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15 Turkey’s EU Membership Process in the Aftermath of the Gezi Protests

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Introduction

The Gezi Park protests represent an unprecedented wave of social resistance in the history of the modern Turkish Republic. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that Gezi had repercussions not only for Turkey’s domestic politics but also for foreign relations, in particular, relations with the EU. This chapter discusses Gezi’s implications for Turkey’s EU accession process. The EU has interpreted the violations of political freedoms surrounding Gezi as signalling Turkey’s shift away from Europe’s liberal democratic norms. Indeed, the perceived ‘normative distance’ between Turkey and the EU over fundamental democratic values made apparent by Gezi led the EU to postpone the opening of the next membership negotiation chapter with Turkey (Chapter 22) until after the publication of the European Commission’s 2013 Progress Report in October 2013. Although the chapter was opened in November 2013, this came amid the EU’s increased democratising pressure on Turkey as well as its declared intention to use the opening of individual negotiation chapters as an instrument for anchoring the country’s further democratisation.

This chapter’s main contention is that, in the post-Gezi period, Turkey’s relations with the EU have primarily been guided by normative – as opposed to intergovernmental and political preference-based – evaluations on the EU’s part and will likely remain so in the near future. Two empirical observations follow. First, the EU’s perceptions about Turkish democracy and how distant Turkey is from the Union in terms of commitment to democratic norms are likely to be sufficient causes for the EU’s decisions about vetoing, postponing or suspending the membership negotiations process. The principal evidence for this is amply provided by the process leading to the EU’s delaying of negotiations on Chapter 22. Second, and as a result of this elevation of democratic norms to the centre of EU-Turkey membership negotiations, so long as Turkey stays normatively detached from the EU, the Union will keep the negotiations open as a policy instrument intended to anchor and encourage Turkey’s further democratisation. This claim is supported by developments following the start of negotiations
over Chapter 22. Both the European Commission (EC) and individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have endorsed the opening of further chapters (Chapters 23, ‘Judiciary and Fundamental Rights,’ and 24, ‘Justice, Freedom and Security’) out of normative concerns to boost Turkish reforms needed to address problems regarding judicial independence and fundamental political rights and freedoms, as illustrated by Gezi.

The broader conclusion demonstrated by these developments is that Gezi has unleashed and strengthened normative causal dynamics in Turkey’s process of EU accession talks. Historically, this norm-based progression of the negotiations process is unprecedented in Turkey-EU relations. The EU’s past decisions regarding the various stages of Turkey’s accession as well as the opening, closing and suspension of individual negotiation chapters have all been principally motivated by member-states’ political preferences and assessments (e.g. estimated implications of potential Turkish accession) advanced and formulated in an intergovernmental context. It would be fair to argue that, prior to Gezi, the extent of Turkey’s democratic commitment was not a sufficient factor in and of itself in shaping the EU’s decisions regarding Turkey. The key policy implication of this transformation is that, so long as Turkey’s democratic deficiencies persist, such norm-based evaluations will likely have primacy over rationalist EU calculations in defining the future progression of Turkey’s relations with the EU.

The chapter proceeds as follows. After discussing Gezi’s normative significance, the first part will analyse the EU’s reaction to Gezi in order to demonstrate its value-based character and how it directly affected the postponing of Chapter 22’s negotiation. The second section will reflect on political developments in Turkey following the opening of Chapter 22, and demonstrate their impacts on the EU’s approach to Turkey’s on-going membership negotiations process. The chapter ends by discussing the overall significance of Gezi for EU-Turkey relations.

The Normative Meaning of Gezi

The Gezi resistance unleashed a new critical social consciousness against the anti-democratic extremes of those in power (Göle 2013). Significant domestic political developments surrounding Gezi led to the growth of the protest movement throughout the summer of 2013. As Yeşim Arat (2013, 808) puts it, ‘subtle government violence’ in various domains, which has been in the making since the AKP’s second term in power, ignited a social reaction, which was channelled into the Gezi demonstrations. The
government's majoritarian conception of democracy had reached a degree of authoritarianism, as evident in key developments such as the AKP's insufficient regard for the principle of separation of powers and the rule of law, attacks on the independent press and freedoms of expression and assembly and, more generally, anti-democratic pressures on the opposition and civil society. In the days leading up to Gezi, the gravity of these issues was reinforced by the AKP's moralising intrusions into individual lifestyles and attempts to reorganise public life in line with Islamic values (Göle 2013, 10). Restrictions on the sale, advertisement and public consumption of alcohol were imposed in June 2013, followed by Prime Minister Erdoğan's public calls to prohibit coed student dorms and housing as the leader of a 'conservative government' with the responsibility to intervene. In addition, legal initiatives to restrict women's choices by banning abortion and Erdoğan's personal call to women to have at least three children, as well as his declared intention to 'raise a religious generation' (going back to 2012), reinforced public fears that secular ways of life were being threatened as a result of the AKP's disregard for the rights of those who do not share the party's ideology (those in the minority, in Erdoğan's view, based upon the assumption that the majority of the Turkish electorate supports the AKP).

This authoritarian and moralising background, combined with the government's uncompromising approach to the Gezi protests, turned the demonstrations into a mass democratic uprising. In particular, AKP officials' and Istanbul Mayor's one-sided insistence on the demolition of the park and condoning of police violence (which left eight people dead and over 8000 people injured) against the protestors (whom Erdoğan labelled as 'marginal,' 'terrorists,' 'looters' [çapulcu] and 'drunkards' [ayyaş]) offended the masses, which added fuel to the protests.

Implications for Turkey-EU Relations

Postponing Negotiations on Chapter 22

Turkey's shift away from democracy, as symbolised by Gezi, had critical repercussions for Turkey-EU relations. As Gezi became the voice of millions all over Turkey against governmental authoritarianism, the EU increasingly evaluated its ties with Turkey from a normative, democratic angle. Although

the weak state of Turkish democracy has always been a central problem for Turkey’s EU accession, after Gezi, democratic considerations reached an unprecedented level of influence over the latter. This is understandable since the EU is a democratic community and it would be fair to say that Turkey had not drifted this far away from European political values since it became a formal EU candidate state in 1999. The Turkish public’s long-standing democratic frustrations unleashed by Gezi and the government’s uncompromising and polarising stance towards the protestors brought to the fore the normative mismatch between Turkey and the EU over fundamental democratic freedoms to such an extent that these factors on their own promised to guide the EU’s subsequent decisions about accession negotiations with Turkey.

In order to assess how Gezi specifically influenced Turkey-EU relations, it is important to analyse the EU’s response to Gezi, in particular, the reactions of the EC and the EP. The first EU responses were given by the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Stefan Füle. Füle criticised the Turkish government during a conference on Turkey-EU relations organised by Turkey’s Ministry for EU Affairs in Istanbul in June 2013. Following European Council President Herman Van Rompuy’s calls for ‘building new and stronger bridges between Europe and Turkey’ (expressed during a visit to Ankara in May 2013), Füle argued for the continuation of accession talks with Turkey in line with the spirit of the EU-Turkey ‘Positive Agenda’ announced in 2012. At the same time, however, he placed renewed emphasis on democratic norms as the propeller of Turkish accession (in light of the government’s efforts to stifle the Gezi protests) and on the Turkish media’s freedom to document and report the latter. Arguing that EU member-states’ and candidates’ task is to follow ‘the highest possible democratic standards and practices,’ namely, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and ‘freedom of media to report on what is happening as it is happening,’ Füle delivered a critical message for Turkey: ‘Energising the EU accession process and strengthening democracy by respecting rights and freedoms are two sides of the same coin’ (Füle 2013, 2).

Füle’s comments were followed by similar messages by MEPs at a special Turkey debate held in response to Gezi on 12 June 2013. The debate was marked by parliamentarians’ condemnation of the disproportionate use of force by the Turkish police against the protestors and calls on the Turkish government to show full respect for democratic rights and freedoms. For example, EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton protested: ‘We have seen too many examples of excessive police force over the past two weeks – close range use of tear gas, water cannons, pepper spray, plastic bullets – against
protestors who have been overwhelmingly peaceful [...] Those responsible [must be] held accountable.2 Similarly, in a separate press statement, EP President Martin Schulz argued: ‘The protests of Taksim Square [...] are not a threat against the Turkish State [...]. [Yet], [d]emonstrators have been taken aback by the ruthlessness with which the authorities responded, by the wave of detentions which ensued and by the crackdown on social media and the press’ (European Parliament/The President 2013). At the same time, however, Schulz stressed the importance of ‘keeping the accession process alive’ (Ibid.). Even those EP groups known for their support for Turkey’s EU membership shared Schulz’s criticisms. As Guy Verhofstadt, the leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), stated: ‘My Group is a strong supporter of a European choice for Turkey. But let me be clear, not a Turkey that turns its back on European principles and values.’3

The spirit of these criticisms was reflected in an EP resolution issued on 13 June 2013. The resolution was one of the harshest the EP has delivered on Turkey and it clearly documented the ‘normative gap’ between Turkey and the EU as far as adherence to democracy is concerned. The EP strongly criticised not only the political rights violations made evident by Gezi but also the government’s way of handling the protests: ‘The EP deplores the reactions of the Turkish Government and of Prime Minister Erdoğan, whose unwillingness to take steps towards reconciliation, to apologise or to understand the reactions of a segment of the Turkish population have only contributed to further polarisation’ (European Parliament 2013, paragraph 5). Furthermore, the resolution ‘call[ed] on the government to respect the plurality and richness of Turkish society and to protect secular lifestyles’ (Ibid., paragraph 12) and ‘recall[ed] that [true] freedom of expression and media pluralism are at the heart of European values’ and are essential for a truly democratic society (Ibid., paragraph 14).

The EP’s critical messages found little sympathy among the members of the Turkish government. Erdoğan denounced the EU as ‘anti-democratic’ and stated that his government would no longer recognise the EP following its resolution.4 Similarly, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu argued that the Turkish government would not let an international body like the EU interfere with its relations with the Turkish people and claimed that the
EP’s resolution would be ‘sent back to them once they submit it to us.’ Furthermore, he rejected the EP’s charges that Turkey is a ‘chaotic state’ which shows little respect for democratic freedoms.

Tension between Turkey and the EU increased following Gezi Park’s forced evacuation and closure to the public by the police on 15 June. Upon the park’s closure, in line with the government’s view of the Gezi protests, the former Minister for EU Affairs and Turkey’s Chief EU Negotiator, Egemen Bağış, argued that all those attempting to access the Taksim area for further demonstrations would henceforth be considered ‘terrorists.’

Among EU member states, Germany in particular criticised the government’s and local Istanbul authorities’ stance on Gezi. German Chancellor Angela Merkel described the AKP’s approach to Gezi as ‘very tough,’ which led to her government’s eventual veto on the opening of Chapter 22. Supported by Austria and the Netherlands, Germany took the lead in preventing the chapter’s opening on the originally scheduled date of 26 June. However, ahead of the EU General Affairs Council (GAC) on 25 June (which was bound to reach a final, official decision on Chapter 22), Merkel agreed to a compromise solution reached at a last-minute meeting held by the foreign ministers of Germany and Turkey. As Rupert Polenz, the head of the federal German Parliament’s Foreign Relations Committee, explained, Germany withdrew its veto in order to ‘send an open message to Turkey for changing its stance towards civil society and peaceful demonstrators.’ Consequently, Germany acquiesced to the postponing of negotiations on Chapter 22 instead of blocking them indefinitely.

With Germany’s veto out of the way, the GAC gave the official go-ahead for Chapter 22’s negotiation, yet it delayed the talks until after the publication of the EC’s progress report on Turkey in autumn 2013:

The Council [...] underscores that the Inter-Governmental Conference with Turkey will take place after the presentation of the Commission’s annual progress report and following a discussion of the GAC which will confirm the common position of the Council for the opening of Chapter 22 and determine the date for the accession conference (Council of the European Union 2013, 9).

As such, although the Council agreed in principle to open talks on Chapter 22, in practice, it still applied political conditionality since the negotiations were effectively linked to the democratic content of the EC’s Progress Report. Indeed, on 27 June, the conditional linkage between the state of Turkish democracy and Turkey’s EU negotiation process was openly stated by Merkel herself on the floor of the German Parliament. While welcoming the reopening of talks with Turkey, Merkel argued that the EU was ‘not acting as if nothing had happened [in Turkey]:’ ‘This outcome makes it clear that Turkey is an important partner, but that our European values […] – freedom to protest, freedom of opinion, the rule of law and religious freedom –, are always valid and are not negotiable.’ More critically, Schulz stated that the AKP’s increasing disrespect for secular lifestyles is raising suspicion about Turkey’s pro-EU orientation and threatening the possibility of its obtaining eventual EU accession, notwithstanding the European Council’s favourable decision concerning Chapter 22. Similarly, ALDE parliamentarian Andrew Duff argued that ‘[Erdoğan] does not understand [that the EU] is in fact a system of government that is federal, pluralistic, secular and far reaching’ and that ‘for the next five to ten years […] Turkey and the core of the EU, excluding the UK, are diverging rather than converging.’

The EP and EU member-states were not the only EU actors that had Gezi in their spotlight. The EC also had normative criticisms of its own, which were primarily reflected in the content of its 2013 Progress Report on Turkey. Indeed, months before the publication of the report, the EC reacted rapidly to Gezi and amended the first draft of the report in light of the developments surrounding the protests. The final version of the report (which was published on 16 October) stated that ‘a divisive political climate prevailed’ after Gezi, as ‘the government [...] adopted overall an uncompromising stance during the protest late May and early June, including a polarizing tone towards citizens, civil society organization[s] and businesses’ (European Commission 2013a, 8). In addition, on the whole, the report was extremely critical about the state of political freedoms in Turkey, in particular, the status of civil society which, ‘as illustrated [by] Gezi […], is still not widely considered by those traditionally involved in politics as a legitimate stakeholder in democracy’ (Ibid., 11).

Notwithstanding these negative evaluations, the EC praised the positive steps undertaken by the Turkish government. Among these were: (1) the implementation of the Third Judicial Reform Package (July 2012), which legalised and broadened the use of the judicial control mechanism as an alternative to detention; (2) the adoption of the Fourth Judicial Reform Package (April 2013) intending to improve freedom of expression by distinguishing peaceful expressions of opinion from those involving an element of violence, coercion and/or presenting ‘clear and imminent danger to public order’; and (3) the September 2013 democratisation package, which included, inter alia, measures improving Kurdish rights and the exercise of freedom of religion.11

The EC, much like the EP and the Council, thus encouraged the democratic developments undertaken by the AKP while keeping pressure on it to end the rights violations surrounding Gezi and to address the core of Turkey’s persistent democratic deficiencies. A few days after the publication of the Progress Report, the Luxembourg GAC confirmed the EU’s common position for beginning negotiations on Chapter 22. Consequently, negotiations on the chapter were launched at the ministerial level at the accession conference with Turkey, which gathered in Brussels on 5 November.

**Negotiations on Chapter 22 and beyond**

The opening of Chapter 22 was significant not only because it suggested that the initial crisis in Turkey-EU relations triggered by Gezi had now relatively subsided (without, however, coming to a definitive end, as will be explained below) but also because it marked the resumption of the negotiations process after several years of deadlock. Indeed, before Chapter 22, the last chapter to be negotiated was Chapter 12 (‘Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Policy’), which was opened on 30 June 2010. Thus, membership talks were effectively suspended between 2010 and November 2013 when the chapter on regional policy was finally opened. The launching of the so-called ‘Positive Agenda’ in May 2012 came as a sweetener during this period as it promised to revitalise the long-strained EU-Turkey membership talks by highlighting the importance of cooperation between the two sides in various areas of mutual interest. However, as elaborated above, the socio-political repercussions of Gezi were so overwhelming for

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11 For a detailed discussion of the content of these legal packages, see European Commission 2013a, 6, 12, 45-46, 51.
the EU that they outweighed the Positive Agenda’s potential promise and resulted in the postponing of talks over Chapter 22.

The EU’s decision to launch negotiations on Chapter 22 should not be taken as a sign that its concerns about Turkish democracy had ended or as a reward for Turkey’s democratic performance. To the contrary, the move was motivated precisely by the persistent normative rift over the commitment to democracy, which distanced Turkey from the EU after Gezi. Just like the delaying of Chapter 22’s negotiations in June 2013, the chapter’s eventual November opening, too, was guided by the EU’s normative impulse to push Turkey in a pro-democratic direction. Indeed, in a memorandum summarising the key findings of Turkey’s 2013 Progress Report, the EC cited ‘[Turkey’s] pressing need to develop a truly participatory democracy’ and recalled that full respect for fundamental freedoms must be ensured both in terms of improving democratic legislation and implementation (European Commission 2013b). As the EC explained:

These issues [lack of participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms problems] underline the importance for the EU to enhance its engagement with Turkey, especially on fundamental rights, so that it remains the benchmark for reforms in the country […] The accession process remains the most suitable framework for promoting EU-related reforms in Turkey. Therefore, accession negotiations need to regain momentum […] In this regard, the opening of Chapter 22 […] will be an important step (Ibid.).

Thus, the EC – along with the EP and the Council – has shown commitment to keeping the negotiations open in order to have Turkey closely ‘under its watch’ and to use the process as a benchmark for much-needed democratic reforms in Turkey. This pro-democratic aspiration has been pursued even more strongly by the EU in the aftermath of 17 December 2013, when a sudden corruption probe – implicating members of the cabinet and Erdoğan’s own family – broke. The corruption probe was followed by the AKP’s tactical moves on the legislative front aimed at further restricting judicial independence and freedom of expression in order to avoid scrutiny. The probe led to the resignation of four ministers, and threatened to ensnare Erdoğan’s son and other family members based upon charges of unlawful enrichment.

The graft allegations were dismissed by Erdoğan as a ‘coup attempt’ launched by members of the ‘parallel state’ (within the police force and the
judiciary) directed by the Islamist Gülen movement, and simultaneously serving the interests of ‘foreign powers’ like Israel and the US. Erdoğan argued that the ‘17 December process’ was a plot orchestrated by the AKP government’s domestic and foreign enemies, which were intent on bringing it down as a step geared towards undermining its successes on the political and economic fronts. Consequently, the AKP government purged thousands of police officers and hundreds of prosecutors who led the corruption investigation in order to clear the state bureaucracy from the ‘parallel state’ and win the ‘second war of independence’ (the first being the 1919-1923 war which was fought against foreign powers, leading to the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic) against ‘traitors’ challenging the ‘national will’ represented by the AKP.

The purges were followed in January by a government-introduced draft law designed to subjugate the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (Hâkimler ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu, HSYK) to the Ministry of Justice, thus effectively serving to establish governmental control over the judiciary and end judicial independence as defined in Article 138 of the Constitution. These initiatives were paralleled by other proposed amendments to Turkey’s internet law granting the Transport and Telecommunications Minister and regulating agencies the authority to block websites (deemed to infringe privacy) without a court order as well as to push internet providers to store information concerning their customers’ online activities. It was speculated that the legislative move was motivated by Erdoğan’s desire to prevent the online sharing of any potentially implicating information/evidence directed at his family and associates since documents and videos about the corruption scandal were being widely publicised via social media.

Against this background, Erdoğan visited Brussels for the first time in five years in January 2014, where he was confronted with an EU that had now become much harsher vis-à-vis the government following the post-17 December developments, which, in the wake of Gezi, had further distanced

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12 The Gülen movement is an Islamist network led by the imam and preacher Fethullah Gülen, who is a Turkish national residing in the US. It consists of a vast web of followers and advocates brought together by ideological commitment to religious conservatism propagated via Gülen’s personal teachings as well as instruction offered at schools owned by the network in Turkey and all over the world. Gülen and Erdoğan’s AKP have worked together since 2002 (when the AKP first assumed power) as close allies against the traditionally powerful secular-nationalist establishment in Turkey. However, the alliance has increasingly unraveled and led to a power struggle since 2010, reaching the point of mutual hostility between the two sides after the 17 December 2013 corruption probe (which was launched against the AKP by Gülenists within the judiciary and the police).
Turkey from the EU’s democratic values. Thus, the EU’s pro-democracy, normative emphasis on its relations with Turkey took on a more prominent role. This was made evident to the members of the Turkish government at an ‘animated’ closed-door meeting attended by European lawmakers in Brussels. Faced with EU criticisms about the lack of judicial independence in Turkey, Erdoğan explained: ‘If we consider the judiciary as a separate power, this would lead to a country of judicial rule and not democracy. We believe in democracy.’ Unconvinced by Erdoğan’s arguments, EU officials and politicians adopted an increasingly critical tone. As EU President Herman Van Rompuy explained after the meeting: ‘It’s important not to backtrack on achievements. Progress in accession negotiations and progress in political reforms in Turkey are two sides of the same coin.’ Similarly, Marietje Schaake, a Dutch MEP from the EP’s Liberal faction, argued: ‘The problems [concerning the AKP’s interference with the judiciary] are now so immense that they need to be investigated independently.’ German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was even more explicit in his criticisms: ‘There are numerous questions to which the Europeans have not received any replies. Demanding that Turkey returns to the rule of law [emphasis added] is not just something that can be done, but it’s something that has to be done.’

The EU’s normative emphasis on the issue of Turkey’s democracy was reiterated by French President François Hollande during a visit to Turkey in late January. Instead of removing his veto on any of the four chapters blocked by France under Sarkozy, Hollande argued that Cyprus should lift its veto on chapters related to law and fundamental rights (Chapters 23 and 24) so as to urgently address Turkey’s most pressing democracy problems: ‘The chapters which I think should be under discussion are precisely those which concern the subjects which currently pose questions for Turkey – the separation of powers, fundamental rights, rule of law, justice.’

17 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/world/europe/turkey.html?_r=0.
These messages were followed by similar calls by Steinmeier and Merkel when Erdoğan visited Berlin in February 2014. As one of the harshest opponents of Turkey’s EU accession (along with France), Germany underlined the need to open Chapters 23 and 24 ‘and then enter into a serious and viable discussion on what the situation in Turkey is like at the moment’ (Agence Europe 2014). Furthermore, Merkel stated that she is ‘sceptical as to the full accession of Turkey: ‘Personally, I say that we are in a process of negotiation which has a certain result and no fixed timing’ (Ibid.).

Turning to the EP, following the spirit of a March resolution on the progress of Turkey (issued by the EP Foreign Affairs Committee), MEPs once again underlined the EU’s need to promote democracy and rule of law in Turkey through ‘close dialogue and cooperation,’ i.e. efforts geared towards the launching of negotiations on Chapters 23 and 24 (EurActiv 2014). As Marietje Schaake put it bluntly: ‘The crisis in Turkey [in the context of the 17 December corruption probe] destabilizes the core of the rule of law and is only getting worse. The separation of powers, freedom of expression and the independence of the judiciary are under great pressure’ (Ibid.).

This initial resolution was followed by an EP resolution (issued on 12 March) on the EC’s 2013 Progress Report on Turkey. While acknowledging that Turkey is an important strategic partner for the EU, the resolution was deeply critical about recent political developments in the country, notably charges of high-level corruption (launched on 17 December) and the purge of prosecutors and police officers involved with the corruption investigations (European Parliament 2014, paragraph 4); the new law on the HSYK, ‘which is not in line with the principle of an independent judiciary’ (Ibid., paragraph 10); the impunity enjoyed by officials and police officers responsible for excessive use of force against the Gezi protestors (Ibid., paragraph 13) as well as the internet law, which contradicts ‘European standards on media freedom and freedom of expression’ (Ibid., paragraph 15). Hence, the EP stressed that ‘delivering to Turkey the official benchmarks for the opening of Chapters 23 and 24 would [...] provide a clear anchor for the reform process in Turkey, on the basis of European standards, with particular reference to the judiciary’ (Ibid., paragraph 25).

The EP’s emphasis on Turkish democracy and the opening of Chapters 23 and 24 as an instrument to help promote it was emphasised by Füle in critical statements delivered to the EP on 11 March (at the plenary debate on the EP resolution) as well as to the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee at their Brussels meeting on 10 April 2014. Füle suggested that the EU needs to cooperate more closely with Turkey, especially before critical Turkish legislation (i.e. concerning democratic issues, such as the internet
law and the law on HSYK outlined above) is envisaged and drafted, as ‘[t]his is the only way for the European Union to remain an anchor of reforms in Turkey and support all those in this country who call for more freedom and democracy’ (European Commission 2014a). Arguing that rule of law and fundamental rights are ‘at the very center of the accession process [...] [and] must be treated as an absolute priority’ (European Commission 2014b), he further called on the Council to formulate a roadmap/opening benchmarks for the launching of accession talks on Chapter 23.

Conclusion

Turkey’s Gezi Park protests constituted a turning point in Turkey-EU relations. As explained above, Gezi signalled a normative gap between the EU and Turkey in terms of attachment to European liberal democratic values embedded in the Copenhagen membership criteria. After Gezi, the more Turkey drifted away from democracy, the more the EU pressured it about democratic norms, which were now firmly placed at the centre of Turkey’s EU membership negotiations and accession process. Issues concerning rule of law and fundamental political rights and freedoms (especially, freedom of assembly, as illustrated by Gezi) have been at the forefront of the EU’s dealings with Turkey since Gezi. The extent of the EU’s post-Gezi, pro-democracy, normative pressure on Turkey has been so intense that it is now fair to argue for the primary role of democratic norms in determining the various stages of Turkey’s EU relations, i.e. the EU’s opening of individual acquis chapters to negotiation.

This chapter has analysed the progression of EU-Turkey ties in light of Gezi and has reached two empirical conclusions. First, Turkey’s deviation from democracy, signified by Gezi, led the EU to react strongly by postponing the opening of Chapter 22 to negotiation, which was originally scheduled for June 2013. The chapter was opened only after the publication of the EC’s Progress Report on Turkey in November 2013 as an attempt on the EU’s part to use the negotiations process as an anchor for Turkey’s democratic reforms. Second, the EU’s normative impulse to push Turkey in a pro-democracy direction, triggered by Gezi, led to the formulation of arguments in favour of opening further chapters down the line – Chapters 23 and 24 – by the EC and the EP, as well as individual member-states. While a date for opening these chapters has not yet been agreed upon, there exists a determination within most of the EU for continuing negotiations, especially over Chapter 23 since it deals directly with Turkey’s most crucial democracy problems (judiciary and fundamental freedoms).
The overall significance of post-Gezi developments is that, for the foreseeable future, democratic norms will guide Turkey’s accession process. It seems that the extent to which Turkey is committed to democracy will by itself determine the progression of its ties with the EU, when it comes to the EU’s opening, delaying or suspending negotiations over individual chapters, as well as shaping Turkey’s chances of eventual membership. The importance of this norm-driven process becomes especially evident when contrasted with the EU’s earlier decisions on Turkey. Hence, future research will benefit from studying the implications of Gezi for Turkey’s EU accession in a comparative historical perspective.

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