

TURKISH RELATIONS WITH EUROPEAN UNION - BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY - 26.05.2023

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Although Türkiye is historically and geographically a European country, it is not the part of the European Union that today constitutes the legal framework of mainstream political and economic processes in Europe. If the EU deprived Türkiye of the right to join the Union, it cant expect Ankara to observe the rules that were never a part of the political consensus between the two partners.

The EU institutions may fairly enough be criticized for their inefficiency to confront and solve numerous problems and prefer to function in a bureaucratic paradigm, but the fact of life is that, there is no visible alternative to them: in terms of institutional and legal framework that arrange cooperation and structure integration, any other alternative of continental dimension simply doesnt exist[1].

European Union is not only statistically (territory, population, GDP and so forth) but also politically a structure that quasi-totally dominates the continent becoming an actor that not only coordinates policy but creates it: a state whether it is located in Europe or outside, can hardly do anything without the consent of EUs institutions not to say against them[2]. As a result of deepening and widening the reach of EUs central institutions, definitions successively change: being in Europe today means basically being a part of its institutional and legal mainstream embodied in the EU: if a country is not (on its own will or not) it becomes a periphery and is not considered as a part of Europe in the civilizational sense[3].

Apart from the post-Yugoslav Balkans and the post-Soviet East, only Britain, Türkiye and Russia are the states that are not ready to delegate a part of its sovereignty to Brussels in exchange for the membership that gives right to take part in the decision-making process that forms the laws and institutions which constitute the framework of the international order in Europe (the Norwegian self-sufficient carbohydrate exception may easily be put aside as a one incompatible to any other).

Britain, Türkiye and Russia have numerous differences, but their position towards the process of the continental centralization shows common features: none of them is ready to be a part of a structure that is (actually or potentially) in a position to impose them something, they do not fully accept. In other words, for all of the three, sovereignty is valued more than economic profits.

Both London (from the inside) and Ankara (from the outside) long time struggled with European institutions to be treated differently: to get its own specificity respected and its decision-making autonomy wide, but finally both of them failed. And this is not because Britain or Türkiye is strategically or culturally incompatible with Europe (a justification that we may often hear), but because staying sovereign in all of the domains of key-importance as they want, make it impossible to move the integration forward: from the point of view of the central institutions that the EU Council and the European Commission intend to be, it is impossible to start any project, knowing that one or two of member-states may simply unsubscribe to it at any moment, or, even worse, to stop it all over by putting its veto on it. Accepting the Turkish or British exception would also have a demoralizing (from the point of view of the whole structure) effect on the others: this would mean that any other member-state may ask for non-application of the common regulations to itself and its actions. And this would be directly contradictory to the logic of integration, not only making it unable to progress, but most probably paralyzing the already existing mechanisms.

But being independent of Brusselss diktat doesnt mean that a country automatically becomes a great power capable of talking with the rest of Europe as an equal partner and creating its geopolitical environment according to its own vision (a thing that Russia recently tried and bitterly found not only impossible, but potentially devastating). Not being a part of the legal and institutional order established by the EU may easily, although not always intentionally move a country to a category of a potential rival.

This is the nature of human perception: the division between us and the others works also on the collective level of conscience according to the following logic often represented by the bureaucracy in Brussels: if a country doesnt accept the European Acquis Communautaire, it means that it rejects it, and if it rejects it, it puts itself in a position of an alternative donor of norms, and if so, it should be treated with suspicion as a threat to the dominant model (because if an alternative exists, in any given moment, one of the club members, lets say Hungary in the Turkish case or Poland in the British case may decide to join it). Thats why the outsiders who, on one hand are physically close and on the other, institutionally far from the EU, will always be treated by Brussels with suspicion if not an open hostility (just as an example, the statements of several French politicians during the Brexit procedure that Britain should pay the price of its decision).

In such circumstances, Turkish foreign policy finds itself between the Scylla of accepting the rules imposed by the EU and the Charybdis of confronting its containment measures. The latter may be even worse: it means, that Ankara has no choice but to accept rules in the elaboration of which, it didnt take part (by the way, this is exactly the situation that convinced Poland to join the EU: if we have to accept the rules anyway, let us be the part of those who at least formally may influence the shape of those rules). After years of unfruitful attempts to negotiate an acceptable way to join the EU and their seemingly ultimate fiasco, Ankara decided to pursue an independent foreign policy: a one not overtly opposite to the European mainstream, but at the same time maximally based on the national interests[4].

And its attitude towards Russia during the war with Ukraine would be the best example of an attempt to build an alternative framework designed to solve the conflict that the EU was unable neither to prevent nor to terminate, showing that there is politics in Europe outside of the European Union and to ultimately deny the status of a European periphery that EU imposed to Türkiye. Not being a part of the European (and to take it wider Western) coalition that actively supports Ukraine and contains Russia, doesnt necessary mean to be pro-Russian, but signifies a rejection to sign up to the rules established elsewhere by the countries, who in their turn, rejected Turkish postulates in other domains.

If Türkiye was denied respect to its national interests in other domains in the past, it would be naïve, to say the least, to expect those same partners to respect Turkish priorities during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, during the elaboration of the cease-fire terms and afterwards, in the post-war reality. To put it directly: by joining the coalition, Türkiye would definitely help Western partners, but there is no guarantee that those partners would help Türkiye and, in these circumstances, non-joining the coalition seems to be the optimal choice: Europe will most probably criticize Türkiye anyway on traditionally controversial issues[5], so accusing Ankara of being pro-Russian[6] doesnt change the overall climate of relations.

Winning the war with Russia in the indetermined future together with the West wouldnt guarantee any profit, while extracting immediate benefits from Russia weakened by the West (and Ukraine) is a net profit, without any cost. The West would hardly let Türkiye

replace Russia in the South Caucasus, let it trade with Moscow or assign a role of the main mediator if Ankara was tied to the coalition by any formal obligations (there would certainly be other candidates eager to take those roles with France and Germany in the first place). Moreover, if Türkiye joins the West, it would be qualified by Russia as a hostile state and thus mechanically deprived of the commercial benefits, it takes from Moscows isolation.

If Türkiye was deprived of a right to be a part of pan-European institutions, those institutions and countries that form them, cant expect Ankara to behave as it never happened. Turkish membership in the EU as well as the admission of other new countries was often presented as a gift that requires to do the political homework. But in reality, potential benefits were mutual[7], and the refusal to integrate Türkiye had its consequences for both sides resulting in a kind of foreign policy that Ankara is leading now.

What is more, the non-admission to the EU was one of the main factors that shaped foreign policy conceptions that had to fill the vacuum created by the fact that Ankara was politically left alone out of Europe and thus had to rethink itself in the new circumstances durably outside and not potentially inside the Union. If Türkiye is not a part of the European legal and institutional framework for good, it would be unrealistic to expect it to be for bad if Europe was not ready to assist when Türkiye needed it, it is logical to expect reciprocity when Europe found itself in need.

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***Picture: European Parliament*

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[2] https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/04/14/making-eu-foreign-policy-fit-for-geopolitical-world-pub-86886

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