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'DO NOT SHOOT THE MESSENGER': A  
CRITIQUE OF THE EXISTING LITERATURE  
ON THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND TURKEY

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# ***“Do NOT shoot the messenger”: a critique of the existing literature on the European Parliament and Turkey***<sup>1</sup>

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## ***Abstract***

Studies on parliamentary diplomacy and on the role of International Parliamentary Institutions (IPIs) have grown substantially in recent years, especially over the international role of the European Parliament (EP). There is also ample literature on EU-Turkey relations. Yet, there is little academic interest in the EP and Turkey. Furthermore, the few studies that exist to date tend to take a rather critical view of its role in EU-Turkey relations, claiming that the EP acts as a troublemaker. Instead, this paper contends that those studies confuse cause for effect. It is the lack of democratic progress in Turkey that is at the root of the EP’s critical stance on Turkey. This study therefore consists of two parts. First, a critical review of the main themes presented in the existing literature. Second, what positive findings can be found in this literature all the same and what more research is needed on this important and yet neglected subject.

**Keywords** *European Parliament; EU-Turkey relations; Enlargement; Copenhagen criteria; parliamentary diplomacy; democratization; human rights; Cyprus Conflict; Kurdish issue; Armenian genocide.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

There is ample literature on European Union (EU)-Turkey relations, including on the question of a possible “Europeanization” of Turkey (Üstün, 2018). This is especially relevant since Turkey’s accession negotiations began in late 2005. It is important to point out that numerous studies blame the EU for often difficult relations between the two sides, and especially in recent years under Erdogan’s rule. Some even accuse exclusively the EU for all of Turkey’s ills (Aydin-Dügit and Keyman, 2012; Üstün, 2018), including for what has been described as its slow “climbing the ladder of authoritarianism” (Barkey, 2018). Others go even as far as to argue that “[t]his was in fact not just a crisis between Turkey and the EU. It was a crisis of identity for the EU and its institutions that also took a huge hit first because of the declining liberal spirit in the world due to the ‘war on terror’ and then the evaporating internal and external solidarity due to the financial crisis of the 2008” (Özel and Balta, 2019: 8).

However, there exists literature that counters many, if not all of, the above criticisms by pouring instead harsh condemnation at Turkey’s successive governments, mainly for failing to democratize the country: a reproach that dates back to the early connections between Turkey and the then European Economic Community (via the 1963 Ankara Agreement) but

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which gains pace for instance more recently with Erdogan's reaction to the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Some analysts have even argued recently that Turkey is moving from "thin" to "thick" populism in its FP. The former is defined as "the emphasis (...) placed on its instrumentalisation in domestic power politics by Turkish governments, against the opposition accused of representatives of 'the old Turkey'; whereas the latter represents "a vehement anti-Westernism through which the superior Islamic Turkish self is constructed against the inferior Western other" (Kaliber and Kaliber, 2019: 3).

Not only the "zero problems with neighbours" approach (Davutoglu, 2010; see also Fotiou and Triantaphyllou, 2010; Grigoriadis, 2010; Devrim and Schulz, 2009) seems to be long gone, but so are the days that Turkey was presented as "a model" (Martin, 2011) for the then emerging Arab Spring countries.<sup>2</sup> All these developments reflect key shifts in Turkey's relations, especially with two authoritarian regimes, Russia and Syria (Dalacoura, 2017; Hammargren, 2018 – see also Ülgen, 2014; Marcou, 2016b; *Le Monde*, 2018; Dalay, 2019): "Ankara is becoming Russia's implicit vassal" (Schmid, 2016). Dashing the hopes of many an observer who, not so long ago, had even predicted an "emerging liberal foreign policy" for Turkey (Bertrand, 2013; Robbins, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

Yet, when one considers the much more limited literature on the European Parliament (EP)-Turkey relations, the few studies that exist on this subject to date tend to take a rather critical view of the EP's role. Often, no credit whatsoever is given to it. Over the past two decades, out of eight such studies (by seven different authors), five offer *negative* assessments of the EP's role in EU-Turkey relations (Nas, 1998; Soler, 2005; Scotti, 2016; Gürkan, 2018; 2019), one is more *ambivalent* (Siitonen, 2010), and only two are *positive* (Krauss, 2000; Casier, 2011).<sup>4</sup> These qualifications have been reached the following way: "negative" refers to views that clearly present a critique of the EP's stance on Turkey. These studies also list several examples in that respect, using terms like "unfair", "unhelpful", or "biased"- especially without making any mention of specific developments in Turkey which over the years have included more than one case of repression, injustice, etc. "Ambivalent" groups assessments that are more balanced in criticizing both Turkey and the EP for their difficult relations but that still put the blame mainly on the Parliament in Brussels/Strasbourg.

Such an observation represents a puzzle as the now consolidating academic literature on the international role of parliamentarians and parliamentary bodies - including a growing literature on the EP (see essays in Stavridis and Irrera, 2015; for the EP as the most advanced and sophisticated IPI in the world, see Cofelice and Stavridis, 2014) - argues on the contrary

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<sup>2</sup> When, for instance, Turkey's vice-prime minister Ali Babacan was arguing that: "the democratization and success of Turkey have served as inspiration [to these Arab countries]" (in an interview by Sanz (2011). See also Ramadan (2011); Ülgen (2011); Dinçer and Kutlay (2012).

<sup>3</sup> This paper does not address the wider yet crucial question of whether Turkey belongs to Europe or prefers a neo-Ottoman regional role (Torreblanca, 2011; Bayrasli, 2014; Perrier, 2014b; see also Roy, 2016; Gürsoy and Toygür, 2018) – including its impact on its long standing membership of NATO (see former NATO Secretary (2004-2009) General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer's comments to that effect, in Minassian, 2017; see also Balci, 2016; Charillon, 2016; Stroobants, 2017; 2019). This particular dimension has gained importance after the "reconciliation" between Erdogan and Putin following the tense relations after the 2015 shooting down of a Russian warplane over Turkey: a development that has culminated with the delivery in July 2019 of the first Russian S-400 purchased by Turkey (see Stroobants, 2019; Jégo, 2019; *Le Monde*, 2019; see also Stroobants, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The study by Ozcurumez and Hohxa reaches similar criticisms but it will not be included in this study as it covers EU Joint Parliamentary Committees with Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Croatia and Turkey between 2000 and 2008; and as a result it does not focus on the Turkish case exclusively (but see their criticisms on the Turkish case, Ozcurumez and Hohxa, 2015: 653-654).

that they tend to act as “international moral tribunals” (e.g. stressing human rights and democratization) (most recently, Stavridis and Jancic, 2017; García Chourio, 2018; Stavridis, 2019; Ferrero, 2019; Cofelice, 2019). This is particularly true of the EP (Feliu and Serra, 2015; Glahn, 2019). Zanon (2005) even goes as far as to describe the EP as possessing “an autonomous foreign policy identity”. Moreover, it is important to stress at this stage that the EP is one of the EU institutions that will need to give its assent to any Turkish accession in the future. Therefore, Turkey will have to convince it of the fact that it is ready to join (and following a future favourable opinion by the European Commission, validated by a subsequent European Council decision). The EP’s stance is therefore not a luxury but a necessity for all involved in this accession process – but also more generally for the EU’s external relations.

In other words, the puzzle remains: how can the existing literature on the EP and Turkey claim so unanimously that the former is being unfair, prejudiced, or biased against Turkey? Thus, the question becomes why are academic analyses of the EP’s role in EU-Turkey relations so critical of the parliamentary arm of the Union? If the EP criticizes violations in Turkey of all types from its democratic perspective, then how come these studies blame the EP and not the Turkish state system? Moreover, if we take a *longue durée* approach, it is even possible to identify that these criticisms do not change over time, in fact they tend to ignore blatant human rights and other democratic principles violations. In brief, whether the EP acts as a “troublemaker” or as a “useful normative actor” must depend more on developments in Turkey, rather than blame the Parliament for those developments. But this does not seem to be the rather unilateral stance by many a study on the subject. This paper will challenge such claims. Instead, it will contend that what those studies do is to confuse cause for effect. It is a lack of democratic progress in Turkey that is at the root of the EP’s critical attitude on Turkey relations. A stance that is particularly visible since the Erdogan reactions to the July 2016 failed coup.

The paper consists of two main parts. First, a critical review of the main points presented in the existing literature which has been divided by topics. Second, what positive findings can be found in this literature all the same and what more research is needed on the subject.

## **PART 1**

This presents a review of the existing literature on the subject. It is to my knowledge comprehensive enough, but it is characterized by the fact that it is highly critical of the EP’s role in EU-Turkey relations. Therefore, this Part contextualizes my analysis, which follows in Part 2. It is important to set out clearly what the literature claims to date to first confirm how critical it is, and second to offer a different approach that shows how the EP is acting as a moral conscience for the EU on its relations with Turkey. This Part covers in turn issues that the literature considers as obstacles to better EU-Turkey relations as a result of the EP’s attention to them: violations of human rights and other democratic principles; the Kurdish question; the Cyprus problem; Armenian genocide recognition; and enlargement criteria.

### **Violations of human rights and other democratic principles in Turkey**

Çigdem Nas (1998) claims that the EP is acting in an unfair way by consistently and continuously focusing on and criticizing minority rights’ violations as well as Turkey’s overall human rights record. She argues this represents an “attitude and style [that is] authoritative, subjective and overbearing” (Nas, 1998: 16), and a method that is “dictating and

authoritarian” (Nas, 1998: 14). She despairs of the EP’s “dictatorial and authoritarian” decisions (Nas, 1998: 14).

She calls on MEPs to stop using their “national” and “ideological” biases in what she sees as a threat to the integrity and unity of the Turkish state. Nas also adds that existing “cultural and contextual variations” between countries explain why Turkey should be treated differently.

In the same vein, Scotti (2016: 132) calls for “less biased” Euro-parliamentarians to participate in the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) in an effort “to overcome common prejudices and enable citizens to learn about their parliamentarians’ performances through increased transparency”. This approach reflects to a large extent the views expressed by Turkish MPs in the past: “Eighty-five percent [...] believed [that] the EU favors the Greek side in Turkish-Greek relations” (McLaren and Müftüler-Baç, 2003: 207, order of sentences reversed from the original quote).

Even the less critical studies include a vast number of criticisms for the EP in that particular respect. Thus, whereas Siitonen (2010: 5) starts by quoting “British MEP Pauline Green (who at the time chaired the Socialist group, memorably articulated the EP’s sentiments: ‘Turkish governments come, promise, and go’), he ends up arguing that in fact the debate over Turkey’s membership simply reflects a mutual fear: not only of Turkey, but also of the very nature of the EU; which, he argues, can be found at the heart of the “very identity of Europe” (Siitonen, 2010: 12 and 15). His chapter title is quite revealing in that respect: EP debates on Turkey as reflecting a “rising cultural protectionism” in the EU.

These assessments are too critical in my view. To mention specific characteristics to Turkey’s identity, culture and religion, is in fact what amounts to really discriminate against that country’s past and current history. For instance, on the need to protect human rights in general and those of minorities in particular, once more, the EP only does what it is expected to do: defend European values not only as listed in EU documents but also in those of other European wide organizations such as the Council of Europe – to which Turkey belongs already. And, also part of the 1948 Universal declaration of Human Rights.

It would have been more fruitful to analyze the nature of the EP’s reactions. As Krauss does when he gives several illustrations of the many complex issues at stake, as well as the various political elements that guide the numerous EP debates, resolutions and reports on Turkey (Krauss, 2000: 227-232). Moreover, he presents detailed examples of the many pressures put on the EP to give its assent to the Customs Union (CU) (by member states, the European Commission, but also by Turkey itself; see Krauss, 2000: 232-235). His perspective therefore contextualizes the ongoing EP vigilance over Turkey’s limited democracy as seen in the Parliament’s earlier condemnations of the many military coups in Turkey.

Or when Casier (2011: 198-202) reminds us of the EP’s particular condemnation of the repression against leftist parties in the 1960s-1980s. or when referring to the fact that, as noted above, the CU negotiations came close to being rejected, and in particular, that the EU-Turkey JPC was suspended in 1994.

## **The Kurdish Question**

Çigdem Nas views criticism of minorities’ rights violations as an erroneous approach because Turkey does not recognize the rights of minorities other than those listed in several

international treaties and conventions signed in the 1920s when the Ottoman Empire collapsed (Nas, 1998: 6-8). Thus, she considers the EP's efforts at promoting Kurdish rights as incompatible with Turkey's constitutional rules and principles.

Moreover, it is not because Turkey says there is no such minority that it is so (under the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, the Kurds were granted autonomy). It seems quite puzzling that even *independent* academics appear to ignore that fact. Especially when the Kurds live in several countries of the region, and not in Turkey alone. For instance, there has been an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq since 1991 and the current Iraqi constitution provides for that country's Head of State to be an Iraqi Kurd.

She also criticizes the EP's support for the Kurds by comparing it to the way the EP reacted to ETA and IRA terrorist attacks on European soil (Nas, 1998: 5). In particular, Nas thinks that most MEPs do not pay enough attention to PKK terrorist actions. Others agree that the EU in general and the EP in particular do not seem to fully appreciate the PKK's overall impact (Scotti, 2016: 122; Gürkan, 2018: 114).

Equally important to note that as far back as twenty years ago, Eric Rouleau (2000: 111) had made the following point about Turkey: "The EU (...) deems unacceptable the notion that [the] ills [of separatism and terrorism] justify authoritarian rule, state repression, and the violation of human rights".

In addition, it is not because Turkey is a Council of Europe member that it necessarily respects its rules and principles – as Nas (1998) argues. In fact, Turkey is being constantly and consistently condemned for human rights violations by the ECHR (see Ergin, 2017). So, if the EP refers to those violations, once more, it only carries out its monitoring and normative role as expected of *any* democratic parliamentary body. Furthermore, such a stance does not only concern the Kurds. Plenty of other minorities in the world are regularly listed in EP documents, including its regular *Report on the Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World and the European Union's policy on the matter*. It is part of the need to protect minorities which represents a key dimension of any democratic entity, based on democratic rules and principles. There is no Kurdish "obsession" of any kind among MEPs as those critics seem to imply.

Yet these studies only mention briefly and almost surreptitiously the fact that the PKK is *included* in the EU's terrorist list.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, to criticize the EP on that account is unfair and incorrect. As for adding comparisons with ETA and the IRA, it only blurs dangerously the lines between counter terrorism and outright destruction of populations and properties by the Turkish state. Moreover, in Syria, the Russian and Turkish war against Daesh and Al Qaeda extends to combatting the Syrian Kurds. This is not the case for the Western members of the International Coalition who support the latter.<sup>6</sup>

On the contrary, Casier (2011: 202-207) provides excellent insight about how that issue has grown on the EP's agenda especially since the 1989 rejection of the 1987 Turkish application – with its particular "moment of glory" on the Kurdish issue with the Leyla Zana case (a Kurdish MP imprisoned in 1994 because she ended her acceptance speech in the Turkish

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/terrorist-list/>.

<sup>6</sup> The bulk of Erdogan's policy towards Syria nowadays has more to do with the Kurdish question than with the regional situation, see Chaliand (2019).

Grand Assembly in the Kurdish language) who was awarded the EP's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 1995 (Casier, 2011: 204-206).

She argues that this is due to a number of informal links promoted by “the lobbying activities of the European Kurdish diaspora” (Casier, 2011: 207-208). She adds that two important developments must be pointed out: first, the EP dimension proper; and, second, domestic Belgian and more specifically, Flemish politics (Casier, 2011: 205). As “accredited EP lobbyists or as press card holders, several Kurdish political activists now hold special entry cards that allow them to walk freely in and out of the European Parliament without the need for personal invitations by MEPs” (Casier, 2011: 202-203).

In addition to individual or groups of MEPs taking part in electoral observation missions in Turkey,<sup>7</sup> Casier (2011: 202-203) mentions examples of several EP parliamentary missions in Turkey to witness trials of politicians, journalists and writers, but also to more symbolic events such as the Kurdish celebrations of their spring *Newroz* / “new year” festivities. Other informal means include the organization of annual conferences by EP political groups in Brussels/Strasbourg (held on EP premises), mainly the GUE/NGL and Greens EFA. The latter “includes regionalists and democratic nationalists from Scotland, Wales, the Basque Country, Romania and Latvia who advance the cause of Europe's stateless nations, regions and disadvantaged minorities”. It is also relevant to mention that several EU-based NGOs working on human rights are also involved, especially the International Conference organized by the *European Turkey Civic Commission* (Casier, 2011: 207-208).

Casier (2011: 206, note 16) points out that in Germany where she was born, MEP Felekna Uca became the first MEP of Kurdish origin, and was, until the 2005 elections in Iraq, the only female Yezidi MP worldwide. Other symbolic examples that combine this time local representatives and civil society actors include the case of the city of Paris that made ex-editor in chief of *Cumhuriyet*<sup>8</sup> Cam Dündar an honorary citizen in November 2016 (Semo, 2016).

Casier also highlights the fact that there is still very little coverage of the Kurdish question amongst EU media; and that there is a tendency of Kurdish nationalists to be talking to each other, rather than trying to engage with other political and social groups who are not necessarily related to that issue. There also remains the key “to be or not to be PKK” question as she puts it. To date MEPs have been particularly careful not to be seen to legitimizing it (Casier 2011: 208). Indeed, it is important to add, as Casier (2011) does, that the EU has never specified a preference for a solution to the Kurdish issue, just that a “political solution” needs to be found.

## **The Cyprus Problem**

As for Cyprus, it is argued that a “Greek side” is pressuring the EP to adopt an intransigent stance on Turkey. Scotti (2016: 127) goes as far as to say that Turkey would recognize the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) as soon as the EU “embargo” against the Turkish-Cypriots is removed.

On Greek pressure, this must be dismissed out of hand because Athens officially supports Turkish membership, *provided it fulfills all necessary criteria*. Something that should really

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<sup>7</sup> Feliu and Serra (2015: 28) note that between 1999 and 2014, MEPs had participated in over 100 electoral observation missions in the world.

<sup>8</sup> A leading left-wing daily newspaper.

not come as a surprise, considering that accession criteria are set to be met and not ignored. In short, the “Greek factor” is a smoke screen often used to try and hide the lack of democratization in Turkey (see in that direction, Chislett, 2010a; 2010b).

As for the relevance of Cyprus to the question of Turkey’s accession, this is not in fact an added criterion (see also below) but simply a result of the fact that *it is Turkey and Turkey alone* that is occupying 30% of the RoC’s territory, that does not recognize the Republic, that has yet to extend its 1996 Customs Union to it (when it has done so with all the other new EU member states), and that occasionally threatens to annex it (as recently as July 2019, “Erdogan threaten[ed] Cyprus with war” (Defence Point 2019)). In short, as no other candidate country occupies part of a member state, such a criterion is relevant for Turkey alone, and does not apply to any other accession state, past, present or future. The EP simply reiterates usual norms of good international behaviour and good neighbourly relations, let alone international law as the numerous UN decisions to that effect show – but also reproduces official EU positions on that issue. Thus, the fact that the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” is only recognized by Turkey and that several international institutions consider Turkey to be the *de facto* ruler in the north of Cyprus, reinforce this point further. For instance, see the 1983 UN Security Council Resolution No. 541 decision declaring that particular Unilateral Declaration of Independence “invalid” and also calling for the non-recognition of the “TRNC”. Similar stances exist in other organizations, including the Council of Europe (CoE)’s European Court of Human Rights. Moreover, the UN decision was also confirmed by a November 1983 European Political Cooperation Statement (as well as other similar declarations later) to that effect.<sup>9</sup> Not even the EU’s repeated calls for Ankara to open its ports and airports to Cyprus have worked out (for details, see Misset, 2006; that was nearly fifteen years ago and the situation has not changed to date).

Similarly, there is little attention paid to efforts made by some MEPs to find ways to have contacts with (and even some representation of) Turkish Cypriots. Liberal Group President MEP Sir Graham Watson led a delegation to Northern Cyprus in September 2012. That delegation also visited the RoC’s Parliament in Nicosia (ALDE, 2012).<sup>10</sup> There was a conference organized in Brussels in July 2016 to discuss this issue, although no specific suggestions came out of it (Gazetesi, 2016). Since 2005, there has also been a cross-party groups of MEPs that holds relations with the Turkish-Cypriots in the north of the island (Beundersnam, 2017). This point is totally ignored in the critiques of the EP’s role as discussed above. The situation in the CoE’s Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) is also worth mentioning: its group on Cyprus includes two “Representatives of the Turkish Cypriot Community”, and some comparative research over that issue could lead to interesting findings and even policy

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<sup>9</sup> Although it is possible to suggest analogies with other situations, it is important to ensure that key differences are not (conveniently) overlooked. For instance, the case of Gibraltar is totally different as it is based on the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, and bilateral links between the UK and Spain improved once Spain joined the then EEC in 1986. More similar cases could be Ceuta and Melilla when Morocco applied to join the then EEC and Spain was already a member state but its application was turned down on geographical grounds. Northern Ireland could also be discussed but again there are many differences, most importantly the fact that the UK and the Republic of Ireland joined the EEC at the same time. The ongoing controversy over the Irish “backstop” provision in the UK’s Withdrawal Agreement confirms that this issue will not simply go away. But it is difficult to see how either the Republic or the Kingdom (let alone the EU) could use the “TRNC” as a relevant analogy. It is one thing to contest sovereignty and another to military invade, occupy and colonize part of another country which is now a member state of the institution one applies to join (Article 1 of Protocol 10 of the Cyprus accession treaty is quite clear on that issue: “The application of the *acquis* [communautaire] shall be suspended in those areas of the Republic of Cyprus in which the Government of the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control.”).

<sup>10</sup> On the EP and Cyprus see also: Stavridis and Tsardanidis (2009); Verney (2009); Pace and Vella (2015).



recommendations. Certainly, Turkey's membership of the Council of Europe does not mean that relations with that institution are necessarily easier than with the EU (see Erkoyun, 2018). There are many a condemnation of Turkey in CoE organs and institutions, including from a legal perspective, both for its occupation of northern Cyprus but also for its violations of human rights in Turkey itself. Again, it is the situation in Turkey that guides the reactions by parliamentary bodies such as the EP or the PACE.

And as recently as May 2019, left-wing Cypriot party "AKEL elected (...) Turkish Cypriot academic Niazi Kizilyurek in the EP elections" (Hadjoannou, 2019). A first for Cyprus. But also a much more effective way no doubt to promote a future reunification of the Island: instead of provoking new tensions by illegal maritime maps re-drawing (with Libya) or organizing Turkish gas drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean in the name of the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus/TRNC" - a statelet only recognized by Turkey, whose UDI/Unilateral Declaration of Independence has been repeatedly condemned by all EU institutions and member states, including the EP (see Melakopides, 2008). As a result, the "EU Sanction Turkish Nationals Over Gas Drilling Off Cyprus" (Chrysoloras, 2020).

### **The Armenian Genocide**

On the Armenian genocide question, the EP has been calling for such a recognition as early as 1987 and several other national EU parliaments have done the same.<sup>11</sup> This is not discriminating against Turkey: it is based on the expectation that such a recognition would facilitate Turkey's reconciliation both with its neighbours and its past history. Such a stance also ignores attempts made by Turks within Turkey to recognize this genocide. Thus, confirming once more that it is not the EP, let alone the EU, that shows an "obsession" with it. As Taner Akçam (2020) recently put it: this "denial [of the Armenian genocide] can only be defeated politically, and as such, this struggle [for its recognition by Turkey] must be seen as part of the wider struggle for democratization in Turkey".

Recently, both the US House of Representatives and the Senate voted for the recognition of the Armenian genocide, although President Trump vetoed it (*BBC News*, 2019). It is even argued that the Israeli Parliament might follow suit soon (Shalom and Aaron Collier, 2020).

### **Turkey accession criteria**

Over the claim that the EP is adding new criteria to the Copenhagen ones, this is an unfair approach because it tries to divert attention from the fact that Turkey does not even fulfill those criteria. Significantly, the phrase used by the Commission to allow for the launch of negotiations was "sufficiently fulfilling", a real "feat", as no such a precondition exists in the EU vocabulary.

Thus, Soler (2005) and Scotti (2016: 119-121) have claimed that "new" criteria based on culture and religion are being unacceptably added to the Copenhagen ones (1993, strengthened by the 1995 Madrid Council criteria).<sup>12</sup> Gürkan (2018) agrees that it represents a

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, the French Parliament in 2001, see Masseret (2001). The German Bundestag did the same in 2016 (Lemaître, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> "stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU; ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the 'acquis'), and adherence to the aims of

prejudiced approach for the EP that goes beyond formal EU accession criteria. She also specifies that whereas there might exist splits in Turkey over the Kurds, this is simply not the case over the Armenian or Cyprus issues (Gürkan, 2018: 119; 2019: 228 and 230).

In other words, Nas (1998), Soler (2005), Scotti (2016) and Gürkan (2018; 2019) all fail to see that these are not additional criteria for membership. They are demands that are specific for Turkey because no other candidate country has impacted so much on the Armenians, the Kurds or the Cypriots. It is not the EP that “triggers” Turkish reactions on those issues (Gürkan, 2019: 228) or that instead accession talks should focus on “less sensitive” issues (Gürkan, 2019: 229). This is the reality that all actors involved must face if a solution is to be found to any of those problematic situations.

Two more criticisms are used to complete these negative assessments: Scotti (2016: 131) concludes that the Copenhagen criteria relevance has “decreased, given that Turkish citizens have confirmed their support for the AKP government”, for instance in the 2015 elections. As for Gürkan (2018), although she admits there is clear evidence of Turkey’s “authoritarian drift” (that some date back to 2013 Gezi Park incidents; see Gürkan, 2018: 13; Akyol 2013), she makes it clear that in her view it is the worsening security environment (read: PKK) and political turmoil (reactions to Islamist terrorist attacks) that are the main causes of those developments. As a result of the EP stance, she claims that “first Turkey questioned EP legitimacy, then refused dialogue, and finally ridiculed its bias against Turkey” (Gürkan, 2018: 113). This is a similar approach to those of Nas and Scotti as discussed above.

It is also sometimes argued that the EP stance is not solely critical over Turkey as it has tried to support modernizing parties in order to prevent the rise of Islamic ones. Thus, MEPs have praised economic progress both during the EU-Turkey Customs Union (CU) negotiations (Tansu Çiller government) and the early years of the current EU accession talks (Recep Tayyip Erdogan government). Yet there is criticism that such a development has not automatically led to better relations. For instance, 2004 EP “rapporteur, Camiel Eurlings (EPP, NL), was impressed by Turkey: ‘More has happened over the past few years than in the four decades previous to those’ (as quoted in Siitonen, 2010: 8 and 9). On the other hand, it is also recalled that in the first instance a resolution calling for the suspension of the CU negotiations came close to being rejected in 1994 (Casier, 2011: 201). This did not happen mainly on the grounds that this type of union with Turkey was seen as necessary to support the Çiller government in its economic reforms. But, instead, once the CU was agreed, in the December 1995 general election, it was Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Welfare (Refah) Party, an Islamist party, who won, and, after a certain level of political uncertainty and coalition attempts at blocking him, he gained power. Thus, the EP’s policy was not considered to be very effective.

On public opposition to Turkey membership, only Siitonen (2010: 17) mentions that as a result of the fact that “[c]urrently the accession negotiations with Turkey are not proceeding smoothly”, French and German leaders are proposing a “special relationship” and also “Turkish enthusiasm for membership of the EU dropped from 75 % in 2005 to 40 % in 2007”. As the study by Gerhards and Hans (2011: 741) shows without the shadow of a doubt, “there is a clear majority of citizens [in the 27 EU Member States] that reject the idea of Turkey joining the EU”.

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political, economic and monetary union. For EU accession negotiations to be launched, a country must satisfy the first criterion.”

Source: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession\\_criteria\\_copenhagen.html](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhagen.html).

This represents a key issue not only because of the need for all member states to agree on any such development (provided accession negotiations are successfully completed), but also because there have been promises of referenda in some countries like France and Austria. The French already did so in 1972 over the first enlargement of 1973.

In conclusion, be it on democratic violations in Turkey (general, ethnic, religious or specifically on the Kurds), on its relations with Cyprus, on the Armenian question, or on the Copenhagen accession criteria, this literature puts much of the blame on the EP's reactions to those issues. In their view, general EU and specific EP "interferences" in Turkey's domestic affairs do not facilitate its democratic transition, in fact they are blocking it and making it harder to materialize. That is to say, the above review shows that the main criticisms leveled at the EP over time actually miss the real problem: *Turkey's lack of democracy*. What follows addresses this question more detail.

## PART 2

Part 2 will offer a critical review of the above criticisms. It will show instead that the real problem lies with Turkey. And not the EP which only acts as a messenger. As long as Turkey does not fulfil the Copenhagen criteria and as long as there are anti-democratic backslides in its often isolated democratic efforts, there will be no prospect of EU membership. Nor an end to EP criticisms to that effect in general over EU-Turkey relations. Then, it will consider several positive contributions that this critical literature has produced all the same which can be a basis for future research avenues.

### **Turkey is the problem, not the messenger (i.e. *not* the EP)**

At the end of the day, *the real problem is Turkey's lack of democracy*. So, the EP is not "biased" against Turkey, just criticizing non-democratic regimes: that is to say being "pro-democratic". The 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul were mentioned above. One should equally refer to the January 2016 "Academics for Peace" petition calling for an end to the military campaign against the Kurds and accusing the government of breaching international law. Over 1,100 academics had signed it and it had led to a vicious repression against them. Thus, such a repression can be better explained by the ideological preferences of the AKP (in its abbreviation in Turkish: the Justice and Development Party) and its leadership.

Indeed, as long as the Turkish President considers that "Democracy is like a streetcar. When I arrive at my stop, I get off",<sup>13</sup> or that the failed July 2016 coup was a "gift from God" (with everybody who is against Erdogan being a Gülen "terrorist"),<sup>14</sup> the EP will carry on with its justified and necessary criticisms.

Instead of repeating official Turkish state propaganda and attacking the EP stance, those critical studies could have mentioned not only various academic and other analyses on Turkey – including several well before the failed coup attempt (Bechev, 2014; *El Pais*, 2014; Perrier, 2014a; Jégo, 2016a; 2016b; Insel, 2017; Bozarslan, 2018), as well as a plethora of reports by NGOs that cover the state of democracy in the world, including in Turkey. That is to say, that it is somewhat strange that the bulk of studies on the EP and Turkey agree to criticize

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-a-dark-time-for-democracy-in-turkey/a-44589205>.

<sup>14</sup> See also the sombre premonitory question asked in one of *Le Monde's* July 2016 editorials: "Have the Turks escaped a military dictatorship to fall into an authoritarian undemocratic regime?" (*Le Monde*, 2016).

exclusively the stance taken by the MEPs. In the literature on the EU and Turkey it is at least possible to find criticisms of the political situation in Turkey. This is not visible in the studies under review here.

For recent reports, in its 2018 study, *The Economist* (2019) shows that, especially over the past two years, Turkey has been sliding close to the lowest level (out of 4: authoritarian regime, hybrid regime, limited democracy, and full democracy, with a current score of 4.37, very close to going into the lowest category as 4 is the cut-off point). Similarly, this time out of a three levels classification (Free/Partly Free/Not Free), the 2018 *Freedom House* study lists Turkey as Not Free (with an aggregate score of 32 out of 100). It specifically points out that “Turkey’s status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to a deeply flawed constitutional referendum that centralized power in the presidency, the mass replacement of elected mayors with government appointees, arbitrary prosecutions of rights activists and other perceived enemies of the state, and continued purges of state employees, all of which have left citizens hesitant to express their views on sensitive topics” (Freedom House, 2018). The *Reporters without Borders’* index of World Press Freedom, lists Turkey in the 157<sup>th</sup> position out of 180 in 2019 (*Reporters without Borders*, 2019). The *Amnesty International* Report on the state of human rights in the world for 2017-2018 also presents severe criticisms of the situation in Turkey. After the 2016 failed attempt, Jean Marcou says that the situation in Turkey can best be described as a country that lives in “a climate of a civilian coup” (Marcou, 2016a; see also Minassian, 2018).

It should be stressed that critical evaluations of the EP’s role in EU-Turkey relations do not fit with the better or worse state of affairs between the two parts. They criticize the EP irrespective of that situation as in two recent publications by Gürkan (2018; 2019). Probably in one of the worst times in EU-Turkey relations, she still blames the EP for that situation.

Surely it is not realistic to argue that it is because of these negative EP evaluations that are repeated over time that Turkey decides not to democratize. But this is precisely the kind of approach that those who criticize the EP stance on Turkey have decided to adopt - as shown above. Turkey is not an exception in the EP’s evaluation - but only one in a long list of similar cases worldwide. In addition, as Turkey is a country engaged in accession negotiations, the EP produces resolutions based on the annual progress reports that the European Commission provides according to accession negotiations rules. These Commission reports have become increasingly critical of Turkey and therefore the EP only reflects a deteriorating state of affairs in that country, especially after the failed 2016 coup. All of these points are ignored by most of the literature under review. Therefore, the EP only does what is expected of a democratic institution.

And it is precisely because of this lack of democracy and democratization in Turkey that the EP calls on the European Council to suspend the current accession talks with that country, while at the same time showing solidarity with Turkey’s democrats. This is the third time the EP makes such a request, after having asked for a temporary freeze in 2016. Thus, the latest report by Kati Piri, written in December 2018 and adopted on 12 March 2019 in Strasbourg (370 in favour, 109 against and 143 abstentions) led to the following statement by its rapporteur (doc A8-0091/2019): “(...) I would like to thank my colleagues for sending a straight signal to the Council calling for *the suspension of the accession talks with Turkey*, while at the same time also showing solidarity with Turkey’s democrats. This was our final report of the past five years and I would like to thank, too, all the shadow rapporteurs for bringing Parliament together every time on a clear stance.” (Piri, 2019).

In more detail, Piri explained during the debate on the issue that took place on 12 March 2019 during the EP Plenary in Strasbourg: “The red lines of this House have all been crossed. Severe human rights violations continue. The rule of law has been dismantled. Turkey is the record holder of jailed journalists and on top of that, the new constitution consolidates Erdoğan’s authoritarianism. That is why we asked the Council to formally suspend the accession talks with Turkey. Not that anyone was seriously considering accession under the current circumstances, but continuing talks on EU integration with President Erdoğan is a charade.” (European Parliament, 2019).

Such a conclusion differs greatly from that of Gürkan (2019: 230) who claims that Turkey has ceased to take the EP’s opinions into consideration, because it considers them as attempts at “discrediting it”, accusing individual MEPs including EP rapporteurs, of being “hostile to Turkey” and “even of standing” by PKK terrorists. Again, such a vitriolic assessment of the EP’s role can only lead to, at best, being perplexed, by this refusal to face facts.

Thus, the EP has been consistent in its criticisms of the lack of democratic improvements in Turkey. This section has also illustrated how the internal situation in Turkey is key to understanding them. What follows will explore possible areas for future research

### **What next? Existing contributions and possible future research avenues**

Even if, as just shown, many of the studies under review suffer from major weaknesses and misconceptions, they still contribute positively to the wider literature on a couple of important points: the growing role of individual parliamentarians in the international relations of the European Parliament, and that of informal means.<sup>15</sup> These two dimensions are also linked. There are indeed a number of such less formalized means that the EP has used with Turkey, as well as number of individual parliamentarians that deserve special mention.

Casier (2011: 203-204) mentions several Dutch, German and Belgian Green MEPs. This is due in part to a number of immigrant communities that established themselves in Belgium where there exists a strong link with Flemish nationalists: for instance, MEPs Willy Kuijpers, or Bart Staes and Nelly Maes. And when a split in the *Volkspartij* party occurred, with MEP Staes moving to the Greens, Turkish issues became a pattern over the years for that party, even if this was of little concern to the latter’s voters (Casier, 2011: 205).

It is also important to mention that individual parliamentarians often hold other posts: as the EP Foreign Affairs coordinator (2014-2019) for the European Conservatives and Reformist (ECR) group Conservative, MEP Charles Tannock, is also very much involved with the Kurds – as he heads the *European Friends of Kurdistan* – an EP cross-party informal intergroup. For instance, in November 2014, he hosted a press conference with Masrour Barzani, Head of the National Security Council of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Northern Iraq). Thus, personal commitment becomes a key element for ensuring ongoing and comprehensive engagement on specific topics (European Conservatives and Reformists Group 2014).

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the importance of informal politics as far as the EU is concerned, see Christiansen and Neuhold (2013). There are several examples of the international role of individual parliamentarians: see for instance on the EP’s President (see Gianniti and Lupo, 2016). Other examples worldwide are listed in Stavridis (2017: 385-386).

In addition, more work should be carried out on several specific aspects of the EP efforts to support Turkey's democratization. Not only by stressing its role in watering down any unnecessarily provocative comments among its midst<sup>16</sup>, but also by echoing useful suggestions to facilitate Turkey's road to democracy: for instance, building on an initiative by the Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades, the 2015 EP Report on Turkey recommends that Turkish be made an official EU language (*France24* 2016). The potential impact of such a development would be massive as Turkish citizens will have direct access to EU documents, including those of the EP, and not through an often-censored press or interrupted internet access in that country.

Over Turkey in general, Siitonen (2010) mentions the central individual role played by rapporteurs Camiel Eurlings and Pauline Green. The importance of Kati Piri, the latest rapporteur, must also be mentioned, in particular as the contents of her December 2018 report contrast with the negative academic analyses presented in Part 1: indeed, as noted above, this December 2018 report on Turkey was approved in March 2019 and it calls on the Council to suspend accession talks with Turkey.

It is therefore possible to argue that even the critical perspectives taken by those studies confirm the importance of the individual role of parliamentarians in international affairs. Such a dimension deserves more attention than it has received to date. Thus, the remainder of this section of the paper now turns to suggestions for a more constructive new research agenda on the EP and Turkey.

Plenty of more additional work is still needed if a more accurate analysis of the EP's stance on Turkey is to be provided. In particular, a fresh appraisal of the EP's stance on Turkey should be made in light of recent developments in Turkey and in Turkish foreign policy. New studies could cover possibly the issues listed below.

The above is particularly relevant to its relations with the EU, including the question of membership: most recently President Macron offered President Erdogan a "partnership" in order to end with the existing "hypocrisy" on the matter (Semo, 2018). These issues are directly related to a question that is not discussed here, that of migration and refugees (Toygür and Benvenuti, 2017; Benvenuti, 2017). This could be another field for future research.

Also, what about parliamentary groups in the EP and their views on those and other issues related directly or not to Turkey? Soler (2005) only really focused on the question of whether to begin accession negotiations with Turkey. He did not go much in depth on the wider implications of what do EU parties and other political groups actually think of the possibility of Turkey becoming a full EU member. What about the impact, if any, of Erdogan's now numerous years in power (since 2002), and in particular after his reactions to the 2016 failed coup? Finally, what about civil society, public opinion, and NGOs? Additional dimensions worth investigating both in EU countries and in Turkey.

A similar exercise could be carried out through Turkey's own parliamentarians and other international parliamentary activities. Is there a "common" Turkish parliamentary view on international issues, including on Europe, or on the refugee crisis (on the former see McLaren

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<sup>16</sup> For instance the following 1999 motions were *not* included in the final report: Greek GUE/NGL MEP Efstratios Korakas claiming that "the Turkish regime [was] enacting genocides on Kurdish people" and British ALDE MEP voting against his group (he has Turks and Kurds in his constituency): "The main cancer in the Turkish system is the repression of the Kurdish people".

and Müftüler-Baç, 2003; on the latter see Demisru and Müftüler-Baç, 2019)? What impact, if any, for Turkey's parliamentary diplomacy?

Finally, none of the criticisms leveled at the EP takes into consideration two important factual dimensions: that there has been a sharp drop of Turkish public support for EU accession over the past year (from over 70% in 2004 to 40% in 2016, see Üstün, 2018: 42-43). And, as noted, the fact that a clear majority of EU citizens rejects the idea of Turkish membership (Gerhards and Hans, 2011).

No doubt, all above proposals amount to an ambitious research agenda but it deserves to be carried out because EU-Turkey relations will remain important whatever form the relationship between the two sides takes in the future.

## CONCLUSIONS

In short, most, if not all, of the above critical studies suffer from a major methodological misconception: they reverse “cause” for “effect”. That is to say that they basically argue that there is no democratization in Turkey and, to a large extent, if not almost completely, this is due to a reaction in that country to the EP's critical approach. When, in fact the opposite is simply the case: it is because there is no democratization that the EP is, quite rightly and correctly, criticizing the situation in Turkey.

Thus, on the EP and Turkey, it is clear that the existing studies have not given the attention the question of parliaments acting as international moral tribunals rightly deserves. Instead of characterizing the EP's role in EU-Turkey relations as a “troublemaker” (Gürkan, 2018), the EP is behaving like a *normative troublemaker for non-democratic regimes*.

Furthermore, the long-time span covered by the studies under review here (1998-2019) allows for a more comprehensive – even if not exhaustive – evaluation. This *longue durée* also means that in future developments Turkey will need to convince the EP of the credibility of any democratic advance it makes. In other words, to make sure to make amend for, as noted above, claims that it has reached the point of “ridiculing” what it calls the EP's bias against Turkey (Gurkan, 2018: 113).

It is equally necessary to go beyond the *ad nauseum* repeated claim that “Turkey is irresistible” for Europe, made by politicians or academics, Turkish or not, alike.<sup>17</sup> For instance, it is often argued that for the EU should let Turkey become a member as evidence of its openness towards the Muslim world, and of rejecting hatred and resulting terrorism (Touraine, 2010). Or simply as a clear way to strengthen stability in the Middle East, as presented by Socialist MEP Menéndez del Valle (2010; see also Vaner, 2004; Müftüler-Baç, 2008; Chislett, 2010a; Solana, 2011). A democratic Turkey is what is needed for all involved, starting for the Turks themselves.

Equally useless are the umpteen repetitions of the “fact” that Turkey has been waiting at the doors of Europe for 50 years (Müftüler-Baç and McLaren, 2003; Chislett, 2010a). It is time to reiterate that the Ankara agreement is an association agreement, not one about membership; that Turkey's 1987 application was de facto rejected in 1989 by the European Commission

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<sup>17</sup> Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul on a visit to the USA (*Kathimerini*, 2007). See also Modebadze and Sayin (2015).



and confirmed by later European Council decisions (especially the 1997 Conclusions); and, finally, that accession negotiations are open-ended both in time (duration) and in result (not necessarily successful), and must be ratified (not only by Turkey). So, the beginning of negotiations was not necessarily the “Turkish Delight” that some observers had wished for (Chislett, 2005). The real issue remains as noted in the 2019 Piri Report (see above) how to defend democracy in Turkey, that is to say to defend Turkey’s democrats. Hoping therefore in the words of Bernard-Henri Lévy for a “Turkish Spring” (Lévy, 2013; see also Frachon, 2019). So far, evidence shows instead a “Putinization of Erdogan” (Jégo, 2017; Baverez, 2017).

Finally, the main aim of this study is to raise attention in the academic community about the need not to just accept official political statements, especially by autocratic or authoritarian regimes. And as, if not more, importantly in order to highlight that the real problem is in criticizing the messenger, and, as a result, in ignoring the message: the facts. What is needed is a democratic Turkey for all involved, starting for the Turks themselves. Because Turkey is not a democratic regime and sadly getting worse by the day. That is precisely what the EP is highlighting. This is exactly what its role as the moral conscience of the EU requires it to do.

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