

The EU's fading influence over Turkey is weakening the country's democratic reform processes.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/05/14/eu-turkey-democratic-reform-kurdish-minority-constitution-firat-cengiz/

14/05/2013

The EU and Turkey have been in dialogue over the country's potential accession since the 1980s. As [Firat Cengiz](#) notes, however, the EU's influence has diminished following the accession of Cyprus in 2004, and the on-going Eurozone crisis. She argues that fading EU influence is weakening current reform processes aimed at drafting a new constitution and recognising the cultural and linguistic rights of Kurdish minorities.



Turkey is currently going through two historically significant reform processes. If successful, the reform processes will profoundly affect the country's future governance. On the one hand, the Turkish Parliament is drafting [a new constitution](#) for the country. On the other hand, peace talks between the Turkish government and the Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) are underway. In a breakthrough development, the Kurdish PKK has initiated the process of [withdrawing](#) its armed militants from Turkish territory.

Since the EU's recognition of Turkey's candidateship in 1999, constitutional reform and the Kurdish issue have constituted the two key pillars of the democratic conditionality relationship between Turkey and the EU. Turkey's current constitution is essentially authoritarian, as it came into force as a direct result of the [1980 coup](#). The Turkish Parliament has amended the constitution more than a hundred times so far, primarily in response to EU demands. Those reforms improved the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms and limited the leverage of non-majoritarian institutions over daily politics. Nevertheless, the authoritarian approach is largely still alive, particularly in the constitutional definition of citizenship that takes *Turkishness* as its basis, thus denying Turkey's cultural and linguistic diversity. Similarly, the state's military approach to the Kurdish issue since the 1980s has exacerbated fundamental rights violations. Consequently, the Kurdish issue has received extensive critical treatment by the EU.

Despite the key position of the two issues in the conditionality relationship, the EU's role in the on-going reform discourses has been limited. The EU's conditionality on Turkey has become gradually weaker since Cyprus' EU accession as a divided island in 2004 caused a stalemate in Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU. Since then other factors have contributed to the deterioration of Turkey-EU relations: some EU Member States, particularly Austria, France, Germany and the Netherlands have continued to voice their increasingly sceptical rhetoric against Turkey's EU membership. The EU's financial crisis and bail-outs have also rendered EU membership a much less desirable prospect for Turkey. After the Arab Spring and the Syrian Crisis, the focus of [Turkish foreign policy](#) increasingly shifted to the Middle East in light of the Turkish government's primary objective of establishing itself as the leader of its region.



Credit: earthprod (CC BY 2.0)

Following this fading of EU conditionality, the Turkish government has adopted EU backed reforms selectively and strategically to extend the governmental powers vis-à-vis the veto players in the domestic political system, most notably the military and the judiciary. Recent [empirical studies](#) confirm the essential influence of EU conditionality on Turkey's reform processes, as well as the changing dynamics of the reform processes in the shadow of fading EU

conditionality.

EU conditionality is an imperfect external governance tool: it follows a colonial logic in which similar conditions are imposed on countries with different socio-political histories; at times it is applied strategically to protect the EU's own security and political interest, rather than with the aim of structurally improving democracy in EU candidates; and it fails to engender a grass roots transformation, particularly when socially embedded norms are at stake. Nevertheless, the on-going reform processes in Turkey still suffer from [significant caveats](#) in the shadow of fading EU conditionality.

The constitutional reform process suffers from a secretive non-participatory process. A conciliatory committee comprised of four political parties represented in the Parliament is drafting the new constitution. So far there has not been any significant attempt to engender public participation in constitution-making. Likewise, the substance of the new constitution, as drafted by the committee, is a complete enigma. Additionally, different political groups perceive the constitution-making process as a strategic opportunity to push their own individual agendas. This results in asymmetrical treatment of substantive issues in the reform discourse. The governing AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) wants to replace Turkey's current parliamentary democracy with a semi-presidential regime to strengthen the executive's role and powers. The AKP's institutional ambitions, and more recently the Kurdish issue have dominated the reform discourse, while other equally important issues, such as fundamental rights and freedoms, minority rights in general and gender equality have barely been mentioned. Had the EU's conditionality been stronger, these issues would have received more significant treatment in the reform discourse under EU oversight.

The Turkish government has initiated the Kurdish peace process primarily due to its regional policy ambitions. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the government has been a [vocal opponent](#) of the Assad regime. In retaliation, the Syrian government left the control of Syrian regions bordering Turkey to the PKK's Syrian wing PYD (Democratic Union Party), significantly increasing the security threats in Turkey's largely Kurdish populated southeast. This has shown once again that Turkey will not be able to take a strong stance in regional politics, let alone achieve its much-desired regional leadership role, as long as the Kurdish issue continues to be its Achilles' heel. Hence, the government's initiation of peace talks with the Kurdish PKK. Although the EU has released a [declaration](#) in support of the peace talks, this has not received any media coverage in Turkey. Under fading EU conditionality Turkey has started to look to alternative sources for inspiration. Northern Ireland's [peace process](#) as reflected in the Good Friday Agreement has so far received the greatest attention.

Turkey's Kurdish issue does not only have a terrorism dimension: it is also inextricably linked to the poor accommodation of Kurds' and other minorities' cultural and linguistic rights. The on-going peace talks are naturally expected to result in improvements in the constitutional accommodation of Kurdish minority rights. Nevertheless, in the shadow of the secrecy surrounding both reform processes, it is not entirely certain to what extent the two processes feed into each other. Similarly, under fading EU conditionality and the Turkish government's strategic approach to reform processes, one cannot help but question the prospects for the processes engendering a public debate on minority rights and improving their constitutional accommodation. Thus, despite its fundamental drawbacks and contradictions, the weakening of EU conditionality still appears a caveat for the reform processes' prospects for improving democracy in Turkey's governance.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1265OaI>

About the author

Firat Cengiz – *University of Liverpool*

Dr Firat Cengiz is lecturer in law at the University of Liverpool. Her primary research interests are in Europeanisation and multi-level governance. She is the author of *Antitrust Federalism in the EU and the US* (Routledge, 2012) and the co-editor of *Turkey and the European Union: Facing New Challenges and Opportunities* (with Lars Hoffmann, Routledge, forthcoming in 2013).



-