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SALVAGING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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There have been numerous articles, reports, virtual meetings and other sorts of assessments regarding the latest situation of Turkey – EU relations. These have increased especially in the last year. This is due to a growing deterioration of the relations since July 2016, after the failed coup attempt in Turkey. Relations have never been easy but soon after every down turn there would be a respite and effort to come closer. This is not the case this time. After four and half years it has gone from bad to worse. That is why we need to stop the haemorrhage and salvage the relationship before we reach a point of no return.

There is deep distrust on both sides. Ironically soon after accession negotiations began in 2005, at a time when both sides should have gotten closer, structural and political problems arose. The process suffered. The real damage came after the migration agreement on March 18, 2016, which also encompassed all aspects of the association. While illegal crossings from Turkey to Greece diminished dramatically, the EU decided to be selective in fulfilling its commitments, using the aftermath of the coup attempt as an excuse.

On the other side of the coin, the EU has accused Turkey of backsliding on democracy, human rights and the rule of law while exploiting the refugees and migration as an element of blackmail.

Regardless of these views, it is difficult to take a step forward unless the parties speak to each other. There are misunderstandings and faulty knowledge on both sides. Public opinion is becoming polarized.

The two sides are getting farther away and there are no real efforts to get closer, expecting the first step to come from the opposite side. Oddly, neither side is willing.

Dialogue which started with the new Commission and Council have focused on issues which mostly concern the interests of the EU, such as immigration and the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria or Libya. However, the main elements in this relationship are membership negotiations, updating the Customs Union, ensuring visa exemptions for Turkish citizens and having a sustainable and regular dialogue at all levels.

Both sides need each other whether they acknowledge it or not. The European Council which meets on 10 – 11 December, will discuss EU's stance towards Turkey. Greece and

Cyprus are already demanding strong language and measures against Turkey with respect to what is happening in the Eastern Mediterranean. There are others like Austria that would support even stronger decisions such as ending the accession process or France that wishes to suspend the Customs Union. These are foolhardy thoughts. The relationship is already dead in the water on all the main aspects. Hence, not only does the EU have no more substantive measures, but harsh language would only result in aggravation and push the sides further away.

The European Council of October 1, 2020 declared that *“Provided constructive efforts to stop illegal activities vis-à-vis Greece and Cyprus are sustained, the European Council has agreed to launch a positive political EU-Turkey agenda with a specific emphasis on the modernisation of the Customs Union and trade facilitation, people to people contacts, High level dialogues, continued cooperation on migration issues, in line with the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.”*¹ This may have satisfied some members but setting conditions do not work on Turkey, notwithstanding the fact that there are no real measures that would hurt Turkey.

The relationship will not reach the point we desire without fundamental change on both sides. The parties seem to imprison themselves in their strict policies. The rhetoric on both sides have to go down more than a few notches.

Many observers are grasping at straws on how to bridge the differences and searching for clues on what could be done.

In this case, even if options to improve relations are limited, they are not absent. Whatever is to be done, it is necessary to move ahead or the relationship will slide away.

Turkey is a democracy with many challenges. Nevertheless, it has a resilient and lively advanced society that strongly believes in human rights, the rule of law and democratic values. Turkey should continue on the path of reforms and their implementation and the EU should assist as it did many other candidates in overcoming these challenges.

To repeat, the key points for Turkey are restarting the accession negotiations, finalising the visa exemption, improving the Customs Union and establishing high level meetings. The EU's main interest are on migration and the international matters where Turkey plays a prominent role.

Realistically, no one should expect any progress on accession talks. On visa liberalisation Turkey still has to fulfil the remaining benchmarks in order to ask the EU to meet its own obligations. The Customs Union has been hijacked by political issues. It may be more appropriate to review and change the elements (such as public procurement, services and agriculture) in the roadmap agreed with the Commission in 2015, and to identify different areas (such as the digital economy). In July 2019, the EU Council took a decision *“not to hold the Association Council and further meetings*

¹ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/01/european-council-conclusions-on-external-relations-1-october-2020/?utm_source=POLITICO.EU&utm_campaign=c1ed0816dd-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_10_02_05_06&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_10959edeb5-c1ed0816dd-189181317

*of the EU-Turkey high-level dialogues for the time being.*² Yet the EU holds regular Summits with many third countries, as well as the Western Balkans, where not all of them are candidates.

Even if Turkey fulfils expectations, relations will still remain limited for three reasons. One is the perennial Cyprus issue. Efforts to resolve the Cyprus problem are as old as Turkey's interactions with the EU. Countless attempts have been made so far to no avail. Without resolving this issue or changing EU structures and decision-making mechanisms, positive steps regarding membership should not be expected.

The second hurdle in front of Turkish accession is population. In the EU institutions and in general, the weight of members is determined by the number of its inhabitants. Membership in the European Parliament, the Commission and the distribution of tasks in other EU institutions are arranged accordingly. Consequently, membership of Turkey means carrying the same weight as Germany. This is a major obstacle to Turkish accession.

Lastly, religion and cultural differences remain an implicit obstacle, although the EU claims to be secular.

Even if other reasons are put forward against Turkish membership, the most important obstacles are those mentioned. Despite these difficulties it is essential to have a proper relationship, as history has taught us that nothing remains static and change can happen unexpectedly.

There is a need to look at the developing international scene. The Biden Administration will most probably return to multilateralism. The Transatlantic Trade Partnership talks between the US and the EU that started during the Obama era may finally be realised. Russia will continue to be a disruptive power. The Middle East is going through a transformation as alliances shift. The Balkans need a boost if they ever have a chance for membership. The rising powers of China and India will continue to increase their influence. When you see how the global outlook is evolving, it is inconceivable to see Turkey and the EU bickering. There are so many areas of convergence, ranging from foreign policy, energy, economy, the green deal and trade to combating terrorism and other overlapping interests. Who profits from this current situation? Only those that do not want either side to develop and strengthen.

As a result, the EU, with which Turkey has always been very close geographically and historically, is its biggest trade partner and largest investor. If we are to think about the future, it is in the interest of both sides to be in a sustainable, honest association.

The way out of this Gordian Knot is actually very simple. Do something that hasn't been done. Have a dialogue on all the issues, whether it's the Eastern Mediterranean, human rights, Cyprus, Customs Union, migration or visa exemption among others. No threats or harsh language. A new relationship encompassing genuine discussion on the issues mentioned above, leaving past accusations but without forgetting the goal of membership. Times have changed so let us start afresh. Get around a table and have a

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/07/15/turkish-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-adopts-conclusions/pdf>

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real conversation discussing where the two sides wish to go. Start small and go up. Build trust. Consider where we will be in the next five or ten years? Put aside the rhetoric, talk and look at the wider interest. At its meeting on 10 – 11 December, if it wishes to be constructive, the European Council should call for such a meeting.