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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Portugal

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. The view from Lisbon

Portugal has consistently been a strong supporter of Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU). This position is neither particularly surprising nor necessarily consensual in terms of party politics and civil society.

Turkey's accession to the EU has benefited from the support of most Atlanticist countries within the EU (of which one could highlight the United Kingdom, Sweden and Poland). It has also been supported by the Southern European flank, with countries such as Spain, Italy and even Greece demonstrating their interest in seeing Turkey as part of the EU. As part of both the Atlanticist and the Southern European groups, it is therefore not particularly surprising to see Portugal's open stance towards Turkey's accession. These geopolitical alignments are also enhanced by the recognition of cultural similarities between both countries. Portugal sees itself as part of the Mediterranean family, of which Turkey is also a member. This is a view shared by Ankara, as highlighted by an Op-ed piece written by the then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in July 2010 for the Portuguese newspaper Público.

What is arguably more surprising is the consistency of that support, at least officially, even when other member states have grown more sceptical of Turkey's accession merits, and when other issues – such as the Eurozone crisis – took over in terms of importance for the country. And that is exactly one of the reasons why the country's position has not significantly changed in the last two decades: relations with Turkey are not seen as particularly relevant within the context of Lisbon's foreign policy. Although media pays close attention to European and international politics, Portuguese foreign policy is, with a few exceptions, mostly a non-contentious issue. In the past, major decisions such as the intervention in Afghanistan have been made without any significant public debate. There is a general foreign policy consensus between the two main political parties, the centre left Partido Socialista (PS) and the centre right Partido Social Democrata (PSD) that certainly contributes for that absence of a strong political debate on foreign policy issues. The two main parties tend, with some degrees of nuance, to be aligned with the transatlantic axis and the European integration project.

There is also the widespread perception among the Portuguese decision makers that the country benefited immensely from its accession to the EU and that other countries should have equal opportunity to benefit from the EU's enlargement policy. In the specific case of Turkey, this is coupled with both the alignment of interests with the country's two most relevant traditional

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.

allies - the United States and the United Kingdom - and the sense that a stable, Europeanized Turkey will be a force for stability in the Southern Mediterranean basin. In 2013, the then Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho suggested that the EU should accelerate the accession process with Turkey as that would give a renewed impetus to the relations between Brussels and Ankara, and ultimately benefit citizens on both sides. For former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Portugal had become the main supportive voice of Turkey's accession, and arguably the country in Europe that best understands Turkey. Also, soon after being appointed Minister of European Affairs in 2014, Volkan Bozkir started his European tour in Lisbon so that he could receive positive energies before visiting Brussels and Strasbourg.

Economically, relations between both countries have been limited. The expansion of Turkey's gross domestic product (GDP) for most of the past decade was also seen as a positive development that heralded new opportunities for trade between the two countries. Trade relations have expanded in the last decade, but the current trading volume is still of only about EUR 1 billion per year. Tourism has also increased in both directions and Turkish Airlines now offers a number of daily direct flights between Istanbul, Lisbon and Porto.

Finally, in Portugal the level of immigration – particularly from Muslim countries – is very low, which means that there is no concern for some sort of “migrant invasion” if Turkey was to join the EU. That certainly makes it easier for Portugal to keep its strong support to Ankara's accession.

This does not mean, however, that such support is unanimous across the political spectrum. In Parliament, both Bloco de Esquerda (BE), and Partido Comunista Portugues (PCP) on the left and CDS-Partido Popular (CDS-PP) on the right have been very critical of Turkey's accession. In January 2000, soon after Turkey was given the status of candidate country for EU membership in Helsinki, BE and CDS-PP presented protest votes in parliament. For CDS-PP, mainly geographic, normative and demographic concerns, together with the absence of a democratic debate within the EU on Turkey's accession, prevented the party from supporting it. This party would prefer Turkey to become a strategic partner rather than a full member of the European Union. For BE (in a view that is shared with PCP), the inclusion of Turkey should only happen after Ankara has banned the death penalty (which it eventually did), fully embraced multi-party democracy and respected the rights of the Kurdish minority.

Public opinion, initially quite supportive of Turkey's accession, became progressively less inclined to support it. From 1996 to 2006, the Eurobarometer consistently reveals the Portuguese population among the main supporters of Turkey's accession. That support peaked in 2001, when 46 percent of respondents revealed to be in favour and only 26 percent against it, the second lowest score in the EU. By the end of 2010, that picture had changed substantially, with only 30 percent of respondents showing their support for Turkey's accession, whereas 50 percent were opposing it. Many factors could contribute to this shift in public opinion. The

financial crisis that Portugal (again, following a European trend) was entering at the time meant that the Portuguese population was less generous towards other candidate members.

At the same time, Turkey's commitment to comply with the Copenhagen Criteria was fading compared to the previous years. This did not necessarily add to the generosity of the Portuguese population.

Another important explanation could be that the general support for the EU's enlargement among the general public was low and that the perception on Turkey was simply following the overall scepticism regarding future enlargements. For instance, in 2006, whereas the overall stance regarding the EU enlargement was 50 percent in favour and 26 percent against, in 2011, with the financial crisis already being felt by the Portuguese population, that support was reduced to 42 percent and opposition increased to 40 percent. There are no recent polls on Turkey, but it would not be surprising if the level of support for the country's accession remained considerably lower than the heights of 2001 and 2002.

1.2. Dominant narratives

As mentioned above, public debate on foreign policy tends to be weak and mostly focused on issues seen as of primary importance to the country. Turkey's accession is currently not part of that list. The two main positive narratives about Turkey have to do with its economic potential and with its geopolitical importance. Although economic relations between Portugal and Turkey are not very significant for either side, every visit of a head of state or government (from Portugal to Turkey and vice-versa) has been an occasion to highlight the great potential for economic cooperation between the two countries. This economic dimension was particularly visible during the 2011-2015 centre-right PSD/CDS-PP coalition government in Portugal, whose strong agenda was strongly centred around the promotion of Portuguese exports as a replacement for the austerity-induced contraction of the country's domestic economy. In 2012, in a visit to Turkey, the then Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho signed a bilateral agreement with Turkey that, among other aspects, included the creation of a regular summit between the two countries. The first summit took place in 2015 and both sides reiterated the unfulfilled potential of their economic relations.

The geopolitical narrative is defined by Turkey's crucial role in fighting terrorism, controlling the flow of refugees and stabilising the Middle East. For Portugal, Turkey can act as Europe's spearhead in the region, both as a future member of the EU and as a member of the Atlantic Alliance.

1.3. Loyalties and Red Lines

Despite the consistent support for Turkey's accession to the EU, Portugal sees the fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria as a *conditio sine qua non*. The current Portuguese government has also made clear after the attempted coup of July 2016 that there are two red lines that Portugal

would consider vital for Turkey to pursue its accession process: first, it should not re-introduce the death penalty and second, it should conduct a thorough investigation into the human rights abuses that were committed during and after the failed coup attempt. As in other European countries, there is also a growing sense that Ankara is moving in the opposite direction of the Copenhagen Criteria and it is unclear until when the Portugal's support for Turkey's accession will continue.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Growing unease

Although Lisbon's official position on the political situation in Turkey has not changed, a growing unease with the current state of affairs in the country is quite visible in the official declarations.

The two left-wing parties that provide parliamentary support to the PS minority government, BE and the communist Partido Comunista Português, have also been very critical of the current political situation in the country. The leader of BE, Catarina Martins, called on the EU to revisit its position regarding Turkey's EU membership in light of what she says were the "two coups" that Turkey suffered in two days, referring to the failed coup and the ensuing governmental response.

2.2. Member or partner?

As mentioned above, all the major parties agree that Turkey could, in the future, be a member of the European Union: PS and PSD have been, when in government, quite supportive of Ankara's European ambitions. The same cannot be said of BE and PCP, which although not closing the door to Turkey, have been less positive about its EU integration, often publicly criticising aspects of both Turkey's domestic and international policy. It must be said that these parties are also quite sceptical of the European project as whole. On the right, CDS-PP is less Eurosceptic but would prefer Turkey to be a strategic partner rather than a full-fledged member.

2.3. Concerns and headlines

In 2015-16, Turkey made the headlines in Portugal for four main reasons: 1) its involvement in the Syrian conflict; 2) its central role in the refugee crisis and the subsequent EU-Turkey agreement on the issue; 3) the terrorist attacks that Turkey suffered in Ankara and Istanbul; and 4) the averted military coup that was broadcasted live by the main news channels in Portugal as well as the government's response in the weeks following the event. The refugee crisis and the consequences of the coup were, and still are, the two main reasons of concern for the main political parties. The EU-Turkey agreement on refugees was quite criticized in the Portuguese media, as well as in Parliament, particularly by the left. For the two main parties and for CDS-PP, the agreement is a lesser evil to tackle an extremely complex problem. After the attempted

coup, all parties noted their concern with the situation in Turkey. In the weeks that followed, the parties on the left were particularly critical of the Turkish government's reaction to the coup attempt, raising questions about the state of freedom and democracy in the country.

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

3.1. Conflicts, changes and concerns

More than concerns regarding Turkey's commitment to the EU, there are serious doubts regarding Ankara's commitment to the Atlantic Alliance. Soon after the failed coup, the leader of the opposition and former Prime Minister, Pedro Passos Coelho, voiced his concern for the situation in Turkey, a country that he labelled as a very important security actor within the context of NATO and Europe's collective security. That broadly remains Portugal's official position. However, more and more voices, even from the political dimension, show signs of a growing scepticism regarding Turkey's future.

3.2. Cooperation areas

Portugal is an active player in Euro-Mediterranean relations, and Turkey has been regarded since the mid-1990s as an important partner in guaranteeing the stability of the Southern Mediterranean region. Related to that, both countries have been very much involved in the Alliance of Civilizations, a joint Spanish-Turkish initiative that had former Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio as its first High Representative. In addition to the role that Turkey can play in stabilizing the Southern Mediterranean region, Portugal also sees itself as a gateway for Turkey's engagement with the Portuguese-speaking world. Ankara is since 2015 an official associate observer of the Portuguese Speaking Community (PALOP) and it has in recent years developed strong ties with a number of Portuguese-speaking countries, such as Angola and Brazil. For Turkey, these are seen as pivotal countries for the development of its relations with Africa and South America.

3.3. Global developments

There is some concern that from a Mediterranean partner and NATO ally, Turkey could be shifting towards Russia. There is also a growing perception that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's aggressive stance both domestically and in the world stage are part of a global trend towards populism and nationalism. Turkey's recent rapprochement with Russia is seen within that context. In a recent Op-Ed for the daily newspaper Público, PSD's MEP Paulo Rangel, argued that Turkey is becoming an illiberal democracy, very much in line with what is happening in Russia. In his view, they both share an ideological programme that aims to destroy the liberal dimension of Western democracies.

Links & Further Readings:

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