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Further tensions between Turkey and the EU

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On 24 November, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for a freeze in Turkey's process of accession to the EU. Despite its non-binding nature, it met with a harsh reaction from Ankara. The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to break off Turkish-EU cooperation on resolving the refugee crisis, and accused EU countries of supporting terrorist organisations (mainly the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) which Turkey is fighting.

Commentary

- Until recently, Ankara and Brussels had treated the process of Turkey's European integration as the main axis of their mutual relationship and a platform for political collaboration. Over the last year, however, these relations had focused on cooperation in solving the refugee crisis. Despite showing real results, the relationship is continuing to deteriorate, which is reflected in the rhetoric of both sides. The EU's ever tougher criticism is related to the strengthening of authoritarian trends in Turkey, and by extension Ankara's departure from the pro-European course in both its domestic and foreign policies. For its part Turkey has accused the EU of hypocrisy, pointing to rising anti-Turkish and Islamophobic sentiments in Europe, which it considers the main factor influencing the climate of bilateral relations. Turkey's membership of the EU is thus becoming unrealistic from the point of view of both Brussels and Ankara.
- On the domestic stage in Turkey, the process of European integration had hitherto been considered as both a modernising factor and a means to consolidate society. In the current situation, however, this consolidation is now based on opposition to EU interference in Turkey's internal affairs, which is reflected in changing public sentiment. According to a poll by A&G published in the pro-government *Sabah* newspaper, almost 60% of Turks are opposed to their country's membership in the EU or declare their indifference to it. In this light, the government in Ankara is consciously exploiting the possibility that the membership negotiations may collapse at its own initiative (for example, by raising the possibility of calling a referendum on continuing the accession process).
- The current tension between Turkey and the EU can be seen as an expression of a paradigm shift in bilateral relations. Ankara is gradually losing interest in continuing the negotiations, while at the same time working to strengthen its own position towards Brussels. The scenario of Turkey breaking off the accession process, which a few years

ago would have been considered unlikely, should now be seen as a real possibility. A test for the current formula of the relationship will arrive at the European Council summit scheduled for 15-16 December, at which decisions are to be taken regarding the liberalisation of visas for Turkish citizens and the continuation of negotiations, among other matters. If this fails, both parties will be forced to develop a new model for the relationship. From Turkey's perspective, if negotiations collapse, the optimal solution would be to continue the strategic cooperation within the framework of a transactional model; the joint actions to resolve the refugee crisis are a kind of pilot programme for this model. Despite the fierce rhetoric and repeated threats to dissolve the partnership, however, it will most likely continue, because it is beneficial for both parties.