



CHAPTER 9

The European Commission's Role in EU–Turkey Relations

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9.1 INTRODUCTION

The European Commission (EC), the EU's executive, is a key actor in EU–Turkey relations. Its main responsibilities are the monitoring of the political and economic situation in Turkey, and the management of EU funds for Turkey. EC–Turkey relations date back to the 1963 Association Agreement, whose final goal, a Customs Union (CU), was realized in December 1995 (EC-Turkey Association Council, 1995). In this framework, the member states mandated the EC to monitor economic, financial, and trade developments in Turkey, as well as the implementation of the CU's provisions. Since conferring candidate status to Turkey in 1999, the accession process has become the cornerstone of EC–Turkey relations, coordinated by the Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement as well as the Directorate General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations. However, due to the slow progress in accession negotiations, since 2015 the EC has launched institutionalized high level dialogues on specific policy areas related to but independent

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from the accession process, including foreign policy, economic policy, and energy and climate policy. In this regard, the EU Delegation in Ankara, formerly known as the Delegation of the EC in Turkey, plays a crucial role, as it is in frequent contact with Turkish officials and reports daily to the EC's headquarters in Brussels on the developments in Turkey.

The influence of the EC within the EU system is a controversial topic in the literature, and a final consensus on this issue has not emerged (Moravcsik, 1998; Sandholtz & Stone Sweet, 1998; Peterson, 2015; Pollack, 2003). According to the intergovernmentalist view, the EC is merely an agent of the member states, acting as a secretariat, as in any other international organization. In contrast, according to the supranationalist view, the EC is much more: it is able to act autonomously and provide policy leadership to the EU based on its expertise, legal competences, and transnational networks (Nugent & Rhinard, 2016).

The EC's influence in candidate countries' domestic politics triggered a similarly intensive academic debate within the Europeanization literature (Grabbe, 2001; Sedelmeier, 2011; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). The EC is able to exercise influence via two mechanisms. The first is related to the EU's conditionality strategy, offering incentives such as the opening of a new accession chapter in return for meeting certain benchmarks. The second is related to social learning in the interaction between actors from the EU and the candidate country. This implies a process whereby positions, interests, and identities are shaped through exchange with other actors (Checkel, 2005). According to this mechanism, harmonization with EU standards is therefore not simply the result of strategic cost-benefit calculations but rather of the learning and persuasion processes in networks between EC officials and bureaucratic actors in the candidate country.

While the accession literature generally acknowledges the explanatory power of the EU's conditionality strategy, several studies on Europeanization processes in Central and Eastern European countries also highlight the relevance of EU-induced learning and socialization processes in a candidate country's reform process (Andonova, 2005; Braun, 2016; see also Alpan, Chapter 5; Lippert, Chapter 11). In regard to Turkey, the fading credibility of Turkey's membership perspective due to the EU's internal problems, such as rising Euroskepticism as well as Ankara's increasing alienation from the EU, have undermined the EU's conditionality strategy; its transformative influence has decreased significantly since

the opening of accession talks (Aydın-Düzgüt & Kaliber, 2016; Aydın-Düzgüt & Noutcheva, 2012; Yılmaz, 2014). With this decline, continued partial alignment with EU standards is often attributed to domestic factors in Turkey, particularly the governing party's domestic agenda (Avcı, 2011; Yılmaz & Soyaltın, 2014) or the country's modernization strategy (Kaliber, 2013).

The remainder of this chapter analyzes EC-Turkey relations since Turkey's official application for membership in 1987, arguing that it plays a crucial role in two regards. First, related to the discussion on the EC's role within the EU's institutional architecture, the EC, as a 'protector of the rules of the game', regularly opposes some member states in favor of candidate countries, illustrating its autonomous role (Bürgin, 2013; Schimmelfennig, 2008). Second, concerning the EC's role in Turkish domestic politics, it has been an important 'agent of change', even in times of deteriorating political relations. Because of its contributions to regular interactions, in particular in the framework of projects financed by the EU's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), the EC has continued to increase administrative capacity and policy learning processes within Turkey's bureaucracy (Bürgin, 2016).

9.2 FIELDS OF EC-TURKEY RELATIONS

9.2.1 *Accession Negotiations*

The EC has an important agenda-setting and monitoring function in Turkey's accession process. After Turkey's application in 1987, the EC's initial evaluation suggested that further reforms were needed before Turkey could become a candidate country (European Commission, 1989). In 1997, the member states mandated the EC to monitor Turkey's progress regarding the membership conditions defined in the Copenhagen criteria. These included three criteria: first, political criteria, such as stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities; second, economic criteria, such as a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces within the EU; and third, the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union (European Council, 1993).

The EC published its first progress report in 1998, followed by annual country reports. In preparing these reports, the Commission makes

use of information from a variety of sources: the Turkish government; reports and decisions of the European Parliament (EP); the evaluations of the European Council, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, international financial organizations; and non-governmental organizations. Based on the EC's 2004 recommendation to start the accession process, the member states opened negotiations with Turkey on 3 October 2005. In the first stage, between October 2005 and October 2006, the EC held screening meetings with Turkish officials in order to compare Turkey's policies with the EU's whole body of common rights and obligations, i.e., the *acquis communautaire*, specified in 33 policy-related negotiation chapters.¹ The EC's resulting screening report identified shortcomings to be addressed during the accession process. In conclusion of these screening reports, the Commission recommended either the opening of negotiations or the requirement of compliance with certain opening benchmarks.

The Council, whose agreement to the opening of a chapter depends on a unanimous vote, set closing benchmarks for most chapters that Turkey must meet before the closure of negotiations in the policy field concerned. No negotiations on any individual chapter can be closed until every EU government reports its satisfaction with the candidate's progress in that policy field. The whole negotiation process is only concluded definitively once every chapter has been closed. According to the negotiating framework, the EC can recommend that the EU suspend accession negotiations:

In the case of a serious and persistent breach in Turkey of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law on which the Union is founded, the Commission will, on its own initiative or on the request of one-third of the Member States, recommend the suspension of negotiations and propose the conditions for eventual resumption. The Council will decide by qualified majority on such a recommendation, after having heard Turkey, whether to suspend the negotiations and on the conditions for their resumption. (European Commission, 2005)

¹In total, there are 35 negotiation chapters, but Chapter 34 (Institutions) and Chapter 35 (Other Issues) are addressed at the very last stage of the negotiations. For a comprehensive overview of the accession negotiations and the status of negotiations chapters see also Lippert (Chapter 11).

As of November 2020, the only provisionally closed chapter is the chapter on Science and Research; sixteen chapters have been opened, while fourteen chapters are blocked by the political decisions of the Council or individual member states (see also Turhan & Reiners, Chapter 1, Lippert, Chapter 11). In addition, although the screening process was completed in 2006, screening reports of eight chapters are pending approval at the Council. Since the screening reports are not officially sent to Turkey, the potential opening benchmarks of those chapters are not communicated.

The IPA is the main financial instrument for supporting the alignment of a candidate country with EU legislation and standards. Managed by the EC, financial assistance under IPA is available for the following four specific objectives: (i) support for political reforms; (ii) support for economic, social and territorial development; (iii) strengthening the ability of the beneficiary country to fulfill the (future) obligations stemming from membership in the EU by supporting progressive alignment with the Union *acquis*; (iv) strengthening regional integration and territorial cooperation.

The EU has allocated 3.533 billion EUR (not including the allocation for Cross-border Cooperation) under IPA 2014–2020 for Turkey. The EC's Indicative Strategy Paper for Turkey (European Commission, 2014a) translated the political priorities set out in the enlargement policy framework into key areas for prioritizing financial support, namely, democracy and governance; the rule of law and fundamental rights; environment and climate action; transportation; energy; competitiveness and innovation; education, employment, and social policies; agriculture and rural development; and regional and territorial cooperation.

Following the Heads of State and Governments' decision in October 2017 to decrease IPA funding for Turkey by 175 million EUR in a symbolic stand against Turkey's distancing from the EU's political values, the EC reoriented the pre-accession funds for Turkey in the 2018–2020 period. According to its Revised Indicative Strategy Paper for Turkey 2014–2020, the EC focused IPA assistance on the pillar 'Democracy and Rule of Law', with continued support for rule of law, fundamental rights, public administration reform, civil society organizations (CSOs), and Union programs, while proportionally reducing the support for the pillar 'Investing in Competitiveness and Growth' (European Commission, 2018: 17). The focus on CSO support comprises four types of action: (i) improving the legislative environment for the operation of CSOs and their participation in policymaking; (ii) strengthening cooperation

between CSOs and the public sector by supporting the establishment of balanced and transparent mechanisms; (iii) building the capacity of CSOs to improve outreach, governance, and institutional capacities, such as advocacy, administrative, and fundraising skills; and (iv) encouraging exchanges and cooperation between Turkish and EU citizens on areas of common interest, sharing technical knowledge and expertise, and developing long-term partnerships. Regarding the latter, since 2004 Turkish citizens, companies, and non-governmental organizations have been eligible to participate in European Community programs, managed by the EC, in particular in the field of education, research, employment, and social policies.

The IPA funds for Turkey were further cut by 146.7 million EUR for the 2019 budget in December 2018, in ‘view of the situation in Turkey as regards democracy, rule of law, human rights and press freedom’ (Council of the EU, 2018), and by 85 million EUR for the 2020 budget in July 2019 in response to Turkey’s gas exploration off the coast of Cyprus, which the member states condemned as illegal. In addition to the financial cuts, the Council also suspended negotiations on the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement, agreed to temporarily suspend the Association Council and further EU–Turkey high level dialogues, and invited the European Investment Bank to review its lending activities in Turkey (Council of the EU, 2019).

9.2.2 *Trade Relations*

When the CU between Turkey and the EU was realized on 31 December 1995 (see also Akman & Çekin, Chapter 12), a Customs Union Joint Committee (CUJC), in which the EC represents the EU, was established to ensure the proper functioning of the CU. The CUJC exchanges views on the degree of alignment between Turkish and EU legislation and on implementation-related problems in the areas of direct relevance to the functioning of the CU. The CUJC, consequently, formulates recommendations to the Association Council.

In December 2016, the EC proposed to modernize the CU, addressing its current limitations, such as the exclusion of agricultural goods, services, and public procurement (European Commission, 2016a). Another issue is Turkey’s increased involvement in the conclusion of EU free trade agreements with third countries. According to the EC, a modernization of the CU will lead to a 27 billion EUR increase in

EU exports to Turkey, while Turkey could gain a 5 billion EUR increase in its exports to the EU (Kirişçi & Ekim, 2015). The EC proposal was based on comprehensive preparatory work throughout 2015 and 2016 under the joint leadership of Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström and Commissioner Johannes Hahn in charge of Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, including technical discussions with the Turkish side, a public consultation with stakeholders, a detailed impact assessment, and a study by an external consultant. The EC underlined that the reform of the CU constitutes one important element in Turkey's accession process and should not be considered as an alternative to it (European Commission, 2016b: 8). However, as of November 2020, the member states justify the postponement of approval of the EC's proposal, citing concerns 'about the continuing and deeply worrying backsliding on the rule of law and on fundamental rights [in Turkey], including the freedom of expression' (European Council, 2019).

9.2.3 *Refugee Management and Visa Liberalization Process*

The EC was a crucial actor in the deepening of EU-Turkey cooperation in irregular migration management (see also Kaya, Chapter 14). In January 2011, the EC and the Turkish government announced the finalization of talks on an EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement, which was then signed by Ankara in December 2013 and entered into force in October 2014. The agreement obliges Turkey to take back irregular immigrants from third countries who have used Turkey as a transit country on their way to the EU from December 2016 onwards (EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement, 2013). Cooperation was further strengthened through the Commission Action Plan of October 2015 (European Commission, 2015), which guided the EU-Turkey Statement agreed on 18 March 2016 (European Council, 2016), in which both parties, the European Council and the Turkish government, decided to take steps toward ending irregular migration from Turkey to the EU. In order to achieve this goal, Turkey agreed to take back all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into the Greek islands after 20 March 2016. For every Syrian returned to Turkey, the EU offered to resettle another Syrian from Turkey to the EU, taking into account the United Nations (UN) Vulnerability Criteria. In addition, the EU announced a more rapid disbursement of the allocated 3 billion EUR under the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey, established at the end of 2015, and mobilized an

additional 3 billion EUR to be used toward the Facility up until the end of 2018. Furthermore, the EU committed itself to re-energizing the accession process and opened Chapter 33 during the Dutch presidency in the second half of 2016. Finally, the realization of a visa waiver for Turkish citizens was announced at the end of June 2016 on the condition that all benchmarks were met (see also Turhan & Wessels, Chapter 8).

The number of irregular immigrants arriving in Greece from Turkey dropped dramatically after the agreement took effect. According to the EC, which is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement, daily crossings have decreased from 10,000 people crossing in a single day in October 2015, to an average of 105 people per day. In total, irregular arrivals remain 94% lower than the period before the Statement became operational, and the number of lives lost at sea has decreased substantially, from 1175 in the 20 months before the Statement to 439 since the Statement has been in place (European Commission, 2020a).

A controversy between the EU and Turkey emerged regarding the EU's financial aid for Syrian refugees, agreed within the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey. Ankara's complaint, that the EU has not fully disbursed the promised six billion EUR is rejected by the EU who emphasizes that the transfer of money is made based on the contracted projects. According to the EC, as of 31 March 2020 all operational funds have been committed, 4.7 billion EUR contracted, and more than 3.2 billion EUR disbursed. The operational funds for the Facility for 2016–2017 have been fully contracted, of which 2.48 billion EUR has been disbursed. For 2018–2019, 1.76 billion EUR has been contracted, of which 768 million EUR has been disbursed. The main focus areas are humanitarian assistance, education, health, municipal infrastructure, and socio-economic support (European Commission, 2020b).

Another controversy emerged on the benchmarks to be fulfilled for a visa waiver for Turkish citizens. A Visa Liberalization Dialogue (VLD) was already launched on 16 December 2013, in parallel with the signature of the EU–Turkey Readmission Agreement. At that time, the member states mandated the EC to start a VLD with Turkey on the conditions to be fulfilled for the elimination of the visa obligation currently imposed on Turkish citizens for short-term visits to the Schengen area. The VLD is based on the Roadmap toward a Visa-Free Regime with Turkey, which sets out the requirements that would enable the EP and the Council to amend Regulation (EC) No. 539/2001, allowing Turkish citizens with

biometric passports meeting EU standards short stays in the Schengen member states without a visa (i.e., up to 90 days within any 180-day period). The Roadmap outlines 72 benchmarks under five thematic groups, namely document security; migration management; public order and security; fundamental rights; and readmission of irregular migrants (European Commission, 2013).

According to the EC's third report on Turkey's progress in fulfilling the requirements of its visa liberalization roadmap (European Commission, 2016c), seven requirements out of 72 remain unfulfilled, including in particular the demand for a revision of the legislation and practices on terrorism in line with European standards—notably, more closely aligning the definition of terrorism with that set out in Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA, as amended in order to narrow the scope of the definition, and by introducing a criterion of proportionality. The European Parliament Conference of presidents (EP president and political group leaders) stressed that the EP can only vote on the EC's proposal for lifting the visa requirement for Turkish citizens (European Commission, 2016d) once all benchmarks have been fulfilled (European Parliament, 2016). As Turkey refused to align its anti-terrorism laws with the demands of the EU, the visa liberalization talks stagnated.

In response to the controversies over the visa waiver, and on the EU's financial aid for Turkey, the Turkish president regularly threatened to withdraw from the March 2016 refugee 'deal' and 'open the gates'. Erdoğan finally acted on his threat in February 2020, when he encouraged thousands of refugees in the country to move toward the border crossing between Turkey and Greece. He argued that a joint Russian-Syrian military offensive in north-west Syria, forcing tens of thousands of refugees fleeing toward Turkey, made it impossible to contain the flow of refugees from Turkey to the EU. EU leaders criticized Ankara for using the refugees as a lever to extract more from Europe. As both sides had no interest in an escalation of the conflict, the EU and Turkey agreed on 9 March 2020 that the 2016 refugee agreement should remain valid, but subject to review.

9.2.4 *High Level Dialogues*

In May 2012, the EC agreed with Turkey on a so-called 'Positive Agenda', intended to both support and go beyond the accession negotiations themselves, covering features important to both sides, such as

visa and border management, migration, trade, energy, counterterrorism, and foreign policy dialogue. The Positive Agenda aimed to bring a fresh dynamic and a new momentum to EU–Turkey relations after a period of stagnation caused by the freezing of eight negotiation chapters by the Council in December 2006 and the unilateral blockage of further chapters by France and Cyprus (Turhan, 2016: 469). To this end, working groups were set up to accelerate the process of Turkey’s alignment with EU policies and standards, reflecting the intention to complement and support rather than replace the accession process (European Commission, 2012a). In 2015, Turkey and the EC launched high level dialogues between Commissioners and Turkish ministers in the field of foreign policy, economic policy, energy and climate policy, providing opportunities to work on projects of common interest beyond the framework of the accession process. The high level dialogues were further institutionalized at an EU–Turkey summit on 29 November 2015, where the EU heads of state or government and Ahmet Davutoğlu, then prime minister of Turkey, agreed to reinforce the political exchange through more frequent and better-structured meetings, including the organization of biannual summits (European Council, 2015). While these meetings were in fact less frequent than planned, due to the deterioration of the relationship in the aftermath of the attempted coup of 15 July 2016, these exchanges intensified after May 2017 (European External Action Service, 2018), before being temporarily suspended by the 15 July 2019 Council decision in response to Turkey’s gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.

9.3 THE COMMISSION AS A CRITICAL BUT FAIR SUPPORTER OF TURKEY’S ACCESSION PROSPECTS

Regarding the scientific debate on the role of the EC within the institutional architecture of the EU, a chronological review of key EC activities supports accounts that consider the EC as an autonomous, influential actor rather than as a powerless agent of the member states. This interpretation is reflected in the decision to open accession talks in 2005. Despite granting Turkey candidate status in 1999, EU member states were still divided over Turkey’s eligibility in principle. Attempts were made by Turkey’s opponents such as the governments of Austria, Greece, and Cyprus, or French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, to include in the negotiation framework a ‘privileged partnership’ as an alternative

to full membership and to make the recognition of Cyprus a precondition for the opening of accession talks (Schimmelfennig, 2008: 21).

However, in 2004, the EC published a country report acknowledging Turkey's reform efforts (European Commission, 2004a: 55). The EC concluded that Turkey had satisfactorily fulfilled the Copenhagen criteria and therefore qualified for the opening of accession talks (European Commission, 2004b: 3). While this decision required a unanimous decision in the Council, the opponents of accession talks found themselves entrapped, compelled to comply with the rules of procedure agreed in 1999, when Turkey was given the status of a candidate country. Therefore, they could not legitimately deny negotiations (Schimmelfennig, 2008: 22; see also Schimmelfennig, Chapter 6).

After the talks began, the EC was also crucial for their continuation. Although Turkey had signed an Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement in July 2005, obliging it to extend its CU to the new member state Cyprus, Ankara refused its implementation. Its argument was that the EU had gone back on its promise, made in a decision of the Council of foreign ministers in April 2004, to open trade with the isolated Northern Cyprus. The EU had promised to open trade with the North as a means to reward the Turkish Northern part of the island for their 'yes' vote in the reunification referendum. In April 2004, the Greek Cypriots had rejected the reunification plan under the auspices of then UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, while the Turkish Cypriots had approved it. Subsequently, the Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in May 2004 and vetoed any direct trade relations between the EU and the Northern part of the island. After Turkey refused to fulfill its obligation to open its ports and airports to the Greek Cypriots, some member states requested a full suspension of accession talks in 2006 (Turhan, 2016: 468). However, Oliver Rehn, Enlargement Commissioner from 2004 to 2010, reminded the member states that the EU also had failed to keep its promises. In the end, the Council decided not to suspend talks entirely but followed the EC's proposal to only suspend talks on eight trade-related chapters.

The conditions for Turkey's accession process further deteriorated with the Constitutional Treaty's ratification problems after the negative referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005 and the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in the Irish referendum in 2008. While survey analyses revealed no significant relation between the 'no' vote and public opinion on Turkey's membership prospects (Ruiz-Jimenez & Torreblanca, 2008: 29), opponents of Turkey's accession framed the opposition against the

Constitutional Treaty in France and Netherlands as an expression of public opinion against further enlargement and, in particular, as a rejection of Turkey's membership (Bürgin, 2010). Commissioner Olli Rehn, however, strongly rebutted the opponents' position, arguing, 'we have to respect existing commitments' (Bürgin, 2010: 421).

Rehn's successor, Štefan Füle, was equally committed to Turkey's accession perspective and was the co-initiator of the Positive Agenda in 2012. The EC's pro-Turkey approach is also illustrated in the debate on visa waivers for Turkish citizens in the same year. EU member states offered the Western Balkan countries a visa liberalization process in return for the Readmission Agreement; however, for Turkey, member states offered only visa facilitations. The EC, concerned about the EU's credibility, argued that Turkey should be offered the same incentives as the Balkan countries. This strong EC support contributed to the start of talks on visa liberalization with Turkey (Bürgin, 2013).

The EC's favor for a re-energized accession process is also evident in its repeatedly expressed support for opening Chapters 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (justice, freedom, and security). For instance, in its 2014 progress report, the EC stated that it was in the interest of both sides that the opening benchmarks for these chapters were defined as soon as possible to allow talks on the respective chapters to be opened (European Commission, 2014b: 1). So far, however, member states have not agreed on a common position, including a definition of the opening benchmarks for these chapters.

Despite former EC President Jean-Claude Juncker's statement at the start of his term in 2014 that Turkey will not join the EU in the foreseeable future (CBS News, 2014), and then Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Johannes Hahn's call in November 2018 to end negotiations with Turkey, the EC has remained committed to the continuation of the accession process. While the EP and some member states demanded an end of the accession process to show their disapproval of Ankara's response to the attempted 2016 coup, the EC, despite joining widespread criticism toward Turkey, opposed an official breakup of the talks. The EC did, however, recommend switching the focus to ongoing work on projects of common interest rather than the accession process itself (Eder, 2017). During a NATO summit in Brussels on 25 May 2017, Juncker, then European Council President Donald Tusk, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed to resume an open dialogue, at all levels, through a process of engagement in areas of common

interest, in particular in the form of a resumption of high level dialogues between Commissioners and Turkish ministers. In February 2018, Tusk and Juncker jointly invited Erdoğan to a meeting on 26 March 2018 in Varna, hosted by Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov as the leader of the country holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU at that time (European Council, 2018).

Also the approach to Turkey of Ursula von der Leyen, EC President since July 2019, is critical but fair. In February 2020, Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding with Libya on a demarcation of maritime zones in the region that ignored the island of Crete, which von der Leyen condemned as unacceptable. However, in the March 2020 controversy on migration policy cooperation, she struck a more conciliatory tone. After Ankara's announcement on 28 February 2020 that Turkey would no longer stop migrants crossing into the EU, prompting thousands to make their way to the Greek-Turkish borders, on 9 March 2020, European Council President Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen met President Erdoğan in Brussels. After the meeting, she stressed the need to support Turkey, involving finding a path forward for the two sides. To this end, she announced a review of the 2016 refugee 'deal' to find a common understanding of elements that are missing and those that are already in place, so that missing elements can be implemented (European Commission, 2020c).

9.4 THE COMMISSION AS AN AGENT FOR CHANGE IN TURKEY

The role of the EC in the management of the IPA funds illustrates its role as an agent for change in Turkey in two regards. First, the EC's discretion in the approval of IPA projects created an incentive for the project applicants in Turkish ministries to comply with the EC's demands. After consultations with the Directorate for EU Affairs, which is responsible for IPA coordination on the Turkish side and held ministry status between 2011 and 2018, the EC sets criteria for the distribution of funds. This is important in balancing the Turkish side's tendency to prioritize infrastructure projects with the EC's preference for directing funds toward projects focusing on the fulfillment of the political criteria (Bürgin, 2016: 112).

Another source of influence is the EC's power over the acceptance of proposals. Once the amount for each component and sector is decided, Turkish ministries and agencies are requested to submit project proposals.

The selection process is jointly coordinated by the Directorate for EU Affairs and the EC; but the final decision belongs to the latter. Thus, the EC has significant discretion in deciding which projects are accepted, blocking some and prioritizing others. It can exploit the competition for projects among departments and oblige ministries to ensure the inclusion of certain aspects in the programming phase, regardless of whether these are a priority for the applicant. For instance, the EC promotes stakeholder participation. Thus, consulting civil society actors in the policy formulation phase is a precondition for a successful project application, resulting in institutionalized NGO involvement, even though the extent of the change in attitude varies across the ministries. Potential beneficiaries, particularly ministries, tend to modify their project proposals after direct contact with the EU Delegation in order to increase their chances of success. Consequently, projects originally designed as simple requests for technical assistance have been modified into twinning projects in line with the EC's preferences (Bürgin, 2016: 113). Twinning brings together public administration officials of EU member states and beneficiary countries with the aim of achieving concrete mandatory operational results through peer-to-peer activities. Between 2002 and 2015, 163 twinning projects were funded in Turkey in various fields, from civil enforcement to integrated border management, emission control, public accounts, and organized crime (Delegation of the EU to Turkey, 2020).

Second, beyond setting incentives, the EC exercises a softer influence on Turkish domestic politics via institution building and social learning in networks established between the EC and Turkish administrators in the IPA process (Bölükbaşı & Ertugal, 2013; Bürgin, 2016; İçduygu, 2007; Kirişçi, 2012). In order to manage the EU accession talks and the IPA process, Turkish ministries established EU departments in which an increasing number of staff members have benefitted from IPA-financed trainings. As a consequence, while in the past only a few, rather isolated international relations experts were involved in EU affairs, today an extensive community of EU experts exists in Turkey, facilitating intra- and inter-ministerial exchange in EU-related matters. These experts are important agents of change, as their recommendations are often more widely accepted than those from the EU delegation (Bürgin, 2016: 113). In this regard, the EC was able to establish a partnership with the Directorate for EU Affairs, which, as the national IPA coordinator, has an important mediation function between the EC and the project beneficiaries in the ministries. Intensive training measures on IPA principles regarding

programming, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, in addition to a significant increase in staff, have resulted in an improved institutional capacity of Directorate for EU Affairs, thus contributing to more effective project implementation in all IPA components (European Commission, 2012b).

Further research is required to understand the effect of the attempted *coup d'état* in 2016 and the subsequent deterioration of the political relations on the cooperation at the administrative level. While some EU officials stated there has been no negative effect on project work at administrative level, as this work is characterized by high levels of professionalism and mutual respect, others highlighted that projects at the administrative level cannot easily escape from the influence of the broader political context, arguing that increases in mutual mistrust at political level also affect the technical level.² Furthermore, it has been stated that ‘Turkish sensitivities over hosting EU or member state officials within state bodies have become stronger’ and that after the attempted coup ‘cooperation with EU bodies has slowed down’ (Young & Küçükkeleş, 2017). This is illustrated by the cut of IPA funds and a slight decrease in the number of completed twinning projects since 2011 (The Republic of Turkey Directorate for EU Affairs, 2020).

9.5 CONCLUSION

After a review of EC–Turkey relations across a selection of policy areas, this chapter has illustrated two aspects of EC influence in EU–Turkey relations. First, as a defender of the rules of the (enlargement) game, it has rebuffed attempts by some member states to undermine Turkey’s membership prospects. The EC’s influence in the debate on the most appropriate approach to Turkey underlines its autonomous role within the EU system and the relevance of its norm-based argumentation. However, due to Turkey’s current alienation from the EU’s normative standards, norm-based arguments in favor of Turkey’s membership have lost much of their weight. Therefore, an interesting avenue for research is to explore

²Interviews conducted by the author with officials from the European Commission in Brussels, October 2016, and with officials from Germany’s National Contact Point for EU *Twinning* and TAIEX at the Federal *Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy*, December 2016.

the extent to which the EC has been able to maintain its influence in the debate among the member states on the future of EU–Turkey relations.

Second, the EC’s critical but fair approach and its role in the management of the IPA funds have contributed to the survival of the accession process in Turkey in some policy fields, despite the deterioration of political relations since the opening of the accession talks. Ankara’s continued harmonization with the EU *acquis* in some sectors, despite the waning relevance of the EU’s conditionality strategy, can be explained in part by Turkish domestic factors, such as Turkey’s general modernization strategy, and by the effects of social learning processes enabled by good working relations between officials from the EC and the Turkish ministries.

There is still a lack of investigation into how far the EC has been able to establish mutual trust and lasting policy networks in its frequent interactions with officials in Turkish ministries. In particular, there is a lack of studies on how the recent deterioration in political relations has affected EU–Turkey relations at the administrative level. Social learning processes outside the official accession negotiations framework represent an opportunity to revive Europeanization processes in Turkey and deserve greater scholarly attention. Therefore, further research may benefit from greater attention to the role of the Turkish bureaucracy. These actors, although frequently engaged with EU actors and EU projects, are neglected by the Europeanization literature on Turkey, which rather tends to focus on the behavior of the political elite, in particular the ruling party, in order to explain the success or failure of Europeanization processes. The EC therefore remains a crucial actor in shaping the future of EU–Turkey relations.

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