

Portugal and Turkey: An Increasingly Substantive Relationship

by Paulo Gorjão

This policy brief argues that Portugal increasingly values its relationship with Turkey, and there was no reason to fear in Ankara that the change of government in Portugal, in June 2011, could trigger a change in the bilateral relationship. Portuguese and Turkish national interests are not absolutely symmetrical, and this means that the relations, both at bilateral and multilateral levels, are not without its points of divergence. However, the reasons that support a cooperative relationship far outweigh factors behind a potentially conflicting bilateral relationship. Thus, the deepening political and economic relations means that the bilateral relationship is likely to gain increasing substance in the forthcoming years.

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The last visit to Lisbon by a member of the Turkish government occurred in September 2012. Egemen Bağış, Minister for European Union (EU) Affairs, as part of a round of contacts at the European level, met with the Portuguese President of the Republic, Aníbal Cavaco Silva, as well as with the Prime Minister, Pedro Passos Coelho, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Paulo Portas.¹ The main theme of the talks, as expected, was the stalled process of Turkey's accession to the EU. Despite the ongoing European sovereign debt crisis, the Turkish government stands firm in its desire to join the EU. In a previous interview, Bağış could not have been clearer: "By the time Turkey completes all negotiations, by the time all the chapters are completed, I'm sure this [European] economic crisis will be over, because no crisis lasts forever".² Put another way, the Turkish national interest in EU membership is strategic and structural. As the chief negotiator of Turkey in accession talks with the EU, Bağış has to convince the Turks that EU membership is the way forward while in European capitals his job is to persuade the Europeans that Turkey's inclusion is in their interest.

In this intricate diplomatic game, the Turkish government must maintain its European allies while simultaneously convincing opponents to shift positions. Therefore Turkey continues to closely monitor parliamentary elections in EU member states, especially since their outcomes have potential impact on national foreign policies. The June 2011 appointment of Paulo Portas as the new Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs has certainly been

followed in Ankara with some concern regarding the future of bilateral relations between the two countries.

In the last few years, the Democratic and Social Centre-People's Party (CDS-PP), headed by Paulo Portas, expressed reservations concerning Ankara's accession to the European Union (EU). CDS-PP advocated, as an alternative, a special status for Turkey instead of its full membership in the EU.³

Under the leadership of the previous Minister for Foreign Affairs, Luís Amado, between June 2006 and June 2011, Portugal fully supported the accession of Turkey to the EU. Both Luís Amado and Portuguese President Cavaco Silva made regular public statements supporting not only closer bilateral ties with Turkey, but also its full inclusion into the EU.⁴ However, with the appointment of Paulo Portas as the new Minister for Foreign Affairs, would the position of Portuguese diplomacy change?

As political events since the June 2011 Portuguese parliamentary elections have shown, there was no reason to be concerned about a possible change of policy. In April 2012, in less than a year after assuming official duties, Paulo Portas undertook a bilateral visit to Turkey.⁵ He demonstrated a clear pragmatic approach, and as minister broke with his party's official position by calling for Turkey's accession to the EU, noting that Europe needs Ankara's vision. He also called for "an open attitude in the negotiations, instead of continuing the stalemate".⁶ Later on, in June 2012, he was one of the 16 EU Ministers for Foreign Affairs signing a joint article saying that the "relationship with Turkey matters more than ever", and that "the EU must meet its obligations to Turkey".⁷ As if recognizing that personal and ideological preferences are luxuries that state functionaries cannot afford, Paulo Portas placed the Portuguese national interests above his political party's official – and perhaps, even his own – views.

Bilateral political cooperation between the two countries has offered mutual benefits in the past and, under normal circumstances, will continue to do so in the future. Moreover, the Portuguese government values bilateral relations with Turkey not only in of itself, but also as a gateway to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Similarly, Portugal also could serve as the gateway for Turkish exports into not just the EU, but also in Africa and in particular, into Lusophone countries. Turkish exports to Angola and Mozambique have grown in the last few years, but are still far short of their full potential.

As for political relations, Lisbon and Ankara regularly exchange official visits and more importantly, whenever possible, each one supports the political interests of the other at international forums.⁸ For example, during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU during the last half of 2007, Portugal strongly supported the "continuity" of membership talks.⁹ Among other reasons, Portugal perceives Turkey's EU

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accession as an option that will strengthen the Mediterranean dimension of the EU. Thus in theory, Turkish accession to the EU is also a way to reset Europe's internal balance of power, tilting it favorably towards Portuguese views and national interests.

In turn, Turkey actively supported the Portuguese bid for a non-permanent seat at the Security Council in 2011-2012. Ankara's "generous support" was later recognized by former Portuguese Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, João Gomes Cravinho.¹⁰ In the future, Turkey's active support for Portugal's bid for a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council for the 2014-2017 term will likely be welcomed. In turn, Lisbon might support Ankara's ongoing bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2015-2016 term.

The two countries will also benefit from the expansion and consolidation of their economic relations. As noted by *The Economist*, "for the past decade Turkey has enjoyed a spectacular boom, fuelled by equally spectacular foreign borrowing".¹¹ Turkey is touted as one of the next generation of tiger economies, i.e. one of the CIVETS – Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa.¹² In 2011, the Turkish economy grew 8.5%, and although it is expected to grow much less between 2012 and 2014 (3%, 4% and 5.1%, respectively), it will continue to be an excellent market for EU products, not to mention a much needed source of skilled labor. Bilaterally, Portuguese exports to Turkey have grown 20% between January and September 2012, and it is likely that they will continue to grow in the forthcoming years.¹³

Moreover as mentioned earlier, as a NATO and EU member state Portugal values political and diplomatic relations with Turkey in the multilateral context. During his last visit to Portugal, Egemen Bağış took the opportunity to exchange views not only regarding EU membership, but also the ongoing civil war and uprising against President Al-Assad in Syria since March 2011.

The Syrian crisis reminded the world about its significance in the geopolitical sense. Turkey is a pivotal state, with increasing regional and strategic importance in the post-Cold War era, and is understood as a player "that could not only determine the fate of its region but also affect international stability".¹⁴ Thus, Paulo Portas argued, "if Europe wants to be an actor on the world stage it will certainly need a good relationship with (...) Turkey".¹⁵ And as it was stressed in 2009 by the Portuguese President Cavaco Silva, "with the accession of Turkey (...) the EU gains a greater strategic importance".¹⁶ Indeed, Turkish membership in the EU makes sense from a strategic perspective, not to mention the ongoing energy power play. Turkey's geographical location means that it could potentially become an "energy hub", providing a viable alternative to Russian control of energy routes flowing from Central Asia and the Caspian into the EU.¹⁷

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Evidently, since Portuguese and Turkish national interests are not absolutely symmetrical, this means that the relations, both at bilateral and multilateral levels, are not without its points of divergence. However, the reasons that support a cooperative relationship far outweigh factors behind a potentially conflicting bilateral relationship. Thus, the deepening political and economic relations means that the bilateral relationship is likely to gain increasing substance in the forthcoming years. ♦

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1. Egemen Bağış' previous visit to Portugal occurred in March 2011.
2. "Egemen Bağış: 'Europe needs Turkey'" (*Al Jazeera*, 5 February 2012).
3. "Política Europeia, Negócios Estrangeiros e emigração" (Grupo Parlamentar CDS Europa).
4. See, for example, "Portugal diz que Turquia tem de ultrapassar obstáculos" (*Lusa*, 13 November 2006); "Luís Amado defende adesão da Turquia à UE" (*Lusa*, 4 November 2007); and, "'A Europa precisa da Turquia', considera Cavaco Silva" (*Lusa*, 11 May 2009).
5. Paulo Portas had been before in Turkey, in Istanbul, in July 2011, but under the fourth meeting of the Contact Group of the Friends of Libya. On the sidelines of the meeting, he met with his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoğlu.
6. "Portugal pide a la UE una postura más abierta hacia el acceso de Turquía" (*Efe*, 3 April 2012); and, "Paulo Portas diz que é conveniente pôr fim ao 'impasse' nas negociações para a adesão turca" (3 April 2012).
7. "The EU and Turkey: Stronger Together" (*EUobserver*, 26 June 2012).
8. The most recent official contacts between the two countries: The Portuguese President of the Republic, Aníbal Cavaco Silva, visited Turkey on 11-15 May 2009, the Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, visited Portugal on 14 July 2010, the Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Paulo Portas, visited Turkey on 3-4 April 2012, and the Turkish Minister for European Union Affairs, Egemen Bağış, visited Portugal on 19-21 September 2012. The Turkish President, Abdullah Gul, also visited Portugal on 19-20 November 2010 to attend the NATO Summit in Lisbon. See "Relations between Turkey and Portugal" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey).
9. In December 2006, Turkey refused to open their ports and airports to the Greek-Cypriots. As a consequence, the EU suspended negotiations on eight of the 35 chapters in the membership talks. However, the chapters on Health and Consumer Protection, and Trans-European Networks were opened during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU in December 2007.
10. João Gomes Cravinho, "A campanha portuguesa para o Conselho de Segurança" (*Relações Internacionais*, No. 28, December 2010), p. 29.
11. "Message to Ankara: Why Turkey is an economy to worry about" (*The Economist*, 7 April 2012).
12. John Greenwood, "After BRICs, CIVETS?" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 2011).
13. "Paulo Portas Boosts Trade Relations with Turkey" (Governo de Portugal, Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, 10 April 2012).
14. See Robert Chase, Emily Hill and Paul Kennedy, "Pivotal States and U.S. Strategy" (*Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 1, January/February 1996), pp. 33-51.
15. "Paulo Portas diz que é conveniente pôr fim ao 'impasse' nas negociações para a adesão turca" (3 April 2012).
16. Pedro Ivo Carvalho, "Cavaco Silva dá novo empurrão à entrada da Turquia na UE" (*Jornal de Notícias*, 13 May 2009).
17. See Dario D'Urso, "Shifting Turkey: Ankara's New Dynamics under the AKP Government" (*Portuguese Journal of International Affairs*, No. 3, Spring/Summer 2010), pp. 20-21.

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