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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Sweden

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. Steadfast but conditioned Swedish support for Turkish EU membership

The Swedish position towards Turkey has generally been positive. Sweden even supported Turkey's full membership on the condition that Turkey fulfils the Copenhagen criteria, with a special emphasis on democracy and human rights. The decision to grant the country candidate status in 1999 was therefore welcomed by the Swedish government. One of the arguments was that it would be easier to steer the country in a more democratic direction within the frame of the future negotiation talks.

Sweden's liberal government, which took office in 2006, focused on strengthening bilateral ties with Turkey and canalized its criticism mainly via the EU and the accession negotiation process. Therefore, Sweden was eventually perceived as one of Turkey's best friends on the European continent. Moreover, the recent years' clearly authoritarian developments in Turkey did not hinder the Swedish government – neither the centre-right coalition (2006-2014) nor the Social democratic-Green one (2014-) – from arguing that Sweden needs to engage even more in order to steer Turkey towards a complete fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. To date, almost every Swedish foreign minister has declared support for Turkey's membership bid in their annual foreign policy declaration in the Swedish parliament. In fact, up until 2010 when the populist right-wing Sweden Democrats entered the parliament, there had been a consensus in the Swedish parliament in this regard.

However, despite the current (2014-) Swedish government still supporting Turkey in its membership process, there seems to have been a serious setback in the Swedish-Turkish relations recently, which coincides with the more definite authoritarian development and a growing Euroscepticism in Ankara. Moreover, during the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven told the Swedish media that he was "concerned" about the "serious situation in Turkey" and added that the outcome of the ongoing events is still "unclear", without immediately condemning the coup plotters. In the following month, Foreign Minister Margot Wallström criticized a Turkish legislative bill causing criticism from her Turkish counterpart who said it was a scandal "to post such a tweet based on false news or speculation". This, along with the fact that the current Swedish government seems to use the EU less than their predecessors to canalize criticism, has probably contributed to the increasingly stalled relation.

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.

1.2. Rights-based interest-oriented narrative dominating the debate

Despite the fact that the Swedish position towards a Turkish EU membership has been positive, the narratives characterizing the Swedish stance have varied over time. Different arguments have been central to mark the Swedish support. The arguments applied have been connected to both the political colour of the Swedish government but also to the domestic political development in Turkey.

By studying Swedish foreign ministers' foreign policy declarations, it becomes clear that an Europeanization perspective has consistently been adopted. The EU is often portrayed as the actor able to steer Turkey with regard to its process of democratization and enhancing the protection of human rights.

The narrative of the EU as a potential change actor for its membership candidate countries, along with the clear focus on a rights-based conditionality, was initially shared among all parties in the parliament. It was not until the AKP came to power and initially carried out promising reforms that the Swedish government eventually also added value- and identity-based arguments, such as the then Social Democratic Prime Minister, Göran Persson (1996-2006), who in 2004 described Turkey as a bridge between a Christian Europe and a Middle East suffused by Islam. His successor, the liberal Fredrik Reinfeldt (2006-2014), often used a similar set of arguments until around 2011. It was in this period of time that Sweden was often referred to as "Turkey's best friend in Europe", showing that during times of Turkish reformism the Swedish government, regardless of political colour, were adding an identity-oriented narrative to the rights-based one.

However, following the Turkish parliamentary elections in 2011 when the then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected for a third term, the identity-based arguments were reduced as the Turkish government became increasingly autocratic. The Swedish then liberal government returned to a stricter focus on value- and rights-based arguments, i.e. focusing on enlargement as the main driver to steer the country back into a reformistic agenda, focusing on democratization and strengthening human rights. Ever since, this has been the major line of argumentation of both the previous liberal government and the current social democratic one.

The Swedish position towards Turkey has, however, also been characterized by pragmatism. When the Swedish parliament in 2010 adopted a resolution on recognizing the events in 1915 as genocide, Turkey immediately withdrew its ambassador to Sweden and a Turkish state visit to Sweden was cancelled, causing the then foreign minister Carl Bildt to openly regret the parliament's decision. Moreover, during the police violence towards the Gezi park demonstrators in Istanbul, Sweden remained remarkably silent. This constitutes just one example of the former government's strategy to canalize its criticism via the EU in order to maintain good bilateral relations with Turkey.

1.3. Universal values in focus

Sweden has a long tradition of defending universal ideals such as democracy and human rights in its foreign policy. The Swedish public opinion thus generally reacts when these ideals are infringed. The political Copenhagen criteria therefore constitute a recurring theme which, as shown above, has characterized the official Swedish position constantly over time. The limitation of freedom of expression, minority rights and the rule of law are consequently the main areas being discussed in Sweden as key factors to continuing the Turkish EU membership negotiations.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Both optimism and concern for the future

Considering the recent years' developments, especially the period following the parliamentary elections in Turkey of June 2015, two main pictures are emerging.

The first picture is shared among most politicians and public opinion-makers who express their increasing concern for democracy and the rule of law in Turkey, with a special emphasis on the highly limited freedom of expression in the country. The aborted peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the resumed fighting in several cities in the mainly Kurdish southeast, the increased number of terror attacks, the failed coup attempt and the consequences following it, all constitute factors worrying the Swedish political elite. Swedish representatives regularly express their deep concern for the political development in Turkey, however insisting that the EU is the best tool available to pilot Turkey in a more positive direction. Sweden thus maintains the conviction that increased commitment from the EU may eventually foster reform processes in central political areas such as the rule of law, democracy and human rights.

The second picture, dominated by Swedish companies active in Turkey, thus constituting an "economic elite", indeed recognizes the problems identified above, but voices a considerably more optimistic approach to operate in the country, both in the short and in the long term. Business Sweden, a partnership jointly owned by the Swedish government and the industry, conducted a survey presented during the fall of 2016 on how Swedish companies established in Turkey perceive the Turkish business climate. The apparent optimism seems to be driven by expectations on sector growth not least due to Turkey's young population and yet growing middle class. Albeit it is not possible to draw any far-reaching conclusions from this, the contrast between the political and economic elites is nevertheless striking. This example also suggests that the very same pragmatism apparent when looking at the Swedish position on Turkey's EU bid may also be relevant in this case.

2.2. All or nothing in the Swedish debate

Concepts of differentiated integration as an alternative to a full-scale membership are rarely presented in the Swedish debate. There are no significant differences among the majority of political parties being positive to a Turkish EU membership, albeit with a varying degree of enthusiasm. The main exception in this regard is the populist and EU-critical right-wing Sweden Democrats, currently the third largest party in the Swedish parliament, who explicitly urges the EU to cancel all forms of negotiations with the country. In light of the recent events in Turkey, the relatively small Leftist Party wants to freeze the membership negotiations and terminate the talks on visa freedom for Turkish citizens to the EU. In short, to a vast majority of Swedish political parties, the question is when, not if, or even how the EU should open its door for Turkey.

The fact that Swedish actors, politicians as well as public opinion makers do not promote any form of “privileged partnership” may be due to at least two reasons. Firstly, enlargement is considered as an important tool to promote democracy and human rights, not least in the case of Turkey. Sweden has a long history of cooperating with Turkey, as it established diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire during the first half of the 18th century. Moreover, Sweden has a relatively large community of people with Turkish background, both due to labour and political migration. This possibly affects the Swedish position to a certain degree as well. Secondly, the Swedish engagement in the EU is characterized by a degree of pragmatism; Sweden is usually not that keen on deepened EU integration, standing outside the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) being the most obvious example, which indicates the Swedish cherry picking. Thus, it is likely that not as much of interest as it may be to other countries is at stake for Sweden in the case of a Turkish EU membership.

2.3. Focus on EU role in the wake of the failed coup-attempt

It was not as much the events in Sweden as those in Turkey that affected the characteristics of the debate on EU-Turkey relations in Sweden during the 2015/2016 period. The July 2016 failed military coup attempt and the consequences following it had a considerable impact on the characteristics of the debate on Turkey, not only by politicians but also public opinion-makers, researchers and various experts and analysts. The big demarcation line of the debate in Sweden regarding EU-Turkey relations concerns the question of whether the EU’s current engagement with Turkey should be put to an end or should rather be intensified. A number of actors have questioned whether or not Turkey could even be labelled as a democracy any longer. A small number of actors, however, argue that Sweden and the EU have let Turkey down considering the challenges it was facing particularly with the coup. Although neither the coup attempt nor the consequences following it prompted a change of the Swedish stance, the government stresses more than ever that only an active foreign policy canalized via the EU could get Turkey back on track.

The message that “the EU needs to do more” was also commonly used when the fighting between the Turkish military and the PKK was resumed during the fall of 2015, as well as when elected politicians from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) were arrested in the wake of the coup attempt. The closure of numerous media outlets and the strong limitation on the freedom of expression – before as well as after the coup attempt – constitute additional examples causing demands on the EU to act.

The fact that Sweden so often seeks to canalize its criticism towards Turkey via the EU may depend on a number of reasons. For instance, the EU is Sweden’s main foreign policy arena as Sweden is neither a member of NATO nor of the G20, thus lacking other arenas to exert influence. Sweden has, however, a seat in the UN Security Council during the 2017/2018 period, but it remains to be seen whether Sweden would prefer that over the EU, considering the ongoing EU membership process. According to the ECFR scorecard survey from 2015, Sweden is, after Germany, the member state with greatest impact on the EU’s foreign policy.

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

3.1. Turkey’s role in Syria vital to Sweden and the EU

The conflicts and the political changes in Turkey’s neighbouring countries had a limited impact on Sweden’s view on Turkey’s role in the area and its relations to the EU. It is mainly the domestic conflicts in Turkey that constitute Sweden’s view of the country. However, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq stand out as exceptions to this.

Turkey joined the international coalition combating the terrorist group IS in 2014. However, it was not until the summer of 2015 that they made their air bases available for the coalition members to attack the IS, which caused frustration also within Sweden. Furthermore, the Swedish foreign minister criticized that Turkey’s own air strikes were not essentially directed towards the IS, but rather against the PKK. Sweden has repeatedly stated that this conflict between the Turkish government and the PKK can only be solved through negotiation and therefore Sweden pushes for peace talks both bilaterally as well as within the EU. The Swedish government believes that successful peace talks would have a positive impact also inside Syria. It also emphasized the important role of Turkey in the fight against IS, not least in the Operation Euphrates Shield, but stressed that it must not lead to strife with other groupings. It has often been pointed out that Turkey is a key player in the region as well as in the conflict in Syria. The Swedish government has outlined on several occasions the crucial importance of cooperating with Turkey in order to manage the challenges in the neighbourhood, which also include the refugee crisis that will be discussed below.

3.2. Room for Swedish focus on rights in the refugee issue

In the light of the High Representative Federica Mogherini's review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2015, the Swedish parliament's foreign affairs committee presented a statement in December 2015, making three interesting additions. Firstly, the efforts promoting the priorities set out in the ENP (prosperity, stability and security) should be based on the universal values the EU cooperation stands on. Secondly, the regional dimension of the ENP, the partnerships, needs to be based on mutual commitments to the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights including minority rights and the principles of market economy and sustainable economic growth. Thirdly, the committee emphasizes the importance of a clear membership perspective to those partner countries geographically located in Europe carrying out political and economic reforms.

It can thus be concluded that representatives of Swedish foreign policy – be it the Foreign Minister on Turkey's EU candidacy or the aforementioned committee on the ENP – attach importance to a similar rights-based narrative. One of the most important areas of cooperation between Sweden, via EU, and Turkey, which thereby crystallizes, is the handling of the refugee issue. One of the stated objectives was to limit the number of deaths in the Mediterranean and to limit the human traffickers. Instead, more than 5 000 people died on the Mediterranean in 2016, to be compared with 3 771 in 2015, a direct consequence of refugees now trying to reach Europe via Libya, as Turkey now more efficiently prevents boats from departing.

Tailored refugee deals with other Mediterranean countries aside, the numbers above show that the deal with Turkey does not offer a long-term solution. Awaiting an updated European asylum policy, Sweden could, either bilaterally or in larger constellations, work more proactively with Turkey in order to, for instance, help strengthen the capacity in the reception of the almost 3 million refugees inside Turkey. Such work could perhaps serve as an example for similar efforts in other neighbouring countries.

3.3. Refugee issue and Turkey-EU-deal in focus

The refugee issue has become the most important political question for Swedish voters. In 2015, Sweden received 163 000 refugees, more per capita than any other country in the EU except Hungary. Turkey plays a key role in this matter considering the large number of refugees it is hosting and its refugee deal with the EU.

This massive influx of refugees caused the Swedish minority government to establish border controls between Sweden and Denmark and over the Öresund Bridge connecting the countries. Furthermore, Sweden introduced temporary residence permits and a restricted possibility for family reunion. The rules, which took effect in early 2016, along with the EU's migration deal with Turkey resulted in that only 29 000 people sought asylum in Sweden in 2016.

During the summer of 2015, it dawned on many in Sweden that the number of refugees suddenly increased. At a manifestation in solidarity with the refugees, the Prime Minister Stefan

Löfven held a now disputed speech on the necessity of maintaining an open-border policy for the EU, only to decide on border controls and stricter asylum rules just a few months later. The Turkey-EU deal on refugees that was eventually agreed upon was also welcomed by the Swedish government. It argued that there would finally be an ending to the dangerous journeys over the Mediterranean, which undoubtedly shows the impact of global developments on the Swedish positioning regarding EU-Turkey relations.

The apparent shift in Prime Minister Löfven's approach to the refugee situation is not only the case for the government. In 2016, a similar shift – from a liberal approach to migration to a more rigorous one – could also be identified among several of the parties in the parliament. However, whether the parties' more restricted position on migration also reflects the opinion of the public has been questioned, and there are different studies finding contrarious conclusions. A recurrent theme of criticism directed towards the refugee deal is that Sweden and the EU allow themselves to be blackmailed by Turkey, while the Swedish government for its part maintains that the measures were necessary as the capacity of Swedish authorities had hit the ceiling.

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