Role of the EU in Turkey’s Policy of Westernization, Promotion of Human Rights and Democratic Consolidation

by Cenap Çakmak

During the last three decades, the EU has played a visible role in the transformation of Turkey particularly in the fields of human rights and democratization. However, it should be noted that this is a role defined and conceptualized in connection with the EU’s transformation from a technical and traditional international organization to a political actor as well as a supranational organization with a keen interest in the protection and promotion of human rights.\(^1\) In other words, Turkey’s relations with the EU have gone through a process of redefinition based on their changing priorities and identities over the past decades.

Turkey’s engagement with the Occident can be traced for centuries; however, it is generally acknowledged that Turkey became involved in European affairs approximately 150 years ago when Ottoman Turkey was admitted as an equal participant in the continental balance of power by the Treaty of Paris concluding the Crimean War in 1856.\(^2\) Regardless of whether this was a deliberate choice or an imposition by the conditions of the time, Ottoman Turkey sought to align itself with the Western world, adopting a fairly ambitious project of European orientation.

This has remained the case during the republican era; with one slight difference the founders of the new Turkish state boldly underlined their regime’s future goal as aligning with the West in an attempt to leave the Ottoman legacy behind. The choice was particularly interesting as Turkey’s war of liberation was fought against mainly Western states including Great Britain and France. Despite this, Ataturk, the founder of the new state, showed eagerness to preserve the country’s Western orientation in an effort to raise its standards to those held by the European nations.\(^3\) For Ataturk and the Kemalist cadres, the main aim was to pull Turkey out from backwardness to, in his oft-repeated words, “the level of contemporary civilization”. In their view, the

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3. For details on this discussion, see for example, Dilek Barlas and Serhat Güvenç, “Turkey and the Idea of a European Union during the Inter-war Years, 1923-39,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, v. 45, n. 3 (2009): 425-446.
only viable models in front of Turkey were the Western countries; to westernize was to modernize. The countries that served as a model for Turkey were industrialized and advanced in technology.4

From another perspective, however, this was the outcome of a pragmatic deliberation. Turkey, satisfied with the post-World War I status-quo and political settlement, was seeking protection and territorial integrity. Westernization and a preservation of the geographical status quo were regarded as the two fundamental determinants of the Turkish foreign policy at the outset.5 Pursuing these two aims within the same foreign policy framework has remained constant for quite some time. There has been no conflict between these aims as Turkey’s Western orientation has also served as a contributing factor for the fulfillment of its security needs.

It should be noted however, that rapprochement between the European West and Turkey on an institutional basis did not become a reality up until the end of World War II. In the aftermath of the war, both parties have developed a pattern of bilateral relations mainly focused on their own security concerns.6 Turkey sought the support and protection of the Western states due to a visible threat from the Soviet Union, which announced it would not renew the 1925 Friendship and Neutrality Agreement expressing grave territorial demands on the Eastern parts of the country.7 This meant that once again the two founding principles and determinants of Turkish foreign policy perfectly overlapped.

In terms of its security concerns, the emerging European institutions were the best allies for Turkey; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was of particular importance because of the collective security framework it provided for its members. The Council of Europe, established to promote democracy and human rights in the Western European countries, was the political leg of a broader alliance devised to address the Soviet threat. Turkey was admitted into the Council as a founding member even though it did not have a working democratic system at the time.

Turkey applied to the European Economic Community (EEC), for full membership in the late 1950s in an attempt to confirm its eagerness to join the Western world. This was not a move for economic reasons nor to consolidate democracy and promote human rights in the country. For Turkey, the EEC membership bid was a natural and inevitable initiative as part of a broader strategy and foreign policy identity. For the European states, Turkey’s application was seen as a sign of loyalty to Western security and political posture against the Soviet threat. Official statements by Turkish political figures confirmed that Turkey did not view the EEC as a useful tool for economic gains. Rather, the application was filed upon the basis it would move Turkey closer to the Western world. In other words, this was a political initiative aimed at underlining Turkey’s Western orientation.

Bilateral relations between Turkey and the EEC remained at a relatively low profile compared with the intensification of ties with NATO and other political and security institutions of the Western alliance during the Cold War era. During this period, the nature of the relations were primarily determined and defined by technical issues, rather than thorny political disagreements or controversies as it was the Council of Europe, which played the main political role within it. However, subsequent to the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc, the EEC evolved into a political organization with a visibly strong institutional identity and ideational priorities.

The EU emerged in this era, with a keen interest in human rights and democratization and replaced the Council of Europe, which started paying less attention to these issues. Although the CoE has been the main institution embodying European norms and values, it did not have the carrot/stick mechanisms equivalent to the EU. Thus for Turkey, the EU accession process pushed Turkey to commit systematically to European norms. For example, the endorsement of the ECHR’s decisions on Turkey in European Commission Progress Reports has motivated Turkish governments to implement Court decisions.8 These have in turn provoked internal debates as to the reasons for the violations and their solutions (often through political reforms or increased political will above the bureaucracy to implement the already passed bills).

Along with the end of the Cold War, this has been a turning point for Turkey. Turkish foreign policy needed to develop a new identity since its two founding principles were not compatible anymore. In other words, emphasis upon Westernization required greater efforts towards democratization and improvement of human rights as conditioned by the EU.

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4 It is interesting to note that it is still claimed by many experts and thinkers that Turkey still has no real alternative to the EU.
whereas, preservation of territorial integrity was interpreted as staying away from legal commitments under international law which arose from accession to relevant global mechanisms.

Turkish foreign policy has failed to adjust to the new requirements introduced by the EU particularly during 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, acting decisively, the EU has repeatedly urged Turkey to comply with its membership criteria (which acts as agents of transformation in member and candidate countries). This was a well-defined role that the EU was eager to play as part of its new political identity.

EU as Promoter of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

The promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms has been a task performed in Europe by the Council of Europe up until the 1990s. This role was recognized by the European states attached to liberal democratic values, as well as by the EU. This was only natural as the Council had well-defined procedures and institutions on that matter including the European Court of Human Rights. Even as late as the mid-1980s, the EU endorsed the Council as the major actor in the field of human rights. For instance, the Single European Act, the first major EU document to make reference to human rights and democratization as part of its responsibility to “aim at speaking ever increasingly with one voice and to act with consistency and solidarity,” refers to the Council’s European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as one of the primary documents that will serve as basis for its determination to “work together to promote democracy.”

In the 1990s however, the EU as an emerging political actor with visible ambitions to develop a common foreign policy identity, created space for human rights and democratization in its agenda and field of activities. The fundamental objective of the new tendency has been twofold: to consolidate democratization and to promote human rights within the member states; and to perform the same task with respect to the non-members, particularly those seeking full membership and those maintaining firm economic relations with the EU. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 further underlined the importance of the political conditions legally. Article 6 reiterates that the EU is ‘founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law which are common to the member states’; thus, any state seeking EU membership, must show during the negotiation phase that it possesses these qualities (as they are understood by the EU).

A general observation of Turkey’s attitudes in this period reveals that Turkish foreign policy makers have been responsive to EU demands over the promotion of human rights and democratic consolidation. This has not been because Turkey was a state that placed strong emphasis upon human rights, but because it was committed to becoming part of Europe, a historically endorsed political goal by its foreign policy establishment. It can also be observed that the introduction of democratic rules and the promotion of human rights has not been problem-free for Turkey, mostly because of the need to take security measures which often go against protection of individual rights and freedoms. Particularly the fight against PKK terror has served as the main source of controversy in this period. The EU request for the recognition of rights has been upheld as a minimum standard for membership. Whilst trying to accommodate the EU wishes on recognition of rights and freedoms, Turkey had to pay attention to territorial its integrity, which in its view was being undermined by separatist terror activities.

Conclusion

The influence of the EU membership bid in Turkey’s transformation in the fields of human rights and democratization is undeniable. The visible influence is surely attributable to the effective use of conditionality, an effective democracy promotion strategy that proves to be more successful than the strategy of offering incentives. However, EU conditionality is not the only factor explaining the recent changes in Turkey. In fact it is possible to argue that EU conditionality was not very effective from 2000 to 2005, before accession talks. There are other factors such as ambiguities about conditionality and whether Turkey will be able to gain admission and internal political developments in Turkey that have “have slowed down political reform in Turkey.” Failure of the power elites in Turkey to display strong unity and commitment to the EU membership bid and lack of popular mobilization are other major factors for the stalled reforms.

Additionally, it should also be noted that conditionality is


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not always an effective mechanism determining the process of transformation in a candidate country.\textsuperscript{14} For instance, a study concluded “there is no automatic locking-in effect of European integration; and that conditionality assists democratic consolidation more in structural than in attitudinal or behavioral terms.”\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, it is proven that since 2004, the effectiveness of the EU conditionality has been reduced.\textsuperscript{16} For this reason, in order to understand the transformation in Turkey it is better to rely on a “broader approach, encompassing the effects of other relevant actors, both internal and external, to complement the impact of EU conditionality.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17} Mustafa Aydın and Sinem Açıkmeşe, “Europeanization through EU conditionality: Understanding the new era in Turkish foreign policy,” \textit{Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans}, v. 9, n. 3 (2007): 274.

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