

FUTURE OF EUROPE: REFLECTIONS FROM TÜRKİYE

Çiğdem ÜSTÜN *
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Research Article

Abstract

This special issue delves into the complex challenges confronting the EU and its member states, offering a meticulous examination of Europe's future. Focusing on security policies, regional relations, energy strategies, digital transformation, and the societal impacts of populism, particularly in the realms of social policies and gender equality, it explores potential future scenarios for the integration project. The motivation behind this issue is twofold. Firstly, despite Türkiye's pivotal role in the EU's strategic future, its direct involvement in discussions about Europe's prospects has been notably absent. This oversight ignores Türkiye's unique position as a crucial actor in the EU's future, regardless of its potential accession. Secondly, the interest in the EU and Europe within Turkish academia extends beyond the accession process and EU-Türkiye relations. European Studies, as an interdisciplinary field, has gained momentum, reflecting Türkiye's long-standing engagement with the study of the West's social and political aspects. This special issue aims to provide perspectives from Türkiye on themes crucial to Europe's unfolding future, envisioning a cooperative landscape that addresses critical challenges, with Türkiye as an integral part.

Keywords: Future of Europe, Türkiye, EU, European Studies.

Avrupa'nın Geleceği: Türkiye'den Görüşler

Öz

Bu özel sayı, AB ve üye devletlerinin karşılaştığı karmaşık zorluklara odaklanarak Avrupa'nın geleceğini derinlemesine incelemeyi amaçlar. Güvenlik politikaları, bölgesel ilişkiler, enerji stratejileri, dijital dönüşüm ve özellikle sosyal politikalar ile cinsiyet eşitliği gibi konularda popülizmin toplumsal etkilerine odaklanarak, entegrasyon projesi için olası gelecek senaryolarını araştırır. Bu özel

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sayının motivasyonu iki katlıdır. İlk olarak, Türkiye'nin AB'nin stratejik geleceğinde kilit bir rol oynamasına rağmen, AB'nin geleceğiyle ilgili doğrudan tartışmalarda göz ardı edilmiştir. Bu eksiklik, Türkiye'nin potansiyel üyeliğine bakılmaksızın AB'nin geleceğinde kritik bir aktör olarak benzersiz konumunu göz ardı eder. İkinci olarak, Türk akademisindeki ilgi, AB-Türkiye ilişkileri ve katılım sürecinin ötesine geçmektedir. Avrupa Çalışmaları, disiplinlerarası bir alan olarak ivme kazanmış ve Türkiye'nin Batı'nın sosyal ve siyasi yönlerini uzun süredir inceleme konusundaki katkılarına odaklanmıştır. Bu özel sayı, Türkiye'nin perspektifinden Avrupa'nın geleceğini şekillendiren kritik temaları sunmayı amaçlar, Türkiye'nin işbirlikçi bir manzarada kritik zorluklara yanıt veren entegre bir parçası olarak görülmesini hedefler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa'nın geleceği, Türkiye, AB, Avrupa Çalışmaları.

I - Evaluating Europe's Prospects: Insights from Türkiye

Commencing in April 2021 and concluding in May 2022, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) provided a platform for citizen engagement, facilitating debates wherein participants voiced their expectations and aspirations for the European Union. Main themes listed in the call for the conference included climate change and environment, health, economy, social justice and jobs, EU in the world, values and rights, rule of law, security, digital transformation, European democracy, migration, education, culture, youth and sport. In these conferences, the candidate countries' citizens were not included in the debates and the EU Directorate at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized online "Future of Europe and the Youth" meetings. The Directorate listed 4 main themes to be discussed in these meetings with the youth, democracy, economy and social inclusion, climate change and digitalization, and security and foreign policy.

Following the CoFE, French President Macron's proposition on the establishment of European Political Community (EPC) heated the debates on the future of Europe. Since the head of the European Commission von der Leyen announced her intention to turn the EU into a more geopolitical actor, president of the European Council Michel, had a similar idea for the establishment of a "European geopolitical community".¹ In the EPC meetings,

¹ Charles Michel, "Speech at the Plenary Session of the European Economic and Social Committee." European Council, May 18, 2022. Accessed May 11, 2023 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/18/discours-dupresident-charles-michel-lors-de-la-session-pleniere-du-comite-economique-et-social-europeen/>

started in October 2022 and since then 3 meetings were held in Czech Republic, Moldova and Spain and the main policy areas identified for EPC to work on are political cooperation, security, cooperation on energy, transport, investment, infrastructure and the movement of people.²

All these efforts by the EU and its member states are the result of the challenges faced lately due to several crises in recent years such as Covid-19, increasing migration flows, economic difficulties and lately not only security crises but also energy crises due to Russia-Ukraine war. This special issue aims to dissect Europe's multifaceted challenges and project potential future scenarios. It encompasses analyses on security policies, regional relations, energy strategies, digital transformation, and the societal impacts of populism, with a particular focus on social policies and gender equality. Each contribution examines the post-2015 crisis through the lens of these thematic pillars.

The main motivation behind this special issue was two folded. One, despite the centrality of Türkiye's role in the European Union's strategic future, its direct participation in the debates concerning Europe's prospects has been conspicuously absent, regardless of whether its potential accession to the EU materializes. This myopic vision neglects the issue that Türkiye has been and always will be a special actor in EU's future in achieving its desired goals. Second, the interest in the EU and Europe in Turkish academia is not limited to the accession process and EU's relations with Türkiye. European Studies gained momentum as an interdisciplinary field in the late 1990s, but the study of the West, especially its social and political aspects, has long been a fundamental part of academic research in Türkiye. This special issue was launched with the aim of providing perspectives from Türkiye on themes that are particularly important as the future of Europe takes shape.

This issue is crafted to delve into five primary themes, each representing key areas wherein Europeans must exert additional efforts for the future. The first theme is populism since it is the most fundamental issue shaking European politics. It negatively affects both the EU's ideal to become an ever-closer union and norms such as democracy, rule of law and values in relation to human dignity and rights. Especially when considered in the context

² Spanish Presidency, "European Political Community: a forum to promote dialogue and cooperation," October 1, 2023, <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/european-political-community-granada-summit/> Accessed May 11, 2023

immigrants, right-wing parties, and human rights and freedoms emerge as the topics that will shape Europe's future in relation to populism. Müge Aknur and İbrahim Saylan, argue that populism has not only corroded normative European power but has also turned into an obstacle to the EU's aspirations for geopolitical European power.

The second theme present optimistic projections for 'low politics' areas like social policy and gender equality, highlighting the EU's commitment to these domains despite the challenges posed by immigration, Brexit, and the pandemic. A. İdil Aybars and Nazlı Kazanoğlu present a more positive future image in these issues. Aybars, explores the implications of the immigration waves, the Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic on social policies, which in turn, has impact on shaping the future of the EU through the citizens' perspectives. She concludes that the Commission underlines the importance of social values in the European project and there is a need to address all the major challenges collectively. Nazlı Kazanoğlu, similar to Aybars, argues that the EU has been committed to providing gender equality and although there are changes observed in the focus of the policies, it stays as one of the main effective EU policies.

Our third theme, sustainable energy, offers a positive outlook as well for the EU since the findings demonstrate the possibility for the EU to act as a normative actor in the sustainable and renewable energy field in relation to its new Green Deal framework. M. Efe Biresselioğlu et al. argue that the EU can sustain its normative power but challenges such as the unequal distribution of resources and inequality of opportunities should be addressed thoroughly.

Within this issue, the fourth theme explores digitalization, a domain that poses considerable challenges in anticipating its future impact. The complexity of digitalization as a policy area is dissected, emphasizing the EU's comprehensive approach and the critical factors that will determine its success in achieving technological sovereignty. The steps taken by the EU in this field are quite comprehensive. Thus, Salih Bıçakcı first attempts to paint the full picture in this field in his article. Additionally, this domain extends beyond security concerns, encompassing diverse sectors such as education, the labor market, and social policies. Given that it is a policy that interconnects such diverse policy areas, the success of digitization and the EU's ability to be an actor depend on numerous variables. Bıçakcı, argues that the DIGITAL program's implementation process, funding, and management efforts will determine its success in the long run and the outputs of these processes will demonstrate whether the EU could obtain its technological sovereignty.

The sphere of foreign and security policies emerges as the most pessimistic terrain concerning the prospective impact of the European Union. The final theme scrutinizes the EU's limited efficacy in foreign and security policy, exploring the constraints imposed by regional dynamics and internal EU discord. Ayça Ergun and Anar Valiyev, and Zeynep Özkurt Dördüncü discuss the obstacles to the EU's credibility and influence in the Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean. Ergun and Valiyev, in their article, analyze the limited success of the EU in the South Caucasus due to the lack of insufficient commitment and comprehensive policy. But also, they underline the importance of EU's efforts to restore its image as a benign actor in the region, while redefining its role as a mediator and peace builder. Özkurt Dördüncü evaluates the results of the EU's endeavors in diversifying external energy supplies and providing energy security by applying energy diplomacy model in the Eastern Mediterranean. Her conclusions include the hampering effect of the interest diversification and the lack of harmonization among the EU member states along with the geopolitical implications of external energy disputes in limiting the effectiveness of the EU's energy diplomacy. The paper on EU's foreign and security policies questions the possibility of a geopolitical Europe from a broader perspective by utilizing a neoclassical realist perspective. As the tensions rise around the EU borders, the emphasis on geopolitical actorness of the Union increases and we observe both the politicians from the member states and the representatives from the EU itself emphasize the concept of geopolitical Europe. However, the poor record of the EU in the past hinders positive expectations from the EU in the future. Ahmet K. Han and Çiğdem Üstün, look at the internal dynamics, external pressures and ideas/perceptions in the EU and conclude that although there are existential threats such as Russia and migration from the South, the internal dynamics do not allow the MSs to reach the level of power sharing in the foreign and security field. In essence, while external pressures and the perspectives of EU politicians are oriented toward the concept of a geopolitical Europe, internal constraints impede the realization of this ideal.

II - Türkiye's Academic Perspective on EU Affairs: A Shift in Focus

Türkiye's journey to join the European Union has been a complicated story, marked by shifting phases of aligning with European standards and moments of notable political differences. The European Commission's 2023

Türkiye Report³, published on 8 November 2023, stands as the most recent barometer of this journey, reflecting a process mired in contention and stagnation. Yet, within the academic and policy-making spheres in Türkiye, this stagnation has not led to a waning of interest or a retreat from European affairs. On the contrary, the impasse has inadvertently fostered a more vibrant and diverse intellectual engagement with Europe, transcending the immediate politics of accession to explore a wider array of strategic, cultural, and normative issues. This section aims to dissect the intricate tapestry of Türkiye's EU accession process, scrutinizing the practical difficulties highlighted in the 2023 report, while simultaneously arguing that the current hiatus has been instrumental in broadening the scope of Turkish scholarly debate on Europe.

The European Union's enlargement policy, once a beacon of hope for bridging continental divides, has now become a tableau of unmet expectations and evolving dynamics. The 2023 Türkiye Report serves as a testament to the complex interplay of factors that have led to the current standstill. It is a narrative punctuated by chapters of reform initiatives, compliance efforts, and political setbacks, each contributing to the current state of EU-Türkiye relations. The report's sobering assessment of Türkiye's accession underscores the myriad challenges that have disturbed the process, ranging from concerns over judicial independence to pressing human rights issues. However, the implications of this report for Turkish academia and expert discourse are far-reaching and multifaceted.

The European Commission's 2023 report on Türkiye paints a stark picture of the country's current state of affairs, particularly in relation to its EU accession prospects. The magnitude of criticism directed at Türkiye is significant, with the report detailing "serious deficiencies" in democratic institutions, continued democratic backsliding, and structural problems within the presidential system. The report's emphasis on Türkiye's centralization of power, the undermining of political pluralism, and the pressure on opposition parties and mayors, as well as the lack of progress in key areas such as judiciary reform, anti-corruption measures, and civil society freedom, underscores a profound discord with EU principles and standards.

This report serves as a strong indicator that Türkiye's accession to the EU is unlikely in the medium term for several reasons. Firstly, the EU places a

³ European Commission, "Turkey 2023 Report," accessed November 8, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5630.

high value on the principles of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities, areas where Türkiye has been repeatedly flagged for regression rather than progress. The report's reference to Türkiye's non-compliance with European Court of Human Rights rulings and the lack of a credible peace process to resolve the Kurdish issue further alienate Türkiye from the EU's foundational values. Secondly, the EU's enlargement policy requires candidate countries to align with its *Acquis Communautaire*, the body of common rights and obligations that bind all member states. Türkiye's reported backsliding in areas such as economic policy, public administration reform, and the fight against corruption suggests a widening gap between Türkiye's current policies and the EU's expectations. The report's detailed criticism reflects systemic issues that cannot be quickly resolved, indicating a long road ahead before Türkiye could be considered ready for accession.

In the face of these challenges, Turkish scholars and experts have not remained passive observers. Instead, they have seized upon the opportunity to engage with the concept of Europe in a manner that is unshackled from the binary outcome of membership. This engagement has led to a renaissance in Turkish academic inquiry into European issues, where the focus has shifted from a singular preoccupation with accession to a broader, more critical examination of Europe's political, economic, and social trajectory. Turkish academia's response to the deceleration of the EU bid is reflective of a broader intellectual movement that seeks to redefine Türkiye's relationship with Europe, not as a candidate country on the periphery of the European project but as an active participant in shaping the continent's future.

In this expanded role, Turkish experts are contributing to the discourse on Europe with newfound depth and breadth. They are delving into the implications of the Eastern Mediterranean's geopolitics, the intricacies of energy dependency, the challenges of environmental sustainability, and the transformative potential of digital innovation. These areas of study are not only pertinent to Türkiye's interests but are also critical to the broader European agenda. The academic widening that has emerged from the stalled accession process has allowed for a more critical and independent analysis of these issues, fostering a debate that is as rigorous as it is essential for the future of both Türkiye and Europe.

This article in specific and the issue in its entirety, therefore, does not merely dwell on the cessation of Türkiye's EU accession as a regrettable diplomatic deadlock; rather, it acknowledges the paradoxical enrichment that has emerged from this standstill. The halt in the accession process, while

unfortunate, has inadvertently precipitated a broadening of perspectives within Turkish academic and expert analysis, transcending the narrow confines of membership discussions. This has fostered a more expansive and profound engagement with European studies, allowing Turkish scholars to offer deeper insights into the complex tapestry of European affairs. It is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of intellectual inquiry in Türkiye, demonstrating how perceived political stagnation can catalyze a dynamic and forward-thinking scholarly response. It is an exploration of how a seeming setback in political integration can lead to a progressive leap in academic and policy discourse, with Turkish experts contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Europe's multifaceted landscape.

When we look at Türkiye-Europe relations, it becomes evident that the discourse extends far beyond the contemporary debate on EU membership. The historical interplay between Turkish and European identities offers a rich longitudinal perspective, as meticulously chronicled by Gülmez, Topal, and Rumelili in their seminal work, "Europe and Turkey: Identities in Evolution."⁴ Their analytical literature review traverses over two centuries of evolving perceptions and representations, shedding light on the complex and often contested narratives that have shaped interactions between these two entities. The scholarship of Turkish academia on this subject matter is both vast and varied, reflecting a commitment to understanding the multifaceted dimensions of Türkiye's place in Europe.

This special issue is a valuable addition to the expansive literature on Türkiye-Europe relations. The authors' exploration into vast array of issues on Europe's Future reveals the dynamic and enduring nature of Türkiye-Europe relations, one that transcends the immediacy of political negotiations. As such, the debate on EU membership, while significant, is but one chapter in the ongoing narrative of European studies in Türkiye—a narrative that continues to be written with insight and analysis from the Turkish academic community.

The field of European Studies in Türkiye, as outlined by Şenyuva and Üstün⁵, has been a barometer for the nation's fluctuating relationship with the

⁴Seçkin Barış Gülmez, Alp Eren Topal, and Bahar Rumelili, "Europe and Turkey: Identities in Evolution. An Analytical Literature Review", *Open Research Europe* 3 (2023): 120. <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16176.1>

⁵ Özgehan Şenyuva and Çiğdem Üstün. 2023. "Türkiye'de Avrupa Çalışmaları." In *Türkiye'de Uluslararası İlişkiler Çalışmaları: Alt Alanlar ve Bölgesel Odaklar*, edited by A. Ergun, Ç. Üstün, and S. A. Akgül, 621-650. İmge.

European Union. The article provides an extensive historical account of the discipline's growth and transformation in response to political milestones. This work underscores the adaptability of Turkish scholars to the changing political landscape and their ability to maintain a broad and deep scope in their research endeavors. The expansion of European Studies in Türkiye, particularly during the optimistic phase of EU accession talks, saw a proliferation of research centers and academic programs dedicated to the subject. The analysis reveals that this was not merely a transient interest but a sustained academic engagement that has produced a wealth of literature on a diverse array of topics. From the politics of Europeanization to the challenges of migration and identity, Turkish academia has delved into complex issues that extend well beyond the binary of EU membership debates. Furthermore, the field's responsiveness to the political dialogue between Türkiye and the EU has led to a rich collage of scholarly work that reflects both the historical depth and the current realities of Türkiye-Europe relations. As Türkiye's EU accession process has faced challenges, the academic community has not been deterred. Instead, it has continued to explore the various dimensions of Türkiye's interactions with Europe, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the region's political, social, and cultural dynamics. This scholarly contribution is vital in understanding the broader context of Türkiye's international relations and continues to be a significant aspect of the global discourse on European affairs.

III- The Enlargement of the EU and Türkiye: The Question Remains.

The significance of EU enlargement for Türkiye transcends the immediate question of its membership status. While Türkiye's accession negotiations have stalled, the country's geopolitical and economic relevance to the EU remains substantial. Türkiye's inclusion in the EU would bring both potential benefits and challenges. On the one hand, Türkiye's strategic location as a bridge between East and West offers the EU a gateway to critical regions and markets since the EU clearly put being a geopolitical actor as a target for itself. On the other hand, the complexities of Türkiye's domestic politics, human rights issues, and the rule of law present significant hurdles to its integration into the EU framework.

The EU's enlargement policy, particularly concerning the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, has implications for Türkiye. While Türkiye's own bid for membership remains in limbo, its role as a

regional power means that its actions and positions significantly influence the aspirations of these states. Türkiye's historical, cultural, and economic ties to these regions make it a valuable partner for the EU, but also a competitor in some respects. The EU's strategy towards enlargement must therefore consider Türkiye's multifaceted role and the broader geopolitical dynamics at play.

Economically, Türkiye has much to gain from closer integration with the EU, even outside the context of full membership. The existing Customs Union already ties Türkiye's economy closely to that of the EU, and further cooperation and modernization of this Customs Union could be mutually beneficial. However, the EU's approach to enlargement and Türkiye's role within it must be managed carefully to avoid exacerbating existing tensions or fostering further mistrust between Türkiye and EU member states.

In the broader regional context, Türkiye's experience with EU negotiations offers valuable lessons for both the EU and candidate countries. The protracted and often politicized negotiation process has led to a degree of skepticism and reform fatigue within Türkiye. This experience serves as a cautionary tale for how the EU manages its enlargement policy and engages with candidate countries. A clear, credible, and consistent approach that rewards democratic reforms and economic liberalization with tangible progress towards membership could help maintain momentum and support within candidate countries.

As the EU reflects on its future enlargement, it must also consider the broader implications for its relationship with Türkiye. A partnership that balances Türkiye's strategic interests with the EU's values and standards could pave the way for a more stable and prosperous region. This would require the EU to engage Türkiye not just as a candidate country but as a key regional actor with the potential to contribute significantly to the EU's strategic objectives, including energy security, trade, and regional stability.

Conclusion: Forging Ahead with a Shared Vision for Europe

As the EU continues to navigate through a period of significant transformation and challenges, the role of Türkiye in the future of Europe remains a subject of robust debate and strategic importance. The discussions within Türkiye about the EU's future—ranging from democratic ideals to economic interdependence—highlight the country's enduring relevance to the European project. Despite the current impasse in accession talks, the potential

for Türkiye and Europe to forge a stronger partnership looms large, with implications that extend far beyond the formalities of membership.

The journey of Türkiye's EU accession process has been fraught with complexities and setbacks, as detailed in the European Commission's 2023 Türkiye Report. Yet, it is precisely this journey that has spurred a deeper engagement with European issues within Turkish academia and policy-making circles. The intellectual discourse in Türkiye has transcended the binary outcome of accession, fostering a broader examination of strategic, cultural, and normative issues that are vital to both Türkiye and Europe's future.

This special issue has underscored the necessity for continued dialogue and collaboration between Turkish and European scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. Such collaboration is essential not only for the enrichment of academic discourse but also for the practical advancement of shared interests in areas like energy, security, and digital transformation. The insights and analyses provided by Turkish experts contribute significantly to the understanding of Europe's multifaceted landscape and offer perspectives that can help shape a more inclusive and resilient European identity.

Regardless of the outcome of the membership process, there is a clear potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between Türkiye and Europe. The EU's enlargement policy, while currently presenting a tableau of unmet expectations, still holds the promise of bridging continental divides if pursued with credibility and transparency. Türkiye's experience with EU negotiations—marked by skepticism and reform fatigue—offers valuable lessons for the EU's engagement with other candidate countries. A partnership that respects Türkiye's strategic interests and aligns with the EU's values can contribute to regional stability and prosperity.

In conclusion, as the EU reflects on its future and considers its next steps in enlargement, it must do so with an appreciation for Türkiye's unique position and the contributions it can make. The dialogue between Türkiye and Europe must continue with vigor, informed by the rich complexity of shared history and the promise of shared destiny. The future of Europe, with Türkiye as an integral part, holds the potential for a landscape of cooperation that leverages the strengths of addressing the critical challenges of our time.

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