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European Union-Turkey Relations: Impasse and Ways Out

Interview with Dr. Yaşar Aydın



PREFACE

The 2023 Turkey Report published by the European Union Commission at the beginning of November this year and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Germany in the middle of last month were two important developments that shed light on today's Turkey-Germany relations and Turkey's relations with the European Union. We asked Dr. Yaşar Aydın from the Center for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin to comment on the latest developments in Turkey-EU relations. Answering our questions, Aydın evaluated how Turkey is perceived by political actors and expert circles within the EU and Turkey's EU membership prospect. Pointing out that Turkey-EU relations appear to be at an impasse, Aydın argues that there are ways out of this impasse.

As the European Institute at Istanbul Bilgi University, we wish to all Almanya Notları / Germany Brief readers health, peace and happiness in 2024.

ÖNSÖZ

Avrupa Birliği Komisyonu'nun bu yılın kasım ayı başında yayınladığı 2023 Türkiye Raporu ve Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın geçtiğimiz ay ortasında Almanya'ya yaptığı ziyaret, günümüz Türkiye-Almanya ilişkilerine ve Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği ilişkilerine ışık tutan iki önemli gelişme oldu. Berlin'deki Alman Uluslararası Politika ve Güvenlik Politikaları Enstitüsü (SWP) Uygulamalı Türkiye Çalışmaları Merkezi'nden (CATS) Dr. Yaşar Aydın'dan Türkiye-AB ilişkilerindeki son gelişmeleri Almanya Notları için yorumlamasını istedik. Sorularımızı yanıtlayan Aydın, Türkiye, AB siyasi aktör ve uzman çevrelerde nasıl algılandığını ve Türkiye'nin AB üyelik ihtimalini değerlendirdi. Türkiye-AB ilişkilerinin bir çıkmazda görüldüğüne dikkat çeken Aydın, bu çıkmazdan çıkış yolları olduğunu savunuyor.

İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Avrupa Birliği Enstitüsü olarak, 2024 yılında tüm Almanya Notları okurlarına sağlık, huzur ve mutluluk dileriz..

With regards / saygılarımızla

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Interview with Dr. Yaşar Aydın¹

The European Union Commission's 2023 Turkey Report published in the beginning of November this year and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Germany in mid-November are two important events that shed light on contemporary Turkey-Germany relations and Turkey's relation to the-European Union. We asked Dr. Yaşar Aydın from the *Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS)* at the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)* in Berlin to evaluate recent developments in Turkey-EU relations.

Deniz Güneş Yardımcı: Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Berlin at the invitation of the Federal Government of Germany in mid-November. The main topics of the meeting with President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Chancellor Olaf Scholz were related to complex issues like bilateral economic relations, the situation in the Middle East and the war in the Gaza, the Russian war against Ukraine, as well as the future of NATO, EU-Turkey relations and migration issues. How were these sensitive themes approached by the leaders?

Yaşar Aydın: Before President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's trip to Germany, it was hoped that the Turkish side would gain the support of Germany, the locomotive state of the union, especially in facilitating visa applications and accelerating Turkey-EU relations. However,

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it is understood that no positive development was achieved in this direction during the one-day visit. Although President Erdoğan and Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan emphasized the importance of EU membership and underlined that the membership is Turkey's strategic goal, no progress has been made to meet the *acquis communautaire*. When viewed from the EU perspective, a picture of Turkey emerges, with the majority of its executive staff moving away from European values and norms. The attitudes and approaches of the administration and the judiciary, such as not recognizing the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, feed the image of a 'conflict and systemic adversary Turkey'. President Erdoğan's harsh criticism of EU countries for their support for Israel after the October 7 2023 Hamas attacks and his accusation of a crusade mentality after his trip to Germany are another example of the difference of opinion between the EU and Turkey.

Deniz Güneş Yardımcı: In the light of the European Union Commission's 2023 Turkey Report it seems important to look at how Turkey is perceived by political actors and expert circles within the EU. The report speaks of 'democratic backsliding' and 'serious deficiencies in the functioning of democratic institutions' in Turkey. How would you interpret the report with respect to Turkey's EU accession negotiations?

Yaşar Aydın: In the EU Commission's 2023 Turkey Report, published in recent weeks, the importance of Turkey is emphasized and it is underlined that the country's EU candidacy continues. However, immediately afterward, concerns about Turkey are listed. According to the report, Turkey is moving away from the EU and there is no dynamic that will reverse this on the horizon. The criticisms against Turkey in the report can be discussed under two headings: domestic and foreign policy. The focus of criticism regarding domestic politics is the deterioration in the functioning of Turkey's democratic institutions, the erosion of democracy, the weakening of the independence of the judiciary, and the instrumentalization of the judiciary by the executive.

The main criticism regarding foreign policy is that the government follows a unilateral strategy and that the attitudes and decisions it has taken do not comply with the priorities of the EU. The overlap rate of Turkish foreign policy with EU foreign policy is quite low, around 10 percent. For example, while Turkey avoids defining Hamas as a terrorist

organization, the EU has a pro-Israel approach. Another disagreement is about Russia. Turkey's signing of the United Nations General Assembly's resolution numbered ES-11/1 condemning Russia's attack and occupation of Ukraine, its mediation efforts and the grain agreement it made jointly with the United Nations are recorded in the plus side of the Turkish foreign ministry. His failure to participate in the economic sanctions imposed against Russia is another subject of criticism.

As a result, the 2023 report reveals that no progress is possible in Turkey's negotiation process with the EU. Firstly, Turkey's refusal to recognize the Republic of Cyprus and its insistence on a two-state solution, contrary to the EU position, are important obstacles to progress. Secondly, the main framework of EU-Turkey relations is no longer the membership perspective. The focus of the relations is the refugee issue, or more concretely, the update of the joint agreement of 2016. Thirdly, the EU's distance from even updating the Customs Union agreement reveals the current state of relations from another perspective.

From all these mentioned, the following picture emerges: Turkey is no longer considered to be in the EU in the near future, the priority of the EU is indeed Ukraine and the Balkan countries. We can attribute their reluctance to burn bridges with Turkey to three reasons: Firstly, not contributing to the destabilization of Turkey, secondly, not causing it to weaken against Russia and cease to be a balancing power, and lastly, the need for Turkey's military power as well as its influence on irregular migration and refugee movements. For the EU, Turkey is a buffer country against irregular migration movements. It is obvious that such a function is incompatible with EU membership. In addition, in many strategy documents, analysis and comments, Turkey is sometimes evaluated as a rival country for the EU, sometimes as an adversary power, for example in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Deniz Güneş Yardımcı: The Turkey-EU relations seem to be stuck at an impasse. Is there a chance for a smoother and constructive dialogue between Turkey-and the EU in near future?

Yaşar Aydın: It is undeniable that the EU played a role in bringing relations to this point. However, the real responsibility lies with the Turkish government. The move away from

the rule of law, democratic standards and practices within the country is entirely related to the government's decisions. It would not be credible to attribute responsibility to Brussels in this regard. Therefore, the side that will solve the impasse is the Turkish government. Either the steps required for progress will be taken, or the relations will continue in this way, namely in a low profile, in a transactional manner, that is, with a short-term perspective.

Deniz Güneş Yardımcı: What are the steps Turkey's government has to take to facilitate a new way forward for Turkey-EU relations?

Yaşar Aydın: There are five steps that Turkey can take to get out of this complex situation: The first is to reorganize and strengthen democracy and the rule of law by returning to a reformist policy. The second is to pursue a foreign policy that does not postpone national interests, but also takes into account the priorities of NATO and the EU. Thirdly, in relations with the EU, it should not – at least in short term and without giving the goal of membership up in the long turn – primarily be focussed on membership, and – since the membership perspective has been moved away – steps should be taken towards re-establishing trust, and the issues that promise a solution should be discussed first. The fourth is to highlight the updating of the Customs Union as a priority goal. Fifthly, a consistent strategy must be created and acted upon in the renewal of the 2016 migration and refugee agreement.

Following all this, the doors of EU membership may not be opened to Turkey. Even if Turkey fulfills the membership conditions, it is obvious that EU membership will not occur in the short term. Especially the problems the EU is facing, the difficulties it faces in deepening the union and its efforts towards expansion are obstacles to Turkey becoming an EU member in the short term. Turkey's inclusion in the EU will mean a relative loss of power for France and Germany, the two locomotive countries of the union – due to its population, military and regional political power.

However, despite all this, there are many reasons that make it mandatory for Turkey to fulfill the conditions of membership. Turkey's reinforcing its democracy, ensuring the rule of law, and raising its human rights standards will put its relations with the EU in a positive framework. Relations between Turkey and the EU are extremely important and

cannot be reduced to a membership issue. Geographical proximity, economic and social connections dictate that relations between Turkey and the EU should not be left at the current level. Many EU member countries are also NATO members and Turkey's military allies. Therefore, Turkey's fulfillment of the membership conditions and the efforts spent in this direction will have a positive impact on both relations with allies and the Turkish economy.

It does not seem possible to deepen economic integration with Europe and update the Customs Union by insisting on an authoritarian regime. Participation in global value and supply chains is vital for the Turkish economy. In this regard, the Turkish government is pursuing an active industrial, trade and location policy to benefit from the restructuring of European and German value and supply chains. The determining factor here is not only whether Turkey has critical infrastructure, technical and financial resources. The real issue is whether the government will be able to demonstrate the political will appropriate to these goals. In summary, at the end of the day, Turkey will have to determine its place in the system struggle that is taking shape in the world.

Deniz Güneş Yardımcı: Thank you very much for this meaningful interview and for sparing your time.