EU–Turkey relations need an honest new start

Manfred Weber

Abstract
The EU has a fundamental interest in having a constructive relationship with Turkey. However, the EU–Turkey relationship has become strained over recent years. This is why EU–Turkey relations need a new start, based on honesty about the long-term goal: EU membership is not an option for Turkey. Instead, the EU and Turkey should focus on concrete fields of cooperation. Humanitarian aid in the refugee crisis is a good example of a field in which a joint solution has been successful, as is the protection of the common external border. More joint action from the EU and Turkey is needed as regards the situation in Syria and Iraq. Turkey must overcome its democratic shortcomings. Further economic cooperation will depend on the application of the rule of law in Turkey.

Keywords
Turkey, EU, New partnership, Accession negotiations

Introduction
The EU has a fundamental interest in having a constructive relationship with Turkey. Turkey plays a key role in managing the humanitarian situation caused by the war in Syria, controlling migration and fighting terrorism. As NATO’s second biggest military power in terms of personnel, a constructive role for Turkey is essential to securing peace and stability in the Middle East. As an emerging economic power with a market of more than 80 million people, Turkey has big economic potential for the EU. Finally, Turkey plays a crucial role in the economic development, wealth, stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans, as well as the Black Sea and Caucasus regions.

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Despite its importance, the EU–Turkey relationship has been significantly strained by the developments of recent years. Disappointments and emotions on both sides have impeded progress. It is therefore high time for us in Europe to redefine our relationship with Turkey. We need a partnership that is structured by pragmatism instead of emotion, by honesty instead of vagueness and by a focus on results instead of empty talk. The precondition for such a new partnership is that we are honest about the long-term prospects: EU membership is not an option.

**Be honest about the long-term prospects: EU membership is not an option**

If recent years have shown one thing very clearly, it is the difference between Turkey and Europe. At present, Turkey is a very long way away from fulfilling the currently applied conditions for EU membership. The European Parliament has therefore already called for a freezing and formal suspension of the accession process.

But we should be even more consistent on this issue: we should finally take Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union at its word, where it says that only those countries that are in Europe and that respect and promote the EU’s fundamental values can be members of the EU.1 Turkey fulfils neither of these criteria, and, therefore, it cannot become a member of the EU. It is thus a matter of honesty towards both the Turkish and the European people that we put an end to the membership negotiations with Turkey. Keeping up the illusion of membership prospects would only create further disappointment on both sides. The EU and Turkey can be good neighbours without being members of the same club.

**Be open to further cooperation in concrete fields**

Instead of membership talks, Europe and Turkey should focus on specific fields of cooperation, where they can achieve concrete results together to improve the lives of their citizens. The following five points should guide the new start to the EU’s relationship with Turkey:

1. **Europe must recognise and support Turkey’s efforts for refugees**

When Turkey and Europe act together, they are able to solve huge challenges. The refugee crisis is the best example of such a joint solution.

Turkey has made enormous efforts to provide humanitarian aid to refugees from Syria. Offering protection to more than 3.5 million Syrians fleeing from war and destruction, Turkey remains by far the most important host country. The resulting burdens on and social consequences for Turkey are enormous. It was an imperative of humanity and Christian charity that the wealthier Europe provided help to the Syrian people. It was a question of solidarity to remove some of the load from Turkey’s shoulders to enable it to
continue on this difficult path. And finally, helping was also a matter of pragmatism: with every euro invested on the ground in Turkey, the incentive to flee further west is reduced, thereby avoiding much higher follow-up costs for us in Europe. With our help, we are instead enabling people to stay close to their home country and maintain hope of returning home once peace is established.

Europe’s help for refugees in Turkey is delivering concrete and considerable results. Since the March 2016 EU–Turkey agreement, Europe has paid for access to primary healthcare services for more than two million Syrian refugees in Turkey. With the same EU money, almost 500,000 Syrian children have received a formal education in Turkey. These funds are explicitly not going to the Turkish state or its local authorities, but are paid directly to aid organisations on the ground.

Europe must continue to recognise and to honour the enormous efforts Turkey is making for Syrian refugees. And Europe must continue to provide direct help to the refugees in Turkey. Together we can better address this humanitarian crisis.

2. Europe and Turkey must keep cooperating on border protection

The second major success of EU–Turkey cooperation is border protection. Today Turkey plays a crucial part in minimising the migration pressure on our European external borders. With the March 2016 EU–Turkey agreement, illegal migration has been stopped before the gates of Europe. At the height of the refugee crisis, a NATO mission was even deployed to the Aegean Sea with explicit permission to operate in Turkish territorial waters. The results are impressive: in 2017, the number of sea arrivals on the Greek islands was reduced by 97% compared to 2015, and the number of deaths in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea was reduced by 94%.

However, this does not mean that things cannot be improved. In the field of readmission especially, the Turkish authorities have to deliver more: it is unacceptable that the number of resettlements of Syrian refugees from Turkey to Greece is more than five times higher than the number of returns in the other direction, from Greece to Turkey.

At the same time, the EU must remain able to secure its own external borders. The launching of the European Border and Coast Guard in October 2016 has been an important step in this direction. It should be further strengthened with more personnel and more equipment in order to permanently and completely close Europe’s external borders to illegal migration.

Nevertheless, the best results in EU border protection can be reached together with Turkey. It is therefore good that the March 2016 EU–Turkey agreement is still operational. Europe and Turkey have demonstrated that together they can deliver results for the protection of our borders. Together with Turkey, we must keep on fighting illegal migration, drying up the business model of criminals and human traffickers, and stopping the drowning of people in the Aegean Sea.
3. **Europe and Turkey must achieve peace in Syria and Iraq together**

More joint action from the EU and Turkey is needed regarding the situation in Syria and Iraq. The terrible war in Syria is still raging, taking the lives of countless innocent people. We Europeans must do everything in our power to reach a ceasefire through talks with representatives of the Syrian regime and moderate opposition forces. For these talks, and eventually for achieving lasting peace in the region, Turkey is simply an indispensable player.

Not only do we need Turkey in order to prevent the infiltration of radical Islamic fighters and supplies into the war zone, but without Turkey’s consent, there can hardly be a peaceful solution to the aspirations for autonomy of the Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria, which have proven to be central pillars in the fight against the so-called Islamic State.

Of course, the recent escalation of violence along the south-eastern border of Turkey is worrying. With a constantly smouldering and repeatedly erupting Turkish–Kurdish conflict, northern Iraq and northern Syria are unlikely to come to rest. We must therefore use all our channels with the Turkish leadership to convince them to seek peace at the negotiating table and not on the battlefield.

Europe and Turkey must achieve peace in Syria and Iraq together. During the Cold War, Europe and Turkey together protected the Middle East and the Mediterranean against the Communist threat. We must return to this common approach in order to solve the conflicts of our time. Peace and stability in our neighbourhood are in our common interest.

4. **Turkey must overcome its democratic shortcomings**

As partners, we must always be clear: the democratic shortcomings in Turkey are a true challenge to EU–Turkey relations and must be overcome. The internal situation in Turkey has been cause for concern for many years, and it has further worsened since the atrocious coup attempt of July 2016. The Turkish government must of course defend itself against those who are attacking the democratic order. But the authorities’ reaction must remain proportionate, respect the rule of law and target the right people, otherwise Turkey risks damaging those very same values it wants to defend.

The European People’s Party (EPP) Group has repeatedly and clearly addressed Turkey’s backsliding on the rule of law: it is incompatible with the freedom of expression and freedom of the press that hundreds of journalists have been put in prison, that hundreds of media outlets have been shut down and that the signatories of the harmless Academics for Peace petition are facing indictments for disseminating ‘terrorist propaganda’. It is incompatible with the principles of democracy and the rule of law that Turkish members of Parliament have been arbitrarily put into prison, that more than one hundred thousand civil servants have been dismissed without proper procedure and that
many court decisions seem influenced by the executive. The European Parliament’s continuous reports on developments in Turkey will always use clear language in this regard.

The EU must continue to formulate constructive criticism on the situation in Turkey. We will not refrain from comment when Turkey moves further away from Europe. At the same time, the EU must stay open to fairly welcoming any possible future improvements. Honesty and openness are the basis of any sustainable partnership.

5. Further economic cooperation will depend on the application of the rule of law in Turkey

In the field of the economy, the potential is big, but further cooperation will very much depend on the application of the rule of law in Turkey.

We will never accept EU citizens being arrested and detained in Turkey for political reasons and without clear accusations. While the Turkish authorities refuse to put an end to this unbearable situation there cannot be concrete progress in EU–Turkey relations.

The same goes for the Customs Union. With 48% of Turkish exports going to the EU in 2016, Turkey is very interested in further deepening the current Customs Union with the EU. For Europe the prospect of increasing trade and economic activity with the Turkish market is also attractive: a 4.5% share in exports in 2016 and a constantly growing Turkish market promise growth and jobs for our European exporting industries.

But European companies need legal certainty and an independent judicial system in order to operate freely and without fear. Turkey must return to the rule of law if it wants to develop its economic relations with the EU and deepen the Customs Union.

Conclusion

Europe and Turkey must stop arguing about unreachable goals and be honest instead: EU membership is not an option for Turkey. If Europe and Turkey finally manage to be clear on this matter, we have the opportunity to make an honest new start in EU–Turkey relations. If we Europeans act in accordance with the above-mentioned five points, we can make concrete improvements on the ground together with Turkey.

Together we can work for peace and stability in the Middle East, as we have for decades as allies within NATO. Together we can help the Syrian refugees and protect our borders, as we have recently demonstrated. And if Turkey overcomes its democratic shortcomings and moves back towards Europe, together we can secure more growth and jobs through deepened economic cooperation.

To achieve all these results, it is in Europe’s interest to keep Turkey close to the EU. And this holds true for Turkey as well: 95 years ago Mustafa Kemal ‘Atatürk’ observed that ‘the Ottoman Empire began to decline the day when, proud of her success against the
West, she cut the ties that bound her to the European nations’ (Versan 1984, 247). His response was to re-establish these ties and to bring Turkey closer to Europe. Atatürk’s insight still applies today: Turkey can be much stronger together with Europe.

The best results can be achieved in partnership, not in opposition. Let us seize the opportunity to be strong partners. Let us together improve the lives of the people in the EU and in Turkey.

**Note**

1. These values are listed in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. They are respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

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**Author biography**

**Manfred Weber** is Chairman of the EPP Group in the European Parliament. He joined the European Parliament in 2004, where he became the EPP Group’s Home Affairs Spokesman in 2006 and Vice-Chairman responsible for Legal and Home Affairs in 2009. Since 2014 he has been Chairman of the EPP Group and ex officio Vice–Party President of the EPP. In the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern) he has been Chair of the Party Youth and District Chair for Lower Bavaria. Since 2015 he has been Vice-President of the Christian Social Union in Bavaria.