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## BUSINESS AS USUAL IS NO LONGER AN OPTION WITH TURKEY

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Today's actions and inactions will shape the future of EU-Turkey relations. And there is much more at stake than the survival of a stalled accession or whether Turkish citizens will be able to travel without a visa to the EU. EU-Turkey relations have a **turbulent story behind** it; full of sterile controversies and mutual blame-games. The risk of a **train wreck** has always existed. Yet, we have never been this close to it and the stakes have never been so high.

Since the coup attempt on July 15, the Turkish government and the President have **accused** the EU of not being empathic enough and have portrayed any European criticism as an anti-Turkish **reflex**. Tension escalates with each passing day. From the political debate on the reintroduction of the **death penalty**, the announcement of a **referendum** on the accession process (the so-called Texit), reviving the idea of **joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)** or through the latest **European Parliament resolution**.

Turkey's top leadership has set its position vis-à-vis the EU: unless you accept my terms, the game is over. It is time for the EU to decide what will be theirs.

Inside the EU there are different views on what Turkey's challenge mean but everyone can agree that it is a top priority. Seen from Paris, Berlin or The Hague, an angry Turkey could mean a new refugee crisis that would boost far-right and populist forces in their respective national elections. For Central and Eastern Europe, an angry Turkey could mean more tensions in NATO. That would only contribute to President Putin feeling that he is on the winning side.

Also, the **Cyprus conflict is far from solved** and a nationalistic Turkey could further destabilise the Middle East. This is a major concern for the whole Southern flank of the EU. Last but not least, economic relations have never been so intense. Leading European companies (from the car industry, to textile, insurance and banking) have invested heavily in Turkey. It is not only the big business, but small and medium enterprises too. As stated in the **Turkey's Path to Prosperity in 2023** report, the EU has a major strategic stake in Turkey's economic success, while the EU is the bedrock trade partner of Turkey. Thus, many forces in Europe will still work to avoid the train crash. Yet, they may not be able to counter those pushing in the opposite direction.

So, what to do next? To simplify things, the EU has four options on the table: to wait and see; to offer Turkey more incentives; to say enough is enough, or to opt for a principled but pragmatic approach. When thinking which of them works best and how they could be operationalised, the EU should foresee how Turkey will interpret its decisions, what the risks are and how to control potential damage.

Europe's classical option would be to "wait and see". That is, to think that time can solve almost everything. Secretly, some European politicians may cross their fingers hoping that Turkey decides to unilaterally withdraw from the negotiation table. Then, if things evolve badly, Ankara will be the only one to blame. However, Turkey is likely to react to Europe's passivity by continuously testing the limits. Time may not heal the wounds and the risk of gangrene is apparent.

The second option could be labelled as nostalgic idealism. In order to get the negotiation process back on track, the EU would put more incentives on the table. As if we could go back to the good old days when Europe's offers were seen as an opportunity by the Turkish government and the accession process was the goal, not a mere instrument. The chances for this strategy to succeed are limited. They require a Turkish government that wants to remain anchored in the EU and incentives that are attractive enough. In other words, offering Turkey to open chapters 23 and 24 of the negotiations process (on Justice and Fundamental Rights) would not make any difference. Not anymore. What Turkey wants is full-backing of their positions on Syria and enhanced cooperation by Europeans to fight against Gülenists and PKK sympathisers. And the EU does not seem to have appetite for this. So, in the unlikely event that the EU decides to explore an incentive-based response, the EU should be aware of a major risk: it could be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness, particularly if the new offer does not meet Turkey's expectations or if it comes right after **a round of threats** from Turkey.

The third option is to tell Turkey that enough is enough. Its proponents would consider that rather than waiting for Turkey to take the initiative, the EU should impose a halt on the negotiation process. Some may even go further and call for sanctions. The risks are apparent: Erdogan will not publicly backtrack and escalation will unfold, at least for a while. From then on, Europe might become the scape-goat for any problem Turkey faces, be it an economic crisis or a deterioration of security conditions. And sooner or later, directly or indirectly, the rest of Europe will suffer the consequences. Moreover, in the short term, Turkey would retaliate, at least to double-check how solid the European position is. Refugees are Europe's Achilles heel. Provoking a mini-crisis may suffice. Thus, before banging Europe's fist on the table, the EU should think twice whether the EU is equipped to resist Turkey's pressure.

The fourth one, principled pragmatism, is embedded in the **EU's Global Strategy**. Such a response is based on two premises: the conventional accession process does not hold anymore and, yet, it would be suicidal to provoke a crisis with Turkey that makes Europe more vulnerable in the months to come. As Sinan Ülgen argues in his **Politico op-ed**, there might be better options than to continue with the pretence of Turkish accession; but a rupture without first devising an alternative is even worse.

The EU response should still stick to principles such as the promotion of democratic values and rule of law and should preserve Europe's openness to those who are ready to participate in this common endeavour. Yet, a pragmatic Europe would use time and information to its advantage and would try to understand better the core interests of the other side. It would work to strengthen the chances of success by building bridges with like-minded actors, including in Ankara's governmental circles and Turkey's business sector. It would look for ways to escape from the current **refugee-deal trap**. And it would draw a roadmap to identify major risks, ways to circumvent them and contingency plans to face those crises that are almost unavoidable.

How to operationalise it? We are facing an unprecedented situation and unconventional solutions may have some traction. One of them could be to create a joint Turkey-EU task-force, asking their members to evaluate the state of the accession process and possible ways out of the current stale-mate. This body, in which stakeholders should also have a voice, would be asked to re-assess the level of compliance with the conditions set for the negotiation more than a decade ago and to propose solutions to long-term blockages and recent crises.

Among its duties, it should address the grievances of both parties. Thus, in this process it should be perfectly acceptable to everyone that the EU voices their criticism on the things they don't like from Turkey and vice-versa. Equally important, one of the main responsibilities of this working group would be to quantify the cost of an abrupt divorce. Probably, they may find it is higher than expected. And some decision-makers may re-evaluate their initial positions when knowing their share of the bill.

The task-force would explicitly be asked to propose a catalogue of different **modalities of relations** between Turkey and the EU. Conventional enlargement should be one of them but other alternatives need to be put on the table. It is time to overcome a binary mind-set that limits the choice to full membership or nothing.

The EU would then propose Turkey to evaluate the results of this task-force at the highest political level. That is, in a European Council meeting with Turkey. The top leaderships would then take a final but informed decision. And if they don't manage to agree on one, they should start discussing the terms of the divorce.

This may look too technical to many and such an option may not be fully satisfactory. But it gives some precious time to cool down tensions and opens a space to think about what kind of relationship would be acceptable and beneficial to both parties. Moreover, this option entails fewer risks in the short term and allows responsible actors to prepare contingency plans. It also has the advantage of making Turkey co-responsible for whatever may happen next while involving a wide-range of informed actors. For this strategy to succeed we will need a cohesive, agile and risk-taking Europe, but also a less emotionally driven decision-making process in Turkey.