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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Finland

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. Finland: a traditionally strong supporter of Turkey's accession to the EU

One can argue that two major ideas have characterized the Finnish debate on EU-Turkey relations since 1999: 1) Finland has taken a position according to which enlargement of the European Union (EU) in general is a positive development and something that Finland therefore explicitly supports; 2) Ever since the confirmation of Turkey's official candidate status in the Helsinki European Council of 1999, Finland has strongly supported Turkey's EU membership. One could even say with confidence that Finland has been one of the most explicit supporters of Turkey's EU membership during the last 18 years. The Finnish debate has been dominated by key political figures, such as former President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Martti Ahtisaari, and Olli Rehn, the previous Commissioner for the EU's enlargement. Martti Ahtisaari, in particular, has delivered numerous speeches in the international fora on this issue, urging EU governments to give strong political backing for Turkey's EU bid.

The main premises behind Finland's supportive stance of Turkish EU membership have been twofold. First, EU enlargement is widely perceived by the Finnish political and economic elite as the cause for peace and stability in Europe. From this perspective, absorbing Turkey into the EU represents the most secure path for creating a peaceful and stable neighbourhood in the Eastern Mediterranean. Second, Turkey counts as an emerging power especially in economic terms, and the EU accession is perceived as the most effective way to secure flourishing trade relations with Turkey.

On the contrary, the main arguments expressing doubt regarding Turkey's full membership in the EU have always focused on the limited nature of Turkey's liberal democracy, especially regarding minority rights, freedom of expression, and the rule of law. The perceived problems linked to these issues were put forward by the European governments, including Finland, as the main objection to Turkey's application in the 1980s and 1990s. It was the alleged improvement regarding these issues that secured the opening of the accession negotiations in 2005. Thus, similar to the wider European debate on Turkey, the Finnish debate has always been a combination of certain reservations regarding the issue of democratic values and rights, and a strongly supportive stance when it comes to economy and security.

However, during the last two years, there has been a modest yet clearly observable change in the official Finnish debate on Turkey. The position today is bipolar. On the one hand, the official stance is still based on the conviction that Turkey can become a member as soon as it fulfills the official accession criteria. On the other hand, there seems to be general agreement that this

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.

represents a rather long-distance scenario. Even the most explicit supporters, like Olli Rehn, already back in 2014, in the context of European Parliament elections, refused to give any answer to the dictum “Turkey’s place is in the EU”, arguing that the question was not at all topical. The reason for this change is mainly twofold. First, the EU is seen as going through a major internal crisis (Eurozone crisis as well as refugee crisis and subsequently significant Euroscepticism), and the enlargement process has been somewhat marginalized in the EU debates. Second, the overall positive stance has been disrupted due to the increasingly authoritarian and unpredictable behaviour of the Turkish government during the last five years.

1.2. Main narratives in the Finnish debate on EU-Turkey Relations: trading partner, pivotal geostrategic country, and westernization

Regarding the main narratives on Turkey-EU relations observable in Finland, certain main conceptions can be identified: Turkey as an important trading partner and a pivotal country in geostrategic terms, and a westernization narrative that understands Turkey as a uniquely westernized country among the Muslim-majority societies. Regarding the political and business elites, an interest-based approach has been dominant, supported by the idea of Turkey’s enduring westernization. The two-decade long continuity of this firm, institutionalized conviction has been recently revealed, showing that the elite has had enormous difficulties to digest the idea that Turkey is de facto ruled by a political Islamist cadre that opposes the westernization project in the country. Similar to the discussion reproduced by wider European political and economic elites, the official Finnish stance on Turkey has thus been based on a paradox. On the one hand, the support for Turkey’s EU bid is based on the idea that Turkey is part of Europe precisely because it has gone through systematic westernization. On the other hand, there has been an almost complete refusal to acknowledge that there might be something essentially problematic in the fact that the hegemonic party (Justice and Development Party, AKP) is ruled by a leadership deeply influenced by Turkish political Islam that sees Turkey’s westernization/Europeanization as a historical mistake.

1.3. Key policy areas: trade and democratization

Trade and democratization compose the enduring core of the Finnish debate on EU-Turkey relations. Turkey is acknowledged to represent an emerging economy with a young and energetic population. The EU-Turkey Customs Union established in 1995 can be perceived as the main institutionalized form of the economic relationship. At the same time, particularly within the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, there has been a strong belief in the EU’s “normative power”, that is, a conviction that the accession negotiations have been crucial for Turkey’s democratization process. Together with economic ties and trade, the consolidation of liberal democracy and the rule of law in Turkey have in this context provided in this context the most important policy areas observable in the Finnish debate.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Dominant view in the Finnish debate – the continuation of Turkey’s candidate status

Considering the importance of Turkey for Europe, the Finnish debate on the future of EU-Turkey relations is very modest. Apart from a small circle of younger scholars focused on the country, and a couple of senior foreign correspondents and journalists, very few people in Finland have deep knowledge about Turkey. In this sense, the Finnish debate essentially follows the general contours of the wider Western/European debate.

There are some variations in the views from different actors on Turkey-EU ties based on their overall political and ideological orientation. One can argue that the politicians representing the conservative-nationalist Finns Party and Christian Democratic Party – as well as the overwhelming majority of the constituencies supporting these parties – form a relatively solid bloc that objects Turkey’s EU membership on the basis of cultural and religious considerations. However, the incumbent Minister of Foreign Affairs, Timo Soini, who is the leader of the Finns Party, has in his current position completely adhered to the long-held official Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs’ Turkey paradigm, according to which dialogue in the form of Turkey’s formal EU accession negotiations must be maintained in all circumstances, excluding the re-implementation of capital punishment (death penalty) in Turkey.

When directly asked, a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated this position also in January 2017, after the European Parliament had on its part recommended the suspension of Turkey’s EU negotiation process. Thus, even though his party excludes the possibility of Turkey’s EU membership on the basis of cultural and religious differences, in his capacity of Foreign Minister the leader of the Finns Party adheres to the traditional Finnish political line whereby Turkey’s membership negotiations are forever maintained for practical reasons – especially now that Europe (and Finland) needs to secure the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement on migration – the so-called refugee deal – which was signed in March 2016 in order to keep refugees away from Europe.

Regarding the other main Finnish parties, from centre-left Social Democrats, Greens and Left Alliance to centre-right National Coalition Party and Centre Party, one could say that there has been a minor but nevertheless crucial change on this issue. In the past, when individual politicians from these parties were asked about Turkey’s EU-bid, most took a rather neutral yet affirmative position, according to which Turkey was welcomed as soon as it fulfilled the official accession criteria. During the past 12 months, and especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016 and the massive purges that followed, the center-left has for the first time seriously started to question the long-established discourse according to which the membership process, despite various setbacks and the deteriorating Turkey-EU relations, should be kept alive. By December 2016, however, the Social Democrat Party, which is the main representative of the centre-left in

Finland, had taken an unprecedented value-oriented approach, stating that with the severe crackdown on political opponents and critical journalists, and in light of reports of systematic torture in detention centers, Turkey under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could not become a member of the EU, and more crucially that the membership negotiations should be suspended for the time being.

Generally speaking, there seems to be a clear difference between the position of the political and economic elites and that of the wider population regarding Turkey's EU bid. For the political-economic elite, the EU integration process as such is an undisputedly positive process, and because EU enlargement has been a major part of the overall integration project, the political and economic elites have generally welcomed Turkey's EU bid. In contrast to this, the wider population generally appreciates the economic, practical and security benefits resulting from EU membership, but they do not consider further enlargement as a relevant topic. In this sense, one could argue that rather than actively resisting Turkey's membership, the wider population has no real interest in the issue. However, several individual citizens repeatedly express their doubts in public discussions, often asking why exactly so many (past and present) key Finnish politicians have been so keen on making Turkey a member of the EU.

Compared to Germany, Austria and Sweden, the Turkish diaspora in Finland is very small, around 10,000 people. For this reason, the polemics regarding the "Euro-Turks" is not part of the wider debate in Finland. For most ordinary citizens, Turkey is a well-known holiday resort, something that is exotic yet somehow familiar at the same time. Turkey's possible EU membership has rarely been debated among the wider population.

2.2. The alternative briefly discussed – "privileged partnership"

In these circumstances, among the rather small number of actors – mainly politicians and government officials – who actively debate on this issue, the concepts of "privileged partnership" and/or "strategic partnership" have been heard now and then, mainly when the actors have been explicitly pushed to elaborate their views on EU's future ties with Turkey. These concepts, however, do not imply a detailed view on how to arrange EU-Turkey ties in the future. Instead, these concepts are thrown into the air as a sign of despair and frustration regarding the events in Turkey. In this sense, the debate can be summarized as a kind "wait and see" attitude that fails to present any meaningful alternatives.

Having said that, the idea of a continued dialogue with Turkey in the form of official EU membership negotiations seems to be highly institutionalized especially in Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs administration, and the changing political orientation of the Foreign Minister has in no way changed this well-established paradigm. It is thus likely that Finland will continue actively supporting functioning and mutually beneficial Turkey-Finland and Turkey-EU relations. However, if the incumbent AKP takes the last crucial step by re-introducing the death penalty, the form of this cooperation will of course change altogether. Then the EU membership process

will likely be halted, and in all likelihood replaced by a “special partnership” in one form or another. It is quite easy to predict that in such circumstances the Finnish political-economic elite would only slightly redefine its position, thereby actively supporting the EU-Turkey dialogue in this new, downsized or at least altered form.

2.3. Recent developments in Turkey affecting the Finnish debate

There is no doubt that the abrupt collapse of the peace process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), as well as the exponentially increasing political violence in Turkey during 2015 and 2016, has to a significant degree changed the expectations regarding the future of Turkey and EU-Turkey relations in the Finnish debate. A similar effect is caused by the weekly news about the harassment of all those –journalists, NGO members, opposition politicians, academics and even ordinary citizens – who express critical views about the ruling party’s decisions and political agenda.

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

3.1. Conflicts in the EU’s neighbourhood and expectations regarding Turkey

As in many European countries, in the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring in the Middle-East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2011, there seemed to be hopes in Finland that Turkey could function as a positive model for other countries regarding democracy and economic development. The Finnish politicians most notably supporting Turkey’s EU membership in the period 2005-2011 often argued that Turkey could function as a bridge between the “Islamic world” and the West, and that a certain model – a liberal democracy in a Muslim-majority society – was established in Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). In this, the key figures in the Finnish debate – Olli Rehn, Martti Ahtisaari and few others – clearly reproduced the widespread narrative developed since the September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, according to which Turkey was almost predestined to become a “bridge actor”, a country that could provide a platform for a peaceful encounter between the Middle East and the West.

From these premises, Turkey’s more active foreign policy in the Middle East was for a long time perceived as beneficial and constructive. However, Turkey’s foreign policy decisions since 2011 have completely undermined these hopes, and the realization of this fact has by now started to influence the views of even the most optimistic Finnish “friends of Turkey”. There is a sense of disappointment and disbelief, and many still refuse to accept the fact that Turkey has become an “illiberal democracy” that is actually more the cause rather than the cure for the instability in the EU’s wider neighbourhood.

3.2. Security and energy as areas of future cooperation

It can be argued that the amount of Finnish decision-makers seeing Turkey as a predictable ally is decreasing, although the official statements still orthodoxly reproduce the narrative of Turkey as a key “strategic partner” and EU candidate. The truth is, however, that those who still see Turkey positively are trying hard to ignore the country’s extremely worrying domestic tendencies, and are concentrating on maintaining economic relations and cooperation in certain key issues, such as energy and refugees. Thus, while the official discourse emphasizes normative issues such as human rights and democracy, Finland’s stance on EU-Turkey ties is based on the assumption of Turkey’s continuing relevance in fields of security and energy, where cooperation is expected irrespective of Turkey’s domestic developments.

3.3. Assertive Russia and an increasing concern regarding Turkey’s future

In Finland, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent involvement in the eastern Ukraine conflict, together with increasing Russian attempts to manipulate the political agenda in various countries, has for historical reasons overshadowed all other debates. With this increasingly difficult relationship, many in Finland would have liked to see a European-oriented Turkey with which the EU could cooperate in its wider neighbourhood, not least in terms of the challenges created by Russian aggression. However, in the larger informed Finnish debate on Turkey, involving scholars and media outlets, the idea of Turkey as a rising country on its way to liberal democracy is completely abandoned for the time being, unlikely to be repaired as long as Turkey is ruled by its current power holders. For these observers and specialists, the future EU-Turkey relationship is likely to represent the kind of interest-based strategic cooperation that the EU is inclined to build with Iran. This means at least partly giving up on a the long-cherished idea of the EU’s transformative power and its alleged ability to draw, by the power of example, countries like Russia and Turkey into its own normative order.

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