Schrödinger's Candidate: Türkiye's Awkward Situation Within the Enlargement Debate

Özgehan Şenyuva and Ali Baydarol

Türkiye stands in a particular and even awkward position regarding debate on the Future of Europe and especially the issue of enlargement. The country has been waiting for membership longer than any other applicant States, with negotiations currently on a de facto hold and any prospects of accession in near future extremely slim. However, Türkiye also remains an important partner and ally for Europe as well as being a member of the Customs Union and holding a critically strategic position regarding irregular migration based on the 2016 European Union (EU)-Türkiye Statement. With the question of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans and Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, Türkiye's positions and actions are important for two interconnected reasons. Firstly, Türkiye is very active in these regions and carries great historic, cultural and economic weight. Thus, Türkiye's position in these States' membership aspirations carries certain value. Secondly, Türkiye must calculate and elaborate on the effects of such an enlargement process *vis-à-vis* its own membership bid, notwithstanding that the country's role in the region is seen by some EU Member States as being competitive. Hence, countering Türkiye's potential influence in this context is listed among reasons for the EU to proceed with offering a membership perspective for the Western Balkans States plus Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Enlargement must therefore factor in Türkiye's position.

Ö. Şenyuva (✉)
Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Türkiye

Ankara, Türkiye
e-mail: senyuva@metu.edu.tr

A. Baydarol
Sabancı University, Tuzla, Türkiye
e-mail: alibaydarol@sabanciuniv.edu

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2023

M. Kaeding et al. (eds.), *Enlargement and the Future of Europe*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-43234-7_39

Türkiye and the EU: Mutual Mistrust and Lack of Progress

In a way, EU-Türkiye relations are a relationship of mutual insincerity and mistrust. On the one hand, the EU has for many years tended to keep membership as a possibility, on condition that Türkiye meets the Copenhagen Criteria. On the other hand, Türkiye pretended to remain committed to its membership goal and the fundamentals of liberal democracy. However, in reality liberal intergovernmentalism and bargaining appears best to explain Türkiye's membership process. In the last two decades it has been dominated by identity and power politics based on interests rather than remaining a legal and technical issue based on values. Worsened by Türkiye's democratic backslide and increased failings in rights and liberties, the whole membership process has been overshadowed, thus allowing Türkiye's European and liberal credentials to became highly questionable. Accordingly, Türkiye is no longer being discussed as a potential Member in the next potential enlargement wave. Even worse, due to increased tensions with EU Members such as Greece and Cyprus, even Türkiye's position as a reliable ally is being doubted. Some politicians in EU Member States aim to make political gains both at domestic and international levels through 'Türkiye bashing' in attempts to profit from weakening relations between Türkiye and the other European states. Hence, one must consider this climate when analysing Türkiye's potential position and activity *vis-à-vis* Union enlargement towards the West Balkans as well as Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. The EU should communicate with Ankara and keep them included as much as possible, to underline the fact this is not another attempt in further isolating and excluding Türkiye. In 2024, the big bang enlargement of 2004 will be in its 20th year. It is certainly hard to say that Turkish public opinion and the politicians have yet to recover from the sense of exclusion and being subjected to double standards. On the contrary, with the developments that followed, such as suspension of negotiation chapters by certain EU Member States and increased anti-Turkish rhetoric, Türkiye's mistrust only worsened. For instance, while 68% of respondents in Türkiye favoured or strongly favoured EU membership in 2005, support fell to 54% in 2022. Nevertheless, this does not automatically lead to EU rejectionism. When asked whether another model of relations with the EU other than membership should be established or not in 2022, a sound majority of the respondents (68%) rejected any other form of relationship besides membership. However, any realistic belief in Türkiye's EU membership potential is now almost non-existent: in 2022, 61% of respondents think that Türkiye will never become a full Member of the EU.

On the positive side, though, EU-Türkiye relationsremain solid in some issue areas. In particular, economic relations have advanced over the years, which has created a mutual dependency, with Türkiye being the more dependent side. Hence, even without the possibility of enlargement, the EU still has a critical role in Türkiye's economic well-being.

Türkiye in the Region: An Ally to Cooperate or a Rival to Compete?

The Russia's War in Ukraine has shown that having positive relations with Türkiye could help the EU to cooperate with the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkan countries more efficiently for three reasons.

Firstly, the war has deepened the EU's energy crisis. With natural gas imports from Russia having been reduced, the EU has leaned towards alternative sources, one of them being Azerbaijani gas. This energy transfer is made through the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline that bridges Azerbaijan and the EU through Türkiye. Secondly, the war closed many Northern trade routes, leaving those through Türkiye as alternatives. Hence, Türkiye now also plays a critical role for the EU's supply chain. Thirdly, the war has made Türkiye the region's current grain supplier.

Thus, it can be argued that improving relations with Türkiye through a feasible agenda would be to the EU's benefit. The two parties can work on updating the EU-Türkiye Customs Union and visa liberalisation, even though boosting democracy reforms and inclusion of Türkiye in the EU's enlargement agenda are not viable for now.

Lessons from Türkiye in the Region

In the 2000s, the EU supported Türkiye's mass privatisation programme. However, as with those in the Western Balkans, these privatisations have led to the formation of clientelist networks. Hence, instead of utilising a swift, united approach, the EU may employ a gradual approach with specific institutional priorities (such as the rule of law). After all, without the institutions that ensure transparency in public auctions and tenders, economic reforms might well-truncate the democratic qualities of regimes. Pressuring for swift structural reforms may produce undesirable consequences. For instance, the EU's privatisation pressures on Serbia led to the sale of large state-owned enterprises in an environment where there were no institutions to ensure meritocracy-based privatisation. The result, not unlike Türkiye, was the establishment of clientelist networks between the incumbents and pro-government business actors. The argument extends to the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU should also bear in mind the negative impact of prolonging the membership process and making it an ever-moving target, which may create candidacy fatigue, as it is the case in Türkiye. Once a country such as Moldova, for instance, enters the membership path, it needs to remain active with certain achievements realised and thresholds passed. Otherwise, the pro-EU actors within the current political divide in the country will slowly lose power and credibility. This is exactly the case for Türkiye, where owning the EU membership goal became highly risky and difficult as a result of constant distancing of eventual membership, due especially to the interest-driven actions of some Member States.

Currently, candidates from the West Balkans and Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia are still far from functioning as stable liberal democracies. This situation is one of the reasons why the EU will face serious challenges for further integration in the future. Employing a gradual approach with specific institutional priorities would enable the EU to transform and move these countries in the desired direction. Furthermore, as they gradually improve their democracy and market-economy qualities, the EU can reward these achievements with the opening/closing of acquis chapters and financial support. More promising membership prospects would ensure that candidate countries do not need to search for alternative allies to the EU.

Recommendations

The EU and its Member States should be mindful that Türkiye is neither a rival nor a competitor in the region. It is an accession country, with enduring sizeable public support for full membership. There are two steps the EU can take: firstly, it can support any future democratic steps in Türkiye and put relations back onto a technical and legal footing based on values; and secondly, the EU can deepen functioning cooperation and act as an ally on hard issues. Turkish public opinion would be supportive of any concrete and transparent development in Türkiye-EU relations and it would help to restore trust. Upgrading of the Customs Union offers a huge potential, as it would also enable Türkiye to benefit from EU enlargement in the regions where it holds economic interests. Finally, the EU should draw lessons from Türkiye's membership process and its failures: the enlargement policy should have credibility and transparency in the eyes of new candidates and they should know that their bid will not be sacrificed for domestic and national political calculations.

Özgehan Şenyuva , Ph.D., is affiliated with the Centre for European Studies at Middle East Technical University, Ankara. He gained his PhD from the University of Siena and works extensively on public opinion, European Union and the politics of football. He is also a well-known researcher and speaker on Youth Work and Learning Mobility.

Centre for European Studies CES-METU is a multi-disciplinary research centre under the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences at the Middle East Technical University. It brings together researchers working on different aspects of European issues. CES-METU has been the pioneer and leading institution in European Studies in Türkiye and other pan European research projects.

Ali Baydarol is a PhD candidate in political science and a graduate teaching assistant at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabancı University. He is also a research assistant in the TÜBİTAK 1001 project entitled 'The Role of Elite Sociology in Understanding the Policy Making Process of Türkiye-European Union Relations' at Bahçeşehir University. He gained his MA from Radboud University and conducts research on the issues of comparative political economy and the European Union. He also worked as the research assistant at the Istanbul Policy Centre, which is a global policy research institution that specialises in key social and political issues ranging from democratisation to climate change, transatlantic relations to conflict resolution and mediation.

Founded in 1994 by the Sabancı Group, Sabancı University is a research-oriented institution located in Istanbul, Türkiye. Under the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the university is dedicated to fostering interdisciplinary research and collaboration among leading social scientists across various fields. Sabancı University continues to respond to the ever-increasing needs of the society with its efforts in education, teaching as well as research and maintains direct involvement with society to understand current and future needs.