiye's membership process and the intra-organizational disagreements, thus questioning the transformation of the EU over the course of 30 years.

In this context, both the criteria declared during the full membership process and the current political agenda will be examined to assess the membership process. Through this assessment, it is aimed to shed light on the concerns of the EU and Türkiye's membership process. In order to do this, the paper divides the Türkiye-EU relations into three historical periods and focuses on how the relations were shaped in these periods. The first period is the contains the years between 1960 and 1987 which points the legal ground of relations. The second is between 1987 and 2001, which can be assumed as an instable process until the official candidacy of Turkish Republic. And the last period will focus on the years between 2001 and 2023, which is shaped by the full membership process and the crises effect this process. Through comparing the periods, a general assessment will be made on the challenges and prospects of the relations.

1960-1987: A Transformative Journey

The period from 1960 to 1987 marked a significant chapter in the complex relationship between Türkiye and the EU. While the formal application for EU membership was submitted by Türkiye in 1987, however the roots of this association can be traced back to the early 1960s.

In 1963, the Ankara Agreement marked a significant milestone by laying the foundation for a closer economic relationship between Türkiye and the European Economic Community (EEC). This agreement was driven by the EEC's broader economic perspective and objectives, primarily aiming to establish a Customs Union and promote economic integration between the member states and Türkiye. The agreement envisaged a phased approach to achieving this goal, with provisions for reducing tariffs and aligning economic policies.

Despite the promising start, full-fledged membership discussions did not commence until the late 1980s. This delay was largely due to a combination of internal and external factors. Throughout the 1960s

and 1970s, Türkiye grappled with significant political instability, characterized by frequent changes in government, military coups in 1960 and 1971, and periods of martial law. These political upheavals were accompanied by economic challenges, including high inflation, budget deficits, and a dependence on foreign aid and loans.

Additionally, Türkiye's economic landscape during these decades was marked by efforts to transition from an agrarian economy to a more industrialized one. However, these efforts were hampered by inadequate infrastructure, limited access to capital, and a lack of technological advancement. The global oil crises of the 1970s further exacerbated Türkiye's economic difficulties, leading to energy shortages and increased debt. The political and economic instability during this period made it difficult for Türkiye to meet the criteria and standards set by the EEC for closer economic integration and eventual membership. It wasn't until the stabilization of Türkiye's political environment and the implementation of significant economic reforms in the 1980s that the path towards more serious membership negotiations could be pursued.

The 1980 Coup would be the biggest obstacle against the Türkiye's path towards EU integration. (Büyükbay, 2016: 28) Despite these great challenges, Türkiye's commitment to European ideals remained steadfast, and efforts were made to align domestic policies with EU standards. Beside the economic and domestic issues of Türkiye, the Cyprus issue emerged as a crucial regional factor influencing Türkiye-EU relations during the same period. The 1974 Turkish intervention in Cyprus and the subsequent division of the island created tensions with EU member states. Disagreements on the Cyprus problem remained a stumbling block, delaying the initiation of formal membership negotiations as it remains today. (Akbayrak, 2021)

By the late 1980s, as the Cold War thawed, and geopolitical dynamics shifted, and Türkiye's desire for closer ties with the EU gained momentum. The withdrawal of military administration from Turkish political life was also an important component for the aforementioned momentum. As a result of this process, in 1987, Türkiye officially applied for EU membership. This was signaling a new phase in their relationship. The subsequent years would witness the beginning of formal accession talks, setting the stage for a complex and multifaceted journey towards closer integration. (Özerdem, 2021: 87-

92) In this respect, the period from 1960 to 1987 laid the groundwork for Türkiye's eventual application for EU membership. The geopolitical landscape, economic challenges, and regional conflicts all played roles in shaping the dynamics between Türkiye and the EU during these decades, setting the stage for the more detailed negotiations and challenges that would follow in the subsequent years.



Figure 1: The Effect of 1980 Coup Process on Türkiye's GDP
Source: World Bank, 2024

1987-2001: Navigating Challenges and Aspirations

The period between 1987 and 2001 was characterized by both optimism and challenges in the relationship between Türkiye and the EU. Following Türkiye's formal application for EU membership in 1987, the ensuing years witnessed a mix of progress and obstacles.

In 1995, the Customs Union Agreement came into effect, representing a significant economic step forward. This agreement aimed at fostering economic integration by eliminating tariffs and trade barriers between Türkiye and the EU member states. It provided a framework for increased economic cooperation and trade liberalization, positioning Türkiye as a significant economic partner. (Dura & Atik, 2015: 43) The agreement provided a robust framework for increased economic cooperation, ensuring that Türkiye adopted

the EU's Common External Tariff on goods imported from non-EU countries. This alignment helped to standardize trade practices and facilitated smoother trade flows. Between 1995 and 2000, Türkiye's exports to the EU increased by over 50%, while imports from the EU grew by nearly 40%, illustrating the immediate positive impact on trade volumes. (Felbermayr and Yalcın, 2021)

Moreover, the Customs Union Agreement required Türkiye to align its commercial legislation and policies with those of the EU, encompassing competition policy, intellectual property rights, and customs procedures. The agreement also positioned Türkiye as a significant economic partner by integrating its economy with the vast EU market. As a result, Türkiye's GDP saw an average annual growth rate of approximately 4% in the decade following the implementation of the Customs Union. This growth was driven by the expansion of the manufacturing sector, which benefited from enhanced access to European markets and the adoption of European standards and practices.

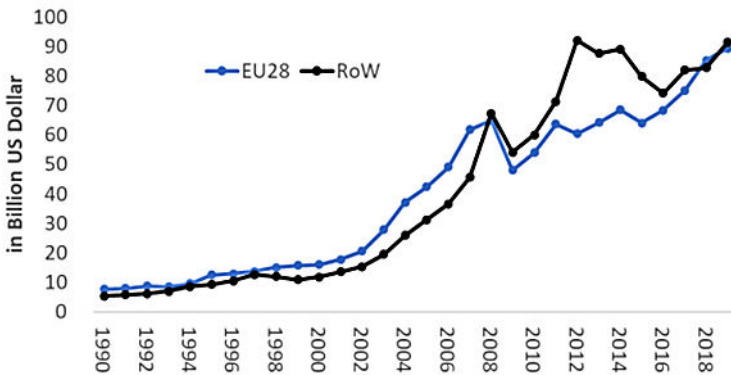


Figure 2: Development of Aggregated Exports From Türkiye to EU and the Rest of the World in Selected Years
Source: Felbermayr and Yalcın, 2021: 9

However, the integration also posed challenges. Türkiye had to cope with increased competition from European products, which pressured domestic industries to enhance their competitiveness. The need to meet EU standards prompted significant investments in technology and infrastructure, fostering overall economic modernization. Despite economic progress, political challenges persisted. The Cyprus issue remained a contentious point, with the division of the island affecting Türkiye's candidacy. The EU's reluctance to initiate full membership negotiations led to frustration in Turkish side, highlighting the complex interplay between geopolitical concerns and accession criteria. (Özek&Kışman, 2020)

In this respect, throughout the 1990s, political instability within Türkiye, coupled with economic challenges, influenced the pace of reforms necessary for EU integration. The EU, in turn, stressed the importance of democratic reforms, human rights, and the rule of law as essential criteria for membership. The PKK terrorism also played an important role in relations. While Türkiye was accusing some of the EU member states by implicitly supporting the PKK, the EU Institutions were accusing Türkiye by the violation of human rights in the struggle process. (İnat, 2016)

On the contrary to all problems, the Helsinki Summit in 1999 marked a turning point. The EU recognized Türkiye as a candidate country, acknowledging its potential accession. This decision provided a renewed sense of optimism and commitment on both sides. And as the 21st century approached, Türkiye underwent economic and political reforms to meet EU standards. However, the road to accession remained complex. The early 2000s set the stage for deeper cooperation and intensified negotiations, reflecting the ongoing evolution of Türkiye-EU relations. (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023)

As a consequence of the aforementioned breaking points, the period from 1987 to 2001 witnessed both economic integration and political challenges in Türkiye-EU relations. While the Customs Union Agreement enhanced economic ties, issues such as Cyprus and the pace of political reforms underscored the intricate nature of the accession process. The recognition of Türkiye as a candidate country in 1999 marked a positive step, foreshadowing the more intense negotiations and transformative developments that would unfold in the subsequent years.

2001-2023: Progress, Crises and Challenges

The period from 2001 to 2023 in Türkiye-EU relations has been marked by a dynamic interplay of progress, setbacks, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. In the early 2000s, Türkiye intensified its efforts to align with EU standards. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), in power since 2002, implemented a series of political and economic reforms, aiming to strengthen democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These reforms were pivotal in the context of Türkiye's EU accession process, demonstrating a commitment to European values. (Rençber, 2016)

However, challenges persisted, and the pace of negotiations remained slow. The Cyprus issue remained a significant stumbling block. Especially the process after the Annan Plan played a crucial turning point for the Turkish point of view on EU membership. When the Turkish side of the island supported the United Nations' plan and Greek side of the island refused, the Turkish government believed that the Cyprus issue will be construct in a new form. (TASAM, 2011) However, EU accepted the Republic of Cyprus, which is exist and govern only by Greek side in practice, as a member state despite all the process. This reflected by the Turkish refusal to recognize the Republic of Cyprus and this tension hindered progress. Additionally, concerns within the EU regarding the state of democracy and human rights in Türkiye occasionally strained the relationship.

In the 2004 referendums, the Turkish Cypriots overwhelmingly supported the plan, with 65% voting in favor, believing it would pave the way for reunification and smooth Türkiye's path to EU membership. In stark contrast, 76% of Greek Cypriots rejected the plan, leading to its ultimate failure. (BBC, 2004) Despite the Turkish Cypriot support for the Annan Plan, the EU proceeded to accept the Republic of Cyprus, governed de facto only by the Greek Cypriot administration, as a member state on May 1, 2004. This decision, seen as disregarding the Turkish Cypriot vote, led to a profound sense of disillusionment in Türkiye. The Turkish government viewed this outcome as a setback, believing that the EU had failed to fairly address the Cyprus issue, and felt betrayed by the process.

The subsequent refusal of Türkiye to recognize the Republic of Cyprus further strained relations. This non-recognition extended to

practical aspects such as refusing to open Turkish ports and airports to Cypriot vessels and aircraft, which became a significant obstacle in the accession negotiations. The EU, in response, froze eight of the 35 negotiating chapters in 2006, demanding that Türkiye fulfill its obligations under the Customs Union agreement to all member states, including Cyprus.

In addition to the Cyprus issue, concerns within the EU regarding the state of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights in Türkiye also strained the relationship. Reports by the European Commission and various human rights organizations highlighted issues such as restrictions on freedom of expression, press freedom, judicial independence, and the treatment of political dissidents and minorities. The 2016 attempted coup in Türkiye and the subsequent government crackdown exacerbated these concerns.

The overall slow pace of negotiations and the growing perception of double standards and political bias within the EU further fueled skepticism in Türkiye about the sincerity of the EU's commitment to its accession. Public opinion in Türkiye reflected this growing disenchantment. Support for EU membership, which was over 70% in the early 2000s, declined to below 50% by the late 2010s, according to surveys conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV, 2011: 22).

Thus, the interplay of geopolitical issues like the Cyprus conflict and internal political dynamics within Türkiye and the EU continued to impede progress in accession talks, casting a long shadow over Türkiye's EU aspirations and contributing to the complex and often contentious nature of their relationship.

In 2016, a critical turning point occurred with the attempted coup in Türkiye. This process created mutual distrust in both sides. The EU warned Türkiye about widespread arrests and restrictions on civil liberties, and this raised concerns within the EU about the state of democracy in Türkiye. On the other hand, Türkiye accused the EU by not understanding the real face of the danger. Because of the nature of the Gülenist cult was spread all the institutions in Türkiye, Turkish government declared that this was the only way to eliminate the new coup attempts. Migration became another pivotal issue in the relationship. As Türkiye faced the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis, an agreement was reached in 2016, wherein Türkiye would help

control the flow of migrants to the EU in exchange for visa liberalization for Turkish citizens. This agreement showcased the pragmatic cooperation between Türkiye and the EU in addressing shared challenges. (Ekşi, 2016)

Apart the political developments, economic ties continued to strengthen throughout these years. The Customs Union Agreement, in force since 1995, contributed to increased trade and economic integration. (Dura&Atik, 2015) The EU remained a significant trading partner for Türkiye as the first in Türkiye's foreign trade, and economic cooperation flourished, providing a stabilizing force in the relationship. And as 2023, Türkiye-EU relations stand at a crossroads. The unresolved issues, including the Cyprus problem and bilateral accusations about Türkiye's democratic positioning, remain, posing challenges to the path of accession. The geopolitical landscape has also shifted, with both the EU and Türkiye facing new regional and global challenges, further influencing the dynamics of their relationship. The Russo-Ukrainian War became the latest example for how the geopolitical environment can create a space for bilateral relations.

Conclusion: Challenges and Prospects in Türkiye-EU Relations

The relationship between Türkiye and the European Union has been a complex tapestry woven with challenges and prospects. Examining both dimensions provides insight into the dynamics shaping this crucial geopolitical partnership.

As first, the longstanding Cyprus dispute remains a central challenge for the future of the relations. The stalemate on the status of Cyprus Island, creates great oppositions on energy politics, East Mediterranean geopolitics and general flow of relations. The divided island has become a symbol of the complexities surrounding territorial disputes within the EU.

The second challenge for the relations is the mutual accusations on the attitudes to human rights. EU's concerns about the state of democracy and human rights in Türkiye have strained relations. On the one hand, the aftermath of the 2016 attempted coup saw a crackdown on perceived dissent, raising apprehensions within the EU about the

trajectory of Türkiye's democratic institutions. On the other hand, Türkiye perceived the suspicious attitude of EU as a trust-breaking indicator for the relations.

The third and the fast rising challenge for the relations caused by migration issue. While the EU and Türkiye cooperated on managing the migration crisis, this partnership also exposed underlying tensions. Disagreements over burden-sharing, coupled with security concerns, highlighted the delicate balance between cooperation and discord. And increasing public pressure on the Turkish government for the withdrawal from the agreement between the EU and Türkiye on refugees, has the potential to make the relations worse.

The fourth challenge derives from economic field. Economic disparities and differing levels of development between Türkiye and the EU member states present ongoing challenges. Achieving economic convergence and addressing structural issues require sustained effort and collaboration.

Beside the challenges, the prospects for the relations points various futures. In this context, long history of economic relations, strategic requirements, cultural ties and structural transformations can change the direction of relations.

For instance, the Customs Union Agreement, in force since 1995, continues to be a cornerstone of economic relations. Both parties stand to benefit from deeper economic integration, fostering trade, investment, and shared prosperity. And beside the crucial role of economy, strategic environment push the relations to a positive agenda. In an era of geopolitical shifts, Türkiye's strategic location is of immense importance to the EU. Collaborative efforts in addressing regional challenges, such as security threats and conflict resolution, can strengthen the strategic partnership. However, it has to be pointed out as well, that if this security threads would not be managed in a cooperation, this could lead to the deterioration of the relations.

In addition to political economical inputs, structural inputs can also contribute to a positive output for the relations. Türkiye's ongoing commitment to political and economic reforms enhances its prospects for EU accession. The EU, in turn, can play a constructive role by supporting and encouraging reforms that align with European values. And the consistent transformation process of Türkiye gives a confidence for the direction of the relations. As another structural

component, cultural ties and people-to-people connections constitute a strong foundation. Promoting cultural understanding and fostering educational exchanges can contribute to a more positive and cooperative relationship. In this context, especially Erasmus programs play a vital role for the future leaders.

As a conclusion the relations has the potential to give a wind for both directions. In the light of the long candidacy process of Türkiye, it is not hard to allege that the strategic environment and existence or absence of talented leaders will determine which wind is going to be used in for the future of relations.

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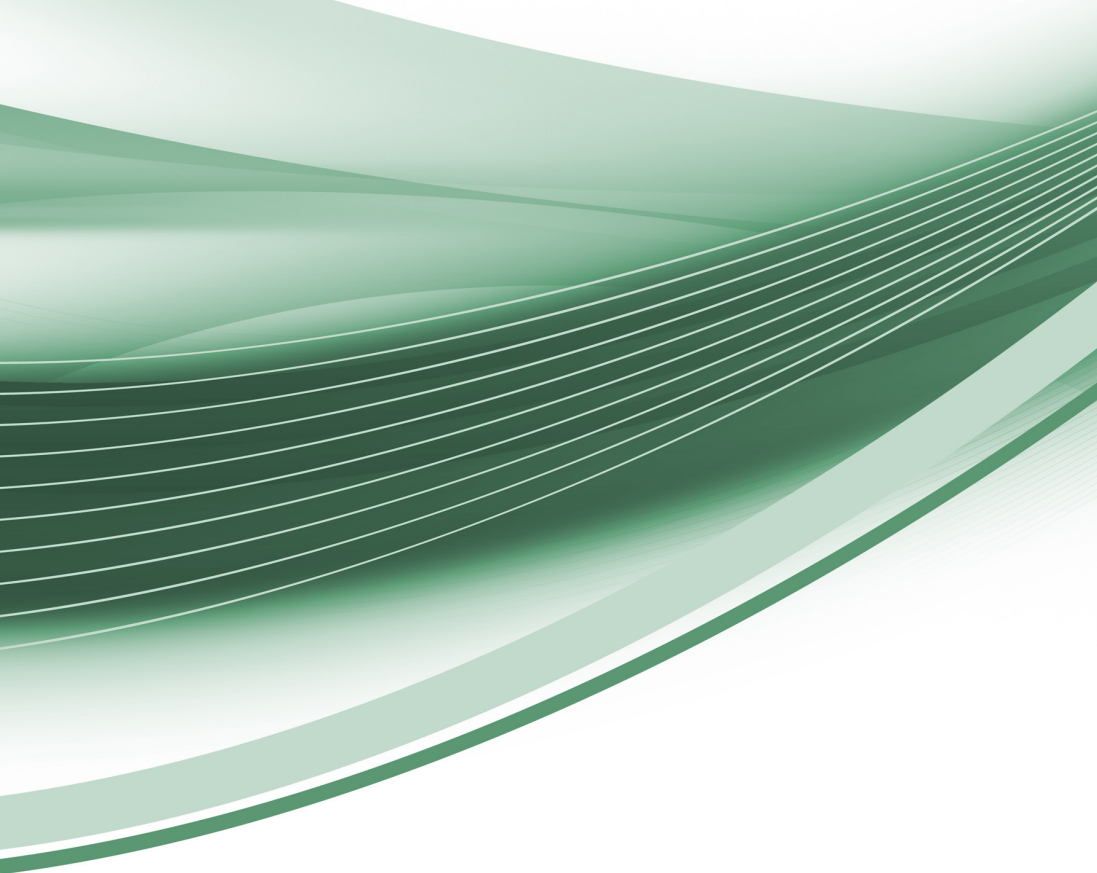
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