

Opening Ceremony
Izmir University of Economics
7 October 2015
Asst. Prof. Dr. Alexander Bürgin

The European Union seems to be in a deep crisis. And also EU-Turkey relations appear to be in a bad state. In the following minutes I will explain, why I am more optimistic about the future of the EU – and also the future of EU-Turkey relations.

I will first refer to the arguments suggesting that the EU is in a bad state, and then present arguments which challenge this negative view. In the second part I will then present the pessimistic and optimistic view on EU-Turkey relations.

Now: Why does the EU seem to be in a bad state?

First, yes, it is true that member states are bitterly divided over several policy issues. Regarding the refugee crisis, those countries hosting the lion share of refugees want to introduce a quota system in order to distribute the refugees more evenly among the countries, whereas other countries are strictly against such a quota system. The split is in particular between the Western and the Eastern European countries.

Another recent example, illustrating the deep divisions within the EU, is the management of the Euro crisis. While some countries were in favour of a strict austerity policy, that means cutting public expenditures in order to reduce the public debt level, other countries were in favour of tolerating higher public debt levels in order to boost the economy. Here, the conflict was basically between Northern and Southern countries

Or some would say: between Germany and the rest of the countries. A widespread perception is that Germany has dictated the responses to the Euro crisis. As a consequence, Germany has been labelled the hegemon of Europe.

The euro crisis and the responses to it also had an impact on the public support for the EU. At the last election for the European Parliament anti-European parties gained around 20 per cent of the votes. Obviously, one important reason was that many people reject the austerity policy, and, in addition, have the impression that this policy is imposed on their countries, which cannot decide anything alone anymore.

I will now explain why my view on the EU is more optimistic. First, the just mentioned conflicts among the member states are normal – and not new. The history of the EU is full of disputes between the member states. This is a central aspect of democracy rather than an indicator of crisis. However, it is important, that common solutions and compromises can be found. This process takes time, but usually it works because public pressure disqualifies the no-solution option. Thus, the governments know that, in the end, they have to find a compromise. Consequently, after a long negotiation process, every position is normally somehow taken into consideration, so that all countries can live with the compromise.

As a result, decision making in the EU is a complex process, involving many actors and institutions. This process cannot solely be dominated by one country. From this follows that Germany is not and cannot be the hegemon of Europe. Regarding the management of the Euro crisis, Germany was for instance not the only country in favour of strict austerity rules as a precondition for another financial aid package for Greece. And even if Germany has played an important role in the management of the Euro crisis, in other policy areas, in particular foreign policy, Germany neither has the capacity nor the aspiration to be a hegemon. Searching for European solutions instead of national approaches is a crucial element of Germany's foreign policy identity since the end of the Second World War.

Finally, some remarks regarding the public support for the EU. People support the EU if they are convinced that the EU is beneficial for them – and not only for the banking sector or the industry. Therefore: The EU has to prove, that the single market is a benefit also for the ordinary citizens. Some advantages are obvious: The single market offers consumers more choices and cheaper products; people can live and work wherever they want in Europe.

Even more important are the political benefits of European integration: It allows the member states to find solutions for common problems which cannot efficiently be solved at the national level, such as for instance environmental pollution. Furthermore, the common policies allow the EU to exercise influence in world politics via a web of economic, diplomatic and cultural ties. Despite deficits and limitations, Europe's voice counts more than the voice of a single country. If people are more aware of these achievements – and less affected by the economic crisis – then public support can raise again.

This is documented by the most recent public opinion polls. During the climax of the Euro crisis public support reached a historic low. However, since the economic situation in many countries has improved again, also the image of the EU has improved.

In the second part I will talk about the state of EU-Turkey relations. A widespread perception among my students, but also in general, is that the accession talks are deadlocked. The most important negotiation chapters are frozen due to the Cyprus problem. And it seems that both sides have only a limited interest in reviving the accession talks. The EU is focused on its internal challenges such as Euro or the refugee crisis rather than the enlargement agenda. As regards Turkey, the unclear membership perspective had a negative impact on the reform process. In addition, some argue that Turkey does not need the EU accession because of its economic and geostrategic alternatives.

However, despite the disappointing slow progress of the accession talks, my assessment of EU-Turkey relations is more optimistic. First, there is evidence that the accession process is not completely deadlocked and that progress - at least at the technical level - is still ongoing.

In this regard, the European Commission is an important ally of Turkey, because it is a critical but fair defender of the rules of the accession process. As for instance some governments tried to delay or even to avoid the opening of accession talks, the European Commission

argued that this would be against the rules because Turkey had fulfilled the political criteria to a satisfying degree – and the member states decided beforehand that in this case accession talks should start. The opponents of Turkey could not ignore this rule without losing their credibility and finally accepted the start of accession talks in 2005.

Something similar happened in 2013. The member states wanted Turkey to sign a readmission agreement which obliges Ankara to take back illegal immigrants of third countries who have used Turkey as a transit country on their way to the EU. In return they offered Turkey quicker and easier visa procedures, but no abolition of the visa duty. However such an abolition of the visa duty was offered to the Western Balkan countries a couple of years before in return for a readmission agreement. In opposition to some member states, the Commission argued that Turkey should be offered the same prospects of visa-free-travel as the Balkan States. I know from my interviews with officials in German ministries, that the German government was annoyed about the Commission's push for a visa liberalization perspective for Turkey. However, in the end, the Commission was successful – and the member states mandated the Commission to start talks with Turkey on the conditions for the abolition of the visa duty. By the way: this is another example, which illustrates that Germany cannot easily dictate its position.

Another factor which has a positive effect on the accession process are projects financed by the EU's pre-accession fund. For instance, in twinning projects officials from a member state come to Turkey in order to work with their counterparts on a specific project for up to two years. I have attended such projects and interviewed officials in the Turkish ministries who were involved in these projects. Even if not always successful, all in all, such projects have contributed to the establishment of a Europeanized expert community in Turkish ministries who promotes pro-EU position inside their ministry and also in the inter-ministerial dialogue.

Of course, an important limitation is that while such projects influence middle and highly ranked bureaucrats, they have a much weaker impact on the top executive.

My second argument is, that despite the importance of the accession talks, it should not be neglected that EU-Turkey relations comprise further communication channels – in which tangible progress is currently easier achievable than in the accession talks.

For instance, recently, the EU and Turkey agreed to reform the Customs Union. If these talks are successful, this would lead to more foreign direct investments in Turkey and would facilitate Turkey's export of agricultural goods, which are not yet covered by the Customs Union.

Or take the visa liberalization process: If Turkey fulfils the required benchmarks it will be difficult for the member states to deny the visa-free travel for Turkish citizens.

Then, there is the consultation process on foreign policy issues. Due to the common security threats, a deeper cooperation in foreign policy issues is of mutual interest.

To conclude, there is evidence that the state of the EU is better than its current image – and that also the state of EU-Turkey relations is better - and more multidimensional - than often considered.

Therefore, dear students, studying the EU is still useful. The EU is a powerful actor and remains an important reference point for Turkey. I also recommend you to participate at Erasmus exchange programmes and benefit from the agreements our university has concluded with partner universities. Studying abroad is an enriching experience, contributing to a better understanding of other countries and cultures.

I am very happy that the European Union has awarded me a Jean Monnet Chair. The grant of the EU will allow me - inter alia - to organise a series of roundtable discussions with national and international experts on global challenges – and how both Turkey and the EU may benefit from cooperation. These roundtable discussions will be integrated in my courses but will be open for all students and colleagues.

Thank you for your attention.