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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Spain

*Melike Janine Sökmen and Eduard Soler i Lecha, Barcelona Centre
for International Affairs*



1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. From economic partnership to institutionalized support: The Spanish perspective

The evolution of bilateral relations between Spain and Turkey has been conditioned by the political and economic evolution of the two countries, how the relations between Turkey and the EU are structured and the effects of regional instability. So far, neither the political changes in one country nor the other, nor the economic crisis, nor the ups and downs that have characterized relations between Turkey and the EU have dramatically damaged these relations. Internationally, both countries have collaborated in areas such as promotion of the Alliance of Civilizations since 2004. On the European agenda, Spain fully supports Turkey's entry into the EU. At a strictly bilateral level, the relations have been upgraded to the highest level (holding of regular governmental summits) since the organization of the first High Level Meeting in April 2009.

Spain's support to Turkey's EU membership has remained the same in spite of the political changes in Madrid. First Felipe González, then José María Aznar and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, and now Mariano Rajoy, have all supported closer ties between Turkey and the EU. Only the arguments put forward to justify this position have changed. The conservatives of the Partido Popular have focused on geostrategic and economic factors while the socialists have portrayed Turkish accession as a way of bringing Europe, and more generally the Western world, closer to Muslim countries and of re-enforcing the inclusive side of European integration, which would also help the modernization and democratization of Turkey itself.

It is worth mentioning that Spain is part of Friends of Turkey (an informal group comprising Sweden, Finland, the UK, Spain and Italy), which in October 2011 proposed a three-step plan to revive accession talks. Yet, since then, this group has not been active.

The element that better explains the continuous support to Turkey's membership is that unlike what happens in other European countries, it is a topic that generates little political controversy and that is not present among the concerns of the public opinion. However, we have seen that in recent years, more sceptical views have been expressed. Conservative politicians have started questioning an unconditional support to Turkey's EU membership, insisting that the EU's absorption capacity is limited, doubting Turkey's Europeanness, and proposing an alternative such as a privileged partnership. Yet, those positions never become the official line of the party. Similarly, it is too early to determine what the effect of the emergence of Podemos for Spanish Foreign Policy in general, and for Turkey in particular, will be. In that respect, political

¹ The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

developments in Turkey may contribute to politicize the Spanish debate on Turkey's EU membership.

Still, the most likely scenario is one in which Spain continues to support Turkey's European aspiration but becomes active merely in this particular field and only if other key European actors such as Germany and France agree to revive the accession process.

1.2. The domination of interest-based arguments and consensus on narratives

Spain's support for Turkish entry has been clear and consistent. The common arguments behind this support have usually been Turkey's geostrategic value, trade links with a dynamic economy, the positive impact on Turkey's democratization process as well as its possible contribution to the strengthening of the Mediterranean axis within the EU, thus helping to move the EU's centre of gravity southwards. Moreover, the lack of political and social debates on this issue has given the Spanish executive more leeway to design and implement its policies towards Turkey. In addition, it is worth mentioning that there are no bilateral disputes between the two countries.

At the political level, it is worth mentioning that the two countries decided to move their relations a step forward with the institutionalization of yearly governmental summits, known as High-Level Meetings, launched with the inaugural April 2009 summit in Istanbul, the last of which took place in Ankara in February 2014. These meetings gather not only the heads of governments and the ministers of foreign affairs but also a wide range of technical ministries (energy, industry, education, culture, etc.) in an attempt to explore new fields of cooperation. Because of the electoral schedules in both countries, it has not been possible to hold the meetings neither in 2015 nor in 2016.

At the economic level, relations have also developed rapidly, coinciding with the expansion of Turkish economy in the 2000s and the implementation of the Customs Union in 1996. According to ICEX data, Turkey was the 10th biggest market for Spanish exports in 2015; while, according to TUIK, Spain was the 9th biggest export market for Turkey in 2016. Spanish firms have been awarded important contracts in the infrastructure sector and there has been a significant increase of Spanish investments. In that respect, it is important to highlight the fact that Spain's second largest bank (BBVA) is the main shareholder of Garanti, the third largest bank in Turkey.

In sum, interest-based discussions have mostly dominated the debate regarding Turkey and its relations with the EU. As identity or value-based discussions have not taken a great part in social and political debates or in public opinion, the mainstream narratives have mostly built up on the mutual economic benefits. The support of the Spanish government to Turkey's accession is likely to continue because the level of opposition of the Spanish public has not yet reached a critical point and economic interests at stake are more vital than ever before. The fact that enlargement is no longer a priority for the EU also reduces the pressure on the Spanish government to take an outspoken position on this particular issue.

1.3. Economy and security relations as key policy fields

Economic opportunities and strategic considerations dominate Spain's discussions on Turkey. Once more, it is important to recall that these discussions are not part of the public debate.

Maintaining a pro-accession stance benefits the improvement of business opportunities for Spanish companies, and Spain's image in Turkey and other candidate countries, facilitating the development of bilateral relations that were either non-existent or marginal.

On a more strategic note, when Turkey is discussed in Spain, it inevitably becomes part of broader foreign policy considerations on the importance of NATO and transatlantic relations but also of the discussion on the nature and the purpose of the EU integration process. In that respect, the non-discriminatory and transformative nature of EU enlargement is often highlighted.

Compared to other European countries, it is worth mentioning that immigration was not part of the debate on Turkey; probably because of the small size of the Turkish community in Spain.

2. Future of EU-Turkey relations

2.1. Mainstream support, little controversy: Views on the future of EU-Turkey relations

One of Spain's peculiarities is that although the Socialist Party and the Popular Party have disagreed on many issues over the foreign policy agenda, they have converged in their support for Turkey's EU bid. Moreover, the two parties have been maintaining their positions both in government and in opposition.

A few exceptions to the mainstream pro-Turkey position in Spain can be found in smaller political parties, mainly from the extreme left. On some occasions, these parties have referred to human rights, as well as the Kurdish and Armenian issues, as elements to put additional pressure on Turkey throughout accession negotiations. Some figures in centre-right nationalist parties from Catalonia and the Basque Country have also questioned whether full accession should be the ultimate goal of EU-Turkey relations, linking this hesitation to their Christian conception of Europe. However, these ideas have never become their parties' official position. Thus, Turkey has never been a major issue in the political debate and more importantly, no political party has used this issue as part of electoral confrontations. For the time being, unlike to what happens in major EU states, we note that Spanish political parties provide little or scant attention to Turkey's integration process into the EU. We should keep an eye on whether the emergence of Podemos and the domestic changes in Turkey challenge this situation.

It is interesting to note that the leading think tanks, both in Madrid (FRIDE, Real Instituto Elcano, Fundación Altnernativas) and in Barcelona (CIDOB, IEMed) have either been engaged on EU-Turkey relations or have published analysis regarding the Turkish question. In all these cases, the position has been in favour of membership and, above all, against any discriminatory formula.

Business circles have also always been inclined in favour of accession, while human rights activists have been more cautious. For instance, we do find organizations that have paid attention to the human rights situation in Turkey and to the Kurdish question. Yet none of these organizations are strong enough to influence public opinion and shape Spanish political debate concerning the Turkish question.

The low intensity of the debate in the political sphere and the media is clearly reflected in the state of public opinion. In the few polls available, the Spanish population ends up being one of the most favourable in Europe regarding Turkey's EU membership, but it is also one of the most indifferent. Yet, those polls are quite old and it would be interesting to see if the situation has changed since recent events put Turkey at the centre of media coverage (Gezi protests, Syria war, coup attempt, etc.).

2.2. Turkey's accession: a rhetorical commitment?

The concepts of differentiated integration have not been part of the official debates on EU-Turkey relations in Spain. While the official political discourse has been in favour of Turkey's accession – a view that has been maintained up until today –, at the backstage politicians speaking of Spain's support for Turkey's membership as a mistake have been increasing. A former Christian-democrat MP, Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida, even openly stated that the EU's invitation to Turkey had been a mistake and that the country should not join the EU. Most people having a similar opinion prefer not to say it publically.

2.3. The gradual politicization of the Spanish debate on Turkey

From the side of Spain, the emergence of Podemos, a left-wing movement founded in 2014 and as of today the third biggest party in the Spanish parliament, has had a major impact on the debates on Turkey. With five members in the European Parliament, the party has been influential in such debates in terms of changing the Spanish as well the EP perspectives, bringing forward a critical outlook on EU-Turkey relations.

From the side of Turkey, the refugee deal has been a major event for creating divergences among different political parties. The proposal of the European Commission, which was initially rejected by Spain, was later signed by the acting Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, notwithstanding the Spanish Congress (except for Rajoy's Partido Popular (PP)) rejecting the deal because of its incompatibility with international law. Yet this debate did not have vast foreign policy repercussions against Turkey and did not prevent the signing of the deal, but has been a clear indicator of growing criticism among the Spanish opposition against what they perceive as an authoritarian turn in Turkey.

The combination of the political developments in Spain, most visibly the presence of an anti-establishment left-wing party with a considerably big electoral base, and the developments in Turkey, are politicizing the debates on Turkey for the first time. Yet, it is too early to say whether this will lead to a break in Spain's consensus on foreign policy decisions.

3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene

3.1. Preferential for Spain, indispensable for the EU: Turkey's role in regional conflicts

Considering recent events in the Middle East in which the EU has a great stake in (e.g. the ongoing conflicts in Syria-Iraq and the refugee crisis), Turkey's leverage and its importance for the EU has increased.

With the emergence of Islamist governments in the MENA region following the Arab Spring, Turkey has become a more attractive partner for the EU because of its access to and influence in the region. Yet, Turkey's role as an intermediary between the EU and post-Arab Spring governments has been more of an indirect role rather than an official policy agreed upon between any of the parties.

In light of Turkey's role as a regional actor and its leverage on the refugee crisis, Turkey is increasingly perceived as an indispensable partner but also as a human rights violator. In intelligence circles, the downing of the Russian jet and some controversial decisions taken ever since have deteriorated Turkey's image as a reliable NATO ally and some start looking at Ankara as a 'trouble-maker'. Yet those decisions are never expressed in public and it is still too early to see whether this will have an impact on Spain's stance towards Turkey.

On the other hand, Spain's efforts to strengthen the Mediterranean dimension of the EU's foreign policy pushes the country to explore cooperation with other Mediterranean countries, Turkey included. Yet, from Spain's perspective, the focus of its attention in the South is mostly on the Maghreb, a sub-region where Turkey's influence is quite limited.

3.2. Potential areas of cooperation

Spain and Turkey have both been essential pieces in the configuration of a common European interest in the area of energy. Turkey's position as a country of transit for the energy consumed by Europe makes energy and energy security a major area of cooperation. Cooperation between the emergency teams of the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency and its Spanish equivalent became part of the agenda coinciding with the war in Syria. The cooperation of the two countries at a Euro-Mediterranean level, which has already been ongoing through organizations such as the Union for the Mediterranean, will continue to play an important role in the two countries' relations. Last but not least, regional security in the framework of NATO has been an essential area of cooperation, and will continue to be so.

3.3. The Erdoğan factor

The rise of the paradigm of the emerging powers has made Turkey more attractive both to Spain and the EU in general. It remains to be seen whether this paradigm that is increasingly perceived

as a bubble, together with specific challenges to Turkey's economy, could diminish this attractiveness.

On the other side, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is increasingly associated with the new forms of authoritarian leadership in Spain's public debate, together with countries like Russia, and this deteriorates Turkey's image among the Spanish society. Putting it differently, it has become increasingly difficult for Spanish politicians to praise Erdoğan in public.

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