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# Defining New Modes, Models, and Agendas for EU-Turkish Relations

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# Introduction

## Kadri Tastan

The multidimensional nature of the relationship between the European Union and Turkey, and their interdependence in multiple domains leaves no chance for either side to slam the door on a definitive divorce despite the crises and tensions of very high intensity between them.

There is unanimity that since their 2016 immigration agreement, their relations have entered a new era in which the EU increasingly considers Turkey a third country to be dealt with, despite its EU membership still theoretically being a prospect. The internal political situation, the gradual deterioration of the rule of law in the country, and the EU's increasingly timid response to this situation over the years is further evidence of this. The tension in the Eastern Mediterranean and other sources of geopolitical friction between them have only reinforced Turkey's new status in the eyes of the EU. In the statements of the EU institutions (except perhaps from time to time the European Parliament) and of European leaders, Turkey is perceived rather as a country that defies the union and European interests.

Despite the attempts to define a framework for Turkish-European relations or to give Turkey a better status in its relations with the EU, a way to get relations out of their current impasse is still to be found. All the tensions that they have experienced over the years show the need to find an inventive framework for these relations. This also requires revisiting some of the existing areas of cooperation to reinvent them.

This paper suggests that the relationship between Turkey and the EU should be maintained, given the high costs of a rupture for both sides. It contributes to rethinking their relations and to seeking a new

agenda in order to develop policies and find solutions to diffuse challenges.

The contributors to this paper look at the current state of EU-Turkish relations and trace the outline of a new agenda between Turkey and the EU. Whether the two sides will be able to create a new framework for their relations and, if so, on what basis it can be built is what the authors try to answer by looking at different areas.

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Günter Seufert analyzes how the modes and patterns of these relations are evolving. He looks at the differences between the approach of the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Council of the EU, as well as the diverse opinions among EU capitals when it comes to Turkey. He also looks at the different forms of relations with Turkey: candidacy, transactional cooperation, and containment. Galip Dalay examines the challenges and crises in relations and their future. Ian Lesser analyzes the effect of the start of the Biden administration and of U.S.-Turkish relations on EU-Turkish relations. He tries to see how the divergence in the former affects the latter and potential cooperation between the United States and the European Union when it comes to Turkey.

Güven Sak looks at the prospects for trade cooperation after Brexit. He analyzes the effects of the Customs Union upgrade, of the European Green Deal, and of the U.K.-Turkey Trade Agreement. Kadri Taştan explores the potential and limitations of possible cooperation in the energy field in a context where not only the dynamics of relations are going through substantial changes, but there are also broader structural changes in energy markets, including the diversification of energy sources. Angeliki Dimitriadi revisits how the different sets of migration agreements

affect EU–Turkish relations. She analyzes whether and how migration changes the balance of vulnerabilities in these. Her contribution presents perspectives and directions for the nature of migration cooperation between Turkey and the EU. Funda Tekin focuses on the political aspect of the new agenda. She outlines the principles and nature of the new relationship. Finally, Rosa Balfour looks at the framework of foreign and security policy relations between Turkey and the EU, and she questions the normative and institutional basis for cooperation.

# A Rules-Based Relationship

## Günter Seufert

The EU's policy toward Turkey was not crowned with success for many years. With the de facto halt in the country's accession process, Brussels has given away its most effective instrument—conditionality—and lost its influence on its domestic and foreign policy. But just as the EU was previously unable to consistently follow through on its policy of integrating Turkey through the membership process, so it seemed unable to firmly oppose Turkey's actions in the Mediterranean.

One reason for this paralysis of EU policy is the conflicting interests of member states vis-à-vis Turkey. France, for example, increasingly perceives it as a strong competitor in Africa and a challenger in the Mediterranean. The mood is quite different in Spain, where Turkey has become the most important customer of the defense industry in recent years. Spanish banks are also Turkey's largest European lenders, which is why Madrid wants to avoid exacerbating the country's economic crisis. Germany is also handling Turkey with kid gloves. Among other things, its industry needs functioning supply chains from the country.

Besides, as a result of its long relationship with Turkey, the EU has to handle at the same time three processes that operate according to very different parameters. First there is the membership process, whose parameters are norm fulfillment on the part of Turkey and a power imbalance to the advantage of the EU, which is supposed to be able to control the process. At the same time, there are processes for cooperation on refugees, in the fight against terrorism, in close economic exchange, and in NATO. There is a strong interdependence here, and often Turkey seems more able to exert pressure than the EU. Last but not least,

and this is more recent and rarely mentioned explicitly, there is also a process of containing Turkish influence in Europe. There is a concern in European countries with Turkish populations that Ankara could use these (and other Muslim diasporas) for its purposes and endanger domestic peace. On the foreign policy front, recent European Council decisions attest to the need for some member states, and by extension the EU institutions, to resist Turkey.

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The three processes sometimes block each other. In the membership process, outrage over the deterioration of the rule of law in Turkey has fueled protests against the 2016 refugee deal. Concerns about the rule of law and human rights—parameters of the accession process—prevented the EU from deepening the Customs Union, which would have tied Turkey even more closely to it economically. Fears that Ankara would break off cooperation on refugees and security policy were the reason why the EU neither terminated the membership process nor got serious about curbing Turkey's current expansionist policies. Relations between the two sides in their many dimensions have seemed to primarily captivate the EU, while Turkey has appeared largely unimpressed.

Against this background, the March decisions of the European Council 2021 seem at first glance like a huge step forward.<sup>1</sup> It signaled the green light to nego-

<sup>1</sup> European Council, "[Statement of the Members of the European Council](#)"; March 25, 2021.

tiations on the modernization of the EU's Customs Union with Turkey, for high-level dialogues of European leaders with the Turkish government on matters of security and energy as well as for the continuation of EU-Turkish cooperation in migration management including EU finance for refugee integration, education, and care. However, the council tied what it called a "positive agenda" to the condition of continued Turkish de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean and threatened Ankara with economic sanctions otherwise. With this combination of threatening gestures and incentives, the EU managed to avoid a choice between strict pro- and anti-Turkey policies. Member states would not have been able to agree on either of these alternatives. More importantly, the European Council for the first time explicitly laid down a kind of conditionality beyond the accession process. It announced "a phased, proportionate and reversible" policy and referred to "established conditionalities set out in previous European Council conclusions."

The EU offers Turkey a positive agenda if it moderates its foreign policy. In theory, the approach gives Brussels an effective tool with which to respond flexibly to Ankara's behavior. But there is considerable risk that EU policy will not go beyond theory again.

***Be it member states or institutions, the different actors in the EU can only act together toward Turkey if they stop arguing about whether more confrontation or more concessions are appropriate.***

Only 11 days after the resolutions of the European Council, its president, Charles Michel, and the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen rushed to Ankara. This happened amazingly fast and even though no substantial messages had come from Ankara. Turkey welcomed the goodwill of the Europeans as expressed in the European Council's positive agenda but avoided approaching Brussels on

its part. It did not revise its positions in the dispute over maritime economic borders in the Eastern Mediterranean, nor did it show any willingness to agree to the EU's participation in the new round of Cyprus negotiations. Turkey also avoided commenting on the EU's demand that it remove trade barriers it had unilaterally introduced and that run counter to Customs Union rules. As for the continuation of the refugee deal, Ankara remained silent on whether it would take back rejected asylum seekers from Greece. Thus, right at the beginning of what is supposed to be a new phase in relations, Turkey tested whether the EU will insist on upholding the conditions it has formulated for entering into a positive agenda.

Another reason why the EU may continue to tread water in its policy is internal. When it comes to Turkey, a very different climate prevails in each of the EU institutions. For the European Parliament, the country is still primarily an accession candidate. For many parliamentarians, the focus is on the backsliding on human and minority rights, the rule of law, and freedom of the press. Without progress on the rule of law, they oppose any concession by the EU to Ankara, including deepening the Customs Union or continuing cooperation on migration. The European Commission, on the other hand, seeks cooperation with Turkey and therefore has to put up with criticism from the assembly. The European Council is the determining body in foreign policy and only it can threaten sanctions. But for the centerpiece of the positive agenda, the deepening and modernization of the Customs Union, it needs the European Parliament's approval. There are thus many stumbling blocks to developing a policy on Turkey that needs to be coherent and flexible.

Be it member states or institutions, the different actors in the EU can only act together toward Turkey if they stop arguing about whether more confrontation or more concessions are appropriate. Instead, they should explicitly formulate clear expectations of the country and base their actions on whether it meets these. Only in so doing can general conditions for cooperation be formulated and a rule-based frame-

work set within which the European Council can act flexibly.

For example, the European Parliament and member states critical of Turkey will be more likely to agree to a deepening of the Customs Union if Ankara has to remove existing trade barriers before entering into negotiations. Support for Turkey in converting its energy supply in line with the EU's Green Deal, as raised by Von der Leyen and Michel in Ankara, would more easily find support in Brussels and among the member states if Turkey's ratification of the Paris Climate Agreement were made a precondition. Similarly, the EU could tie its willingness to hold high-level

dialogues with Ankara to its implementation of the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights.

Without a doubt, the EU can create conditionality beyond Turkey's frozen accession process. But it will only achieve its much-vaunted goal of a rules-based relationship if it formulates rules unequivocally, adheres to them, and makes their fulfillment by Ankara the guiding principle of its policy.

Such an approach would also have advantages for Turkey. Its government would know what it has to reckon with but also what it can rely on. And the country's democrats would certainly welcome a more rules-based relationship with the EU.

# The Search for a Third Way

## Galip Dalay

When speaking of EU-Turkish relations, there is no single crisis but rather several ones. Broadly speaking, they suffer from bilateral, multilateral, institutional, and normative crises.

First, from France to Greece and to Germany, Turkey has experienced different forms of bilateral crises with different EU states. Whereas the diaspora was the main agenda item of previous disputes with Germany, geopolitics has been the main source of friction with France. Ankara and Berlin have often clashed over the former's policy toward the Turkish community in Germany. From North Africa to the Eastern Mediterranean and to Syria and West Africa, Turkish and French geopolitical aspirations clash. Both countries' respective policies on the Libyan crisis have clearly illustrated the conflictual nature of their power and influence projection.

Second, as the Eastern Mediterranean conflict, which pits Turkey against a plethora of countries—including Greece, Cyprus, and France as well as institutionally against the EU—has illustrated, EU-Turkish relations have suffered from a set of crises within a multilateral setting.

Third, not only do member states pursue different policies toward Turkey, but so do different EU institutions. Whereas the European Parliament treats it as a candidate country, the European Council approaches Turkey as a major geopolitical actor. And, even though it is not an EU institution, NATO plays a central role in European security. Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia has triggered an institutional crisis in relations with NATO. One can argue that this purchase has not only triggered an institutional crisis, but also generated a conceptual question over the meaning of NATO membership.

Fourth, the answer to what should form the normative or values basis of Turkish–EU relations was straightforward previously. As Turkey was, and still is, a candidate country, the accession framework formed this normative basis. However, such straightforwardness is no longer the case. Turkey's membership prospects have all but vanished. This in return undermines the credibility and feasibility of the accession framework as forming the normative basis of relations. The default alternative to the accession framework has been transactionalism, exemplified by the migration deal of 2016. Yet given the level of interconnection and interdependency between Turkey and the EU, transactionalism cannot serve as a sustainable basis for their relations.

Of these crises, the institutional and normative ones are more challenging and long-lasting. Taken together, they can be seen as the framework crisis of relations. And with each EU summit or meeting on Turkey, the institutional and normative crises become even more glaring and acute. The European Council meeting in March was a case in point.

The meeting, which among other things discussed Turkey and the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, offered only a fragile positive agenda for and kicked the can down the road to the June meeting. It once again clearly illustrated the gap between the official norms-based accession framework of relations and the actual one, which is primarily driven by the logic of geopolitics and economics, along with the necessity to work with Turkey to ease the migratory and refugee pressure on the EU.

This gap between the official and actual frameworks creates an expectation-reality gap in relations and leads to glaring contradictions in the approaches of



different EU institutions toward Turkey. For instance, whereas the European Parliament treats Turkey as a candidate country and therefore adopts a much more normative language toward it, the European Council treats Turkey primarily as a major geopolitical player and therefore it places less emphasis on the normative aspects of the relations.

In spite of the increasing democratic decline and authoritarianism in Turkey, the outcome of the latest European Council meeting was relatively good news for its government. In fact, Ankara welcomed the outcome. Geopolitical calculations such as de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the launch of exploratory talks between Turkey and Greece played the primary part in the meeting offer of a fragile positive agenda, which includes a high-level dialogue format. Given the prevailing feeling of isolation in Ankara and uncertainty hanging over relations with the United States, the high-level dialogue format, which was implemented by the visit of the presidents of the European Council and of the European Commission to Ankara in April, was appealing for the Turkish government.

The outcomes of the latest European Council meeting have therefore reinforced the trend of recent years in which it treats Turkey as a geopolitical player and regional power, and crafts its responses accordingly. This approach shifts focus from Turkish domestic politics to its foreign policy and geopolitical activism. This represents a major change, which is largely negative, as regards the meaning of the EU for Turkey. Europe has largely and traditionally served as a reference point for Turkey's domestic political transformation and economic modernization, whereas the United States for a long time played the same role for its foreign policy and geopolitical identity.

Moreover, the European Council's prevailing geopolitical perspective is reductionist and limited in its scope. The Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, migration, and arguably the Libyan conflict to a limited extent form the main elements of this perspective. This scope needs to be broadened. At a time when

the United States has partially downsized its role and commitments in the EU's southern neighborhood, Turkey and the EU need to have a broader and structured dialogue on their shared neighborhood, particularly its conflict zones. How their respective roles there can be more in alignment rather than in opposition should be one of the central questions of this dialogue.

### ***Relations should not be reduced to either geopolitics or transactionalism.***

Having said that, relations should not be reduced to either geopolitics or transactionalism. Looking at Turkey through foreign and security policy or geopolitical lenses misses out one essential quality of these relations. Turkey and the EU are not foreign policy files for each other. Instead, they are essentially domestic political files for each other. Whatever happens on the streets of Istanbul will have reverberations on the streets of Berlin. Political and sociological interconnection illustrates the shortsightedness of reducing Turkey to a geopolitical or migration file and disregarding the human rights and democratization agenda.

In this respect, modernization of the Custom Union offers a third way between pure transactionalism, as exemplified by the refugee deal, and the norms- and values-based accession framework. It represents a credible and achievable target. It also requires a certain amount of legal, political, and institutional changes and adjustments in Turkey. Modernization of the Custom Union hence provides a semi-normative basis for the relations. Yet there is a glaring chasm between the two sides on this—for Turkey, it is an economic issue while for the EU it is a political one. This gap poses a challenge and needs to be bridged.

Finally, a new agenda or a new framework for the relations should not be seen as an alternative to or replacement for the accession framework. Instead, it should be complementary. It should serve the purpose of keeping EU-Turkish ties afloat at a time when the accession framework no longer serves this purpose.

# The Transatlantic Dimension

Ian Lesser

The United States has always been a stakeholder and, at times, an actor in EU-Turkish relations, although this role has varied significantly over time. It played an important role in the diplomacy leading up to the establishment of the Customs Union in 1995 and the formal opening of negotiations for Turkey's accession to the EU in 2005. Support for Turkey's EU aspirations has been a longstanding fixture of U.S. policy. The salience of this position—still a talking point for U.S. officials—has declined in recent years but it has never been abandoned. The advent of the Biden administration has brought new energy to transatlantic relations. Policy toward Turkey is also now an explicit part of the EU-U.S. discourse, with potentially significant implications for relations between Ankara and Brussels. After a period in which U.S.-Turkish and EU-Turkish relations were essentially decoupled, there is now a much more tangible transatlantic linkage in relations with Turkey.

Today, Turkey's relations with the EU and the United States are deeply troubled—for some of the same reasons. The values side of their relationship with Ankara—the state of Turkish democracy, media freedom, and human rights—has given rise to strong criticism on both sides of the Atlantic. The Biden administration is clearly more focused on these issues than its predecessor, and concerns on this front are now largely shared between Washington, Brussels, and key European capitals. Yet there is also a fundamental asymmetry in the European and U.S. relationships with Turkey. For Washington (and it is “Washington”, with public opinion hardly a factor on the U.S. side), security issues are at the center of the relationship. There have been many attempts to diversify and to reinforce the economic and people-to-people aspects

of bilateral engagement, but these have had only modest success. The relationship remains overwhelmingly focused on security and defense ties, which by their nature are often contentious. The United States and Turkey are geographically distant partners and not necessarily natural allies. Both countries can be sovereignty-conscious and convinced of their exceptionalism. The “strategic relationship” can have an optional quality for both sides.

By contrast, the EU and Turkey cannot escape from each other. They are bound by history, geography, trade, investment, and the large Turkish diaspora, in addition to foreign and security policy interests. Their relationship may be troubled, but it is not optional. The practical dimension of policy toward Turkey is most evident in the EU—above all the German—approach to migration and the ongoing negotiations with Ankara in this sphere. For all their discomfort with Turkey's internal and external policy, key EU members have been reluctant to jeopardize a migration agreement that, despite its flaws, has helped to manage a politically existential problem. There is also a less immediate but important U.S. interest in EU-Turkish cooperation in managing refugee flows. Without effective migration management across the Aegean, the EU risks a further strengthening of populist political movements, few of which put transatlantic partnership at the top of their agenda. In foreign policy, Turkey's posture in the Eastern Mediterranean and, to a lesser extent, in Libya, Syria, and the Caucasus, have been points of particular concern. On these issues, France has been particularly critical. It is notable that these concerns are also at the top of the U.S. agenda vis-à-vis Turkey.

If migration policy is the center of gravity for EU policy toward Turkey, Ankara's flirtation with Russia in the security realm is arguably the chief concern for U.S. policymakers. Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system is an especially neuralgic issue for Washington. It has become emblematic of wider concerns about Ankara's reliability as a strategic partner. Turkey, too, has its list of grievances when it comes to relations with the United States, from the presence of Fethullah Gülen in Pennsylvania to the Halkbank case. The list of problematic issues with Ankara is somewhat different on both sides of the Atlantic. But the net result has been a marked deterioration in Turkey's trust in and standing with transatlantic partners.

The deterioration has probably gone farther in the U.S.–Turkish relationship. Always difficult to manage, it reached a point of near collapse during the Trump administration. With the Biden administration, foreign and security policy worries have been reinforced by the perception of a deterioration of Turkish democracy, rule of law, and media freedom. Whereas EU officials once found themselves confronting U.S. reluctance to criticize Turkey for the sake of the “strategic relationship,” the situation is now reversed. With strong, bipartisan criticism of Turkey in Washington, many EU leaders and opinion shapers are now counselling against policies that risk a collapse of Turkish–Western relations. In their view, there is simply too much at stake.

For the first time in many years, EU and U.S. officials are now engaged in an explicit conversation about a coordinated policy toward Turkey. Transatlantic interests in this differ in some respects, but there are important shared stakes. These are most evident in the Eastern Mediterranean, where there is essentially complete agreement about the destabilizing nature of recent Turkish policy and the urgent need for risk

reduction. The S-400 issue is a more direct concern for NATO, but inevitably affects attitudes within the EU, against the backdrop of growing friction in relations with Russia. U.S. sanctions related to the S-400 purchase, and possible further ones arising from the Halkbank case, can have political and economic consequences touching on EU interests in Turkey. In general, the EU is likely to be much more cautious in its approach to sanctions as a policy instrument in relations with Ankara. This is partly a matter of philosophy and partly a matter of pragmatism.

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The EU and the United States are essentially on the same page when it comes to longer-term objectives. Leaders on both sides of the Atlantic are inclined to take the long view; aiming to stabilize rather than reset relations with Ankara. Under current conditions, the United States is clearly not inclined to advocate for EU membership for Turkey as it has at key points in the past. This advocacy was not always well received in Brussels and among member states, even when the country seemed a more attractive partner and there was greater enthusiasm for EU enlargement. Yet, there is a strong, shared transatlantic interest in Turkey's future convergence with EU norms and policies. For the moment, the pursuit of a positive agenda with it has become part of the vocabulary for policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic. For Ankara, policies toward Washington and Brussels can no longer be pursued in isolation. They may be mutually aggravating or mutually reinforcing. They are no longer separable.

# EU-Turkish Trade Goes Green?

## Güven Sak

The current trade regime between Turkey and the EU came into effect in 1996,<sup>1</sup> and it has since played an integral part in the country's economic development. However, it is by now out of date when compared to the EU's more recent customs arrangements with third countries. Reflecting the economic dynamics of its time, the Customs Union covers only industrial products, leaving out services and agriculture. It is in urgent need of an update, and the EU's environmental agenda could be key in that effort.

In 2020, Turkey was the sixth-largest trading partner of the EU,<sup>2</sup> following China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Russia. Japan, South Korea, and India trailed behind Turkey,<sup>3</sup> reflecting that proximity matters. Turkey has become part of mostly Germany-based value chains, and it is the fifth-largest non-EU export destination for EU countries.

In 2019, Turkey imported \$63.9 billion worth of goods from the EU while the EU imported \$77.9 billion worth of goods from Turkey, for a total \$141.8 billion bilateral trade volume. No less than 41.6 percent of Turkey's total trade is through the Customs Union.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, 81.8 percent of Turkey's exports to the EU face a 0 percent tariff rate thanks to the Customs Union. On the EU side, 71.8 percent of its trade flow with Turkey face a 0 percent tariff rate.<sup>5</sup> The Customs

Union has provided a protective shield over Turkish exports to the EU when it comes to competition from China and Southeast Asian countries.

The Customs Union has served its purpose well. Coupled with the inherent dynamism of the Turkish economy, it has radically transformed the country. Without it, Turkey would be a less industrialized, less connected, and far poorer place. In 1980, the total value of Turkish exports was around \$3 billion, with 90 percent of these exports being agricultural products. Today, the figure has increased to around \$150 billion, with 90 percent being industrial products.<sup>6</sup>

### *Customs Union Modernization Fatigue*

There have been two periods of economic reform and transparency in Turkey. The first was in the early 1980s, when the Turkish economy was opening up with President Turgut Özal's reforms. The second one was after the acceptance of Turkey's bid to join the EU in 1999, coupled with an economic stabilization program in 2001. These Europeanization reforms led to the Turkish accession negotiations that started in 2005.

The accession process stalled after 2007 due to rising apathy on both sides. This political mood also stopped the economic reform process and slowed the international competitiveness gains by the Turkish economy. Hopelessly adrift, bureaucrats and opinion leaders have been searching for a "positive agenda."

In this context, a "positive agenda" means that the formal accession talks are so negatively charged that both sides are looking for some unrelated positivity to inject into it. Today, Turkey and the EU trade

1 Directorate for EU Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Turkey, "[Customs Union](#)," July 12, 2019.

2 European Commission, "[Turkey – Trade](#)," May 6, 2021.

3 European Commission, "[Top Trading Partners 2020 – Trade Statistics](#)," April 12, 2021.

4 Ibid.

5 The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) Global, "[Customs Union Position Paper](#)," January 14, 2021.

6 TURKSTAT, "[Foreign Trade Statistics](#)," January 29, 2021.

through an arrangement they set up before Steve Jobs announced the first iPhone, Larry Page and Sergey Brin founded Google, and Elon Musk produced the first Tesla. Customs Union modernization has been on the EU–Turkish agenda since at least 2014. That was also the year the World Bank produced a report on the substantial benefits of such modernization for both sides.<sup>7</sup> Over the years there have been many high-level dialogue meetings that should have been shameful for Turkey and the EU. Both sides came together just for the sake of coming together, and they had empty dialogue for the sake of dialogue. Nothing substantial was achieved—appearances were kept up, paychecks were earned, and everybody went home.

It is a brave new world out there, with innumerable new types of services, cryptocurrencies, and so much more. The EU–Turkish trading framework needs to adjust to that reality. Yet, the process has not moved forward, remains stuck in the icy political winds between Brussels and Ankara.

### *The U.K.-Turkish Trade Deal as Model?*

The post-Brexit U.K.-Turkish free-trade agreement signed in January<sup>8</sup> could have provided an example for a new trading regime between the EU and Turkey, but it did not. The Customs Union has been beneficial to Turkey, not only by increasing trade and competitiveness, but also by providing the legal and institutional infrastructure of a rule-based free-market economy. Trade reform is desirable not just to increase raw economic output, but to support transparency, competitiveness, and respect for the rule of law—all of which are important for the long-term health of the economy. The deal with the United Kingdom, though smaller in economic terms, could still have brought many of those rule-of-law benefits.

It did not because the final deal was not that ambitious. The agreement does not experiment with new openings in services and agriculture, meaning that it does not go significantly beyond the framework set in the old Customs Union. Ankara and London would have struck a different deal if their institutions had the energy and creativity to conceive of one. At least Ankara, as the smaller economy with more to gain, should have done so. The fact that it did not suggests that Turkey does not have a solid framework to modernize the Customs Union.

### *Is the Green Deal an Opportunity?*

The current green-digital transformation that is taking shape on both sides of the Atlantic provides a great opportunity to renew the Customs Union. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in December 2019 that “the European Green Deal is our new growth strategy.”<sup>9</sup> It is about renovating existing productive capacity in Europe with new low-carbon technologies to jumpstart growth and job creation, together with low-carbon emissions. It is also a post-pandemic economic recovery program. This is all doable and Turkey cannot stay out of it. A “Green Deal Turkey” could also be a much-needed item on the positive agenda to warm up the politics between the EU and Turkey.

With the Climate Club as a regional trading zone taking shape, and Turkey adjusting to it, the Customs Union will change anyway for three reasons. First, the EU single market has been turning into an EU digital single market. Second, the green transformation has the capacity to change the EU’s trading relations with all countries, with or without the carbon border tax. And, third, a systematic framework for transformation is taking shape, which makes it easier for countries like Turkey to join the debate and to take systematic measures to comply. Hence the Green Deal and the Climate Club offer good starting points for an ad hoc

7 World Bank, “[Evaluation of the EU–Turkey Customs Union](#),” March 28, 2014.

8 U.K. Department for International Trade, “[Trade with Turkey](#),” February 17, 2021.

9 European Commission, “[The European Green Deal](#),” December 11, 2019.

modernization process for the Customs Union, something that is already underway.

Turkey needs a structural reform agenda to make its growth sustainable and to improve its global competitiveness. This is of vital importance for the resiliency of the economy in the near term. With no Green Deal of its own, Turkey risks losing its international competitiveness, together with its share in European imports and its place in European value chains.

Turkey has an interest in creating a more conducive environment for foreign direct investment (FDI) because there is an understanding that it cannot

achieve this transformation without increasing levels of European direct investment. More FDI means more bilateral trade.

In this sense, a Green Deal is not something Turkey will do out of environmental consciousness. The EU has already made that decision for the country. At this point, going green is just good business. It is about accepting the rules of the new Climate Club that is taking shape as a trading zone. And, in this context, it is high time to reopen the Customs Union modernization file with the necessary rule-of-law provisions. More FDI requires more policy stability and more rule of law in Turkey.

# The Old-New Story of Energy Cooperation

## Kadri Tastan

Energy has often been seen as an important pillar in EU-Turkish relations. Usually, energy relations have been discussed either with reference to the European need for diversification of energy sources in the face of dependence on Russia or to Turkey's EU accession process. Accordingly, energy cooperation has mostly been the fruit of Turkey's strategic location, meaning its role as a corridor between consumers and producers of energy.

The EU's desire to diversify its sources of suppliers, reduce its gas dependence on Russia, and turn to the resources of Central Asia and the Middle East gives Turkey an important role in its diversification and energy security policies. Gas dependency on Russia is a challenge for both of them, and Russia's weaponization of this dependency for political goals only further exacerbates this challenge for both. In response, the EU and Turkey have been pursuing policies to reduce this dependency. On top of this, Turkey's long-lasting desire to become an energy hub and a corridor for energy sources in the Middle East and the Caspian basin toward European consumer markets paves the way for a convergence of interests between Brussels and Ankara. Therefore, EU-Turkish energy cooperation is necessary and—despite the political difficulties—the economic, geopolitical, and energy imperatives remain strong.

### *Changing Dynamics*

Many developments call for a clear-eyed discussion on the potential for EU-Turkish energy engagement, including Turkey's role in European energy policy and security. They range from the changes in the energy markets to the growing supply of liquefied natural gas (primarily low-price shale gas from the United States),

from a phased exit from oil-and-gas-based economies to more focus on decarbonization and green deal policies, and from Turkey's potential exclusion from the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) to its usage of lignite coal domestically.

Gas and electricity have traditionally been the cornerstone of EU-Turkish energy cooperation, but their strategic relevance seems overestimated given the limited current and likely future size of the regional gas transit and electricity trade.<sup>1</sup> In the longer term, cooperation in gas supply and trade in electricity will depend on several political, economic, and commercial factors.

Moreover, the trajectory of their crisis-stricken relations coupled with Turkey's increasingly close ties with Russia will have a significant impact on the development of a genuine energy partnership with the EU in the longer term. Therefore, the new geopolitical and energy context is highly likely to shape the nature and future of EU-Turkish energy relations. The conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean is a good example in this sense. The energy discoveries there could have potentially put Turkey back at the center of the energy debate, as Turkey is in an ideal geographical location to bring these resources to Europe, but several factors (Greek-Turkish tension on maritime issues, the unresolved Cypriot issue, the tensions between Turkey and several countries in the region) have prevented this from happening. As a result, Turkey has been excluded from any economic and energy cooperation such as EMGF. For the time being, the regional energy center of gravity in the Eastern Mediterranean is shifting to

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Tagliapietra, "[A New Strategy for EU-Turkey Energy Cooperation](#)," Turkish Policy Quarterly, 2018.

Egypt and Israel, which is a huge blow for Turkey, who for years has wanted to position itself as a transition country for the region.

### *A New Framework for Cooperation*

The above-mentioned factors will all affect or modify the energy commitments or cooperation between Turkey and the EU; but the most important and influential one will undoubtedly be the gradual transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. In order to fight climate change and meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement, the EU has embarked on an ambitious decarbonization process to become climate-neutral by 2050.<sup>2</sup> In April, the EU reached provisional political agreement to enshrine in legislation its 2050 climate neutrality target, as well as a collective, net greenhouse-gas emissions reduction target of at least 55 percent by 2030 compared to 1990.<sup>3</sup> That means, even though energy cooperation in fossil energy sources will continue at a certain level, this will decrease in the European energy configuration.

Therefore, fossil fuels will still be consumed for a long time and Turkey's role as a transit country will still be crucial to some degree. But with the Green Deal and the energy transition, if both sides want to have a closer and more developed relationship, the framework of their cooperation should be broadened with the new realities be taken into account. Moreover, for the EU maintaining the commitment of each country, including Turkey, to the green energy transition will be crucial for meeting the Paris Agreement objectives.

The EU will also need to convince Turkey to adopt ambitious emission-reduction policies and renewable-energy programs. Turkey's energy sector, like that of most countries, is at a crossroads. The country will either pursue a decarbonized pathway by investing in efficiency and low-carbon technologies or it will continue with business as usual based on high-carbon

technologies with a risk of stranded assets that can lock in energy-sector investments for decades to come.<sup>4</sup> Irrespective of which path Turkey pursues, it will bear consequences for energy cooperation with the EU. Consequently, this cooperation will not only have important economic, strategic, and ecological implications for both, but also have significant consequences on the future of their relations in general.

However, despite the potential and capacity of renewable energy sources in the country, Turkey does not have a clear strategy to decarbonize its energy sector and its economy. Its energy outlook is not in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement. According to its intended nationally determined contribution (INDC) presented to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Turkey's emissions will continue to rise.<sup>5</sup> The country has not committed to a net greenhouse-gas reduction. Moreover, Ankara has not even ratified the Paris Agreement.

Therefore, the first step Turkey should take is to ratify the Paris Agreement and update its INDCs with more ambitious targets in the decarbonization process. Without this, energy cooperation with the EU based on the energy transition will not develop to the desired levels.

Turkey has a considerable potential for alternative energy sources and the EU has the technological and economic capacity, so their cooperation would be beneficial for both. Furthermore, European countries have made significant technological and regulatory advances in renewable energy and Turkey could learn from them. The EU and Turkey must reinvigorate their joint dialogue on energy and the energy transition and decarbonization process have a major role to play in advancing this goal.

2 European Commission, "[2020 report on the State of the Energy Union](#)," October 2020.

3 European Council, "[European Climate law : Council and Parliament reach a provisional agreement](#)", 5 May 2021.

4 Ceren Ayas, "[Decarbonization Of Turkey's Economy: Long-Term Strategies And Immediate Challenge](#)", SEE Change Net, TEPAV and CAN Europe, August 2020.

5 Republic of Turkey, "[Intended Nationally Determined Contribution](#)", 2015.



# The Migration Deal and Future Prospects

## Angeliki Dimitriadi

The EU-Turkish statement of March 2016 aimed at reducing irregular arrivals via Turkey to Europe and has since become the main framework of cooperation between the two sides. An emergency solution hastily constructed, it resulted in an imbalanced transactional partnership between Turkey and the EU as regards migration. The negotiations for its renewal are an opportunity to develop a different type of partnership—one focused on offering positive incentives for refugees and grounded on a more technical and operational cooperation.

As the “European refugee crisis” of 2015 unfolded, the EU and Turkey reached a burden-sharing arrangement. This provided that Turkey would receive a total of €6 billion through the Facility for Syrians in Turkey (FRIT). In exchange, the country would accept all returnees from Greece who had crossed through the maritime border. As an added incentive, for every Syrian returned to Turkey, another Syrian would be resettled to EU country (the 1+1 formula). Finally, Turkey’s EU accession process was to be re-energized, with visa liberalization considered.

The success of the statement has been heavily contested for numerous issues regarding human rights and the safety of returnees to Turkey<sup>1</sup> (especially after the attempted coup in the summer of 2016), conditions on the Greek islands,<sup>2</sup> and very limited returns.<sup>3</sup> The deal did reduce arrivals in the EU, though the closure of the Western Balkans route was equally crit-

ical in achieving that goal. It also established a transactional element in the partnership, beyond the norms and values advocated by the EU. Whereas before the EU exported normative power over Turkey through its Europeanization process, the statement created an imbalanced dependency with the EU now reliant on Turkish border controls.

### *The statement created an imbalanced dependency with the EU now reliant on Turkish border controls.*

The EU’s externalization of migration management to Turkey was made possible by the partly successful Europeanization process the country had undergone in the previous decade.<sup>4</sup> Syrians have been able to apply for temporary protection in Turkey since 2014 under the Law on Foreigners and International Protection. This entitles them in principle, to access to health care, labor, education, and housing as well as protection from refoulement. Turkey received much needed financial assistance from the EU for the Syrian refugees. It also elevated migration as a key determinant of its political relationship with the EU and instrumentalized its position to exercise pressure on the EU.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, visa liberalization did not progress and the promised resettlement of Syrians (capped at 75,000) had not exceeded 28,000 by March 2021.

1 Amnesty International, “[No safe Refuge: Asylum-seekers and refugees denied effective protection in Turkey](#),” June 3, 2016.

2 Asylum Information Database (AIDA), “[Country Report: Greece](#),” (2016 update), 2017.

3 European Commission, “[EU–Turkey Statement: Three years on](#),” March 2019.

4 Başak Kale, “[Asylum Policy and the Future of Turkey–EU Relations: Between Cooperation and Conflict](#),” FEUTURE Online paper No.18, April 2018.

5 Angeliki Dimitriadi, Ayhan Kaya, Başak Kale, Tinatin Zurabishvili, “[EU–Turkey relations and irregular migration: transactional cooperation in the making](#),” FEUTURE April 2018.

The imbalanced dependency was evident in February 2020 when the Turkish government did what it has threatened for years and “opening” the border with Greece.<sup>6</sup> The European Commission denounced this and proclaimed Greece the “shield” of Europe.<sup>7</sup> Turkey in turn has repeatedly accused Greece in the past year for pushbacks of migrants in the Aegean Sea and the EU for failing to deliver visa-free travel for Turkish citizens.<sup>8</sup> Yet, despite mutual recriminations, both sides have expressed an interest in renewing the statement.

Geography is one element that the EU cannot alter. Turkey will remain in the future an important partner on migration, particularly as it continues to host 4 million Syrians. A partnership is thus needed offering migration-related positive gains for Turkey.

A revised EU-Turkey deal can be disentangled from the high-level political discussions on EU membership, the Customs Union, and even visa liberalization. Instead, the new deal should focus on prioritizing legal pathways of entry to the EU, offering robust support for labor integration of Syrians in Turkey, and making financial support conditional on improvement of conditions for migrants (including non-Syrians), rather than returns.

Turkey will need financial support for the millions of refugees it hosts, partly as an incentive in maintaining border controls, but partly because ensuring improved conditions and rights for the Syrian refugees is in line with the EU’s political and normative interests. Although a significant number of Syrians remain dependent on cash assistance and face homelessness and limited integration, evidence suggests

that many prefer to remain in Turkey.<sup>9</sup> The focus of EU funding should shift from emergency assistance to integration. Labor integration particularly, is crucial in ensuring independent living, and in this the FRIT can contribute funds for boosting development at the local and regional levels in Turkey.<sup>10</sup>

Family reunification also needs to be strengthened, with prioritization of a legal migration pathway for those with family members already in EU states, thereby also reducing the incentive for irregular migration. This could be further supported by an EU-wide resettlement scheme, offering legal migration options for those in Turkey but also in the broader neighborhood, to function as a counterincentive to irregular migration.

***A revised EU-Turkey deal can be disentangled from the high-level political discussions on EU membership, the Customs Union, and even visa liberalization.***

The issue of returns remains problematic. The percentage of Syrians among those arriving in Greece has reduced over the past few years. In 2020, Afghans constituted 35.2 percent<sup>11</sup> of total arrivals in the country and the expected withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan this year will likely trigger renewed migratory movement from a country that remains largely unsafe. In parallel, according to Human Rights Watch, Turkey is not a safe third country for most migrants, with human rights risks recorded for

6 Ayşe Dicle Ergin, “What Happened at the Greece-Turkey Border in early 2020? A legal analysis,” *Verfassung Blog*, 2020/9/30, September 30, 2020.

7 European Commission, “Remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece, Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, President Sassoli and President Michel,” March 3, 2020.

8 Berkay Mandracı, “Sharing the Burden: Revisiting the EU-Turkey Migration Deal,” *Reliefweb*, March 13, 2020.

9 Franck Düvell et al, “How Many Syrian Refugees in Turkey Want to Migrate to Europe and Can Actually Do So? Results of a Survey Among 1,900 Syrian,” German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), April 21, 2021.

10 Kemal Kirişçi, “Revisiting and going beyond the EU-Turkey migration agreement of 2016: an opportunity for Greece to overcome being just ‘Europe’s aspis,’” Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), April 2, 2021.

11 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Operational Portal Refugee Situation,” 2021.

returnees in many cases.<sup>12</sup> A revised deal should not be conditional on returns nor should it prioritize the return of specific nationalities (such as Syrians under 1+1) over others; rather, Turkey should commit to reapplying the bilateral and EU readmission agreements already in place.

Finally, it would be worth strengthening technical rather than high-level political cooperation. A forum that facilitates direct exchange, made up of representatives from border and coast guards (Greece, Turkey, Frontex), asylum experts, and representatives from national authorities involved in migration, could be a requirement for a new deal.

The EU-Turkey statement is not a panacea, and the EU cannot continue to rely on externalizing migration management to neighboring countries in exchange for financial assistance. Rather, it needs to take a more active role in preventing crises or in mitigating their outcomes. It also needs to rebalance its relationship with Turkey and offer the country an arrangement grounded on concrete incentives that positively impact the refugees and encourage a true responsibility-sharing arrangement that incorporates a strong normative dimension.

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12 Orçun Ulusoy and Hemme Battjes, "[Situation of Readmitted Migrants and Refugees from Greece to Turkey under the EU-Turkey Statement](#)," Migration Law Section, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2017.

# The Politics of Future Relations

## Funda Tekin

The EU is challenged to square the circle in its relations with Turkey. For years, the two of them have been trapped by a vicious circle driven by: the process of de-democratization in Turkey; rising nationalism and populism on both sides; bilateral conflicts between Turkey and individual EU member states; conflicts over maritime borders, exclusive economic zones, and Turkey's drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean; and a migration deal that has run its course. Hence, their relations are challenged from global, regional, and domestic perspectives across their political, identity, security, energy, and migration dimensions.

In this context the EU veers between imposing sanctions on an increasingly adversarial neighbor and offering a positive agenda provided Turkey shows readiness to engage in a genuine partnership. Overall, the EU seems to lack a clear strategy for how to sail the troubled waters of the relationship.

### *The EU veers between imposing sanctions on an increasingly adversarial neighbor and offering a positive agenda.*

When the United Kingdom decided to exit the EU, there was briefly a debate over whether their post-Brexit arrangement could be a blueprint for alternatives to Turkey's accession to the EU. There was a general belief that, if such a heavyweight country preferred to be associated to rather than a member of the EU, Turkey would not outright oppose any alternative to its EU membership as it has done so far. However, experts and stakeholders alike realized rather quickly

that such a comparison did not reflect reality. What is more, one lesson from Brexit is that negotiations on new forms of relations between the EU and any country are not easy, last longer than expected, and are highly complex and loaded with domestic political interests on both sides.

Therefore, the EU would be well advised to have a clear strategy for its future relationship with Turkey. Four elements can provide a strategic compass for this.

### *Putting the Cards on the Table*

One stumbling block in EU-Turkish relations is a lack of mutual trust. The EU had already lost trust in Turkey's reform process well before the failed coup attempt of 2016, and the constitutional reform introducing an executive presidential system obliterated all hopes for the country's re-democratization. On Turkey's side, doubts in the credibility of the EU's commitment to its eventual membership has played an important role. The debate on the EU's absorption capacity as well as the open-ended nature of accession negotiations has not helped trust-building. Additionally, the Cyprus conflict is the elephant in the room for any debates on modernizing the Customs Union or Turkey's EU membership. The fact that the EU does not trust Turkey to be a credible accession country and Turkey does not trust in the credibility of its accession perspective only exacerbates the vicious circle.

Both sides should work to reduce mutual accusations and should start talking with (rather than about) each other at all levels—although meetings at the highest political level should be postponed until a time when trust has been rebuilt. They should also not shy away from tackling the Cyprus issue. The report

on the state of play of relations by the high representative and the European Commission has already started this process by clearly outlining how far this issue connects with trade, political, and economic relations. And, last but not least, the EU and Turkey should be honest regarding the fact that accession is currently off the political agenda.

### *Less Focus on the End Point*

The EU and Turkey should acknowledge that they are looking at a fluctuating relationship and not a static situation. This does not necessarily mean that the accession process should be cancelled but rather that aiming for this end point for their relationship does not help but rather undermines it. Their relations are complex and encompass coexisting scenarios that might at one point in time be more conflictual and at others more focused on cooperation and convergence. The high tensions at the end of 2020 that were followed by weeks of relaxation are evidence of this.

The European integration process has been successful because its creators abstained from clearly defining any end point. Thus, even if the goal of Turkey's membership in the EU is currently shattered, both sides should put less effort into either cancelling the process or defining alternative goals on which they will hardly reach a consensus and which are very likely to be overtaken by developments in the relationship. Instead, they should concentrate on those areas of mutual interest in which the cooperation aspects outweigh the conflictual ones in order to return to a constructive relationship. Furthermore, an open-ended relationship has the benefit of flexibility. The EU's official statements since last December emphasize the fact that reversibility is an important element regarding a positive agenda with Turkey as well as possible sanctions. This highlights the fact that their relationship can take opposite paths but neither of these should be a one-way street. This acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of the situation.

### *Transactionalism Is Not Enough*

Taking an open-ended approach is very likely to increase the relationship's transactional character. At the same time, pure transactionalism cannot be the solution. The EU and Turkey have always cooperated in different ways and policy areas of mutual interest in addition to the accession process. However, their close economic relations—with Turkey the EU's sixth-largest partner for exports as well as imports of goods in 2020—did not prevent Turkey from turning into the EU's difficult neighbor. Additionally, geopolitics have taken over the relationship in the past two years, which has not made them any less conflictual. On the contrary, the security dimension can now be considered one of the dominant drivers of conflict in the relationship.

There is a clear need to mitigate conflictual dynamics and foster cooperation in the relationship and one of the EU's ways of doing so is to use a rules-based framework. The aim should be to preserve the EU's democratic anchor for Turkey and to prevent the relationship from becoming purely transactional. Future EU-Turkish relations hence require a return to openly voiced political conditionality and to the EU's soft-power approach.

### *Start with Win-Win Issues*

Future EU-Turkish relations should be prominently driven by cooperation in those areas that represent a win-win situation. Such forms of cooperation can be conditional on Turkey's return to constructive engagement in foreign policy; but more importantly they should be strongly embedded in a norms-based framework. The modernization of the Customs Union would suit such a framework perfectly for economic and political reasons. Although the economic gains on the Turkish side might be higher than on the EU side, the accompanying modernization of Turkey's economy would still be attractive for the EU. Additionally, the new focus on boosting public-private cooperation, with a focus on green and digital transitions, extends the focus of the modernization to include policies that are

crucial to the EU's future agenda. Politically, it allows the EU to demand key economic-governance reforms.

The renewal of the migration deal also holds substantial potential for creating a win-win situation. The EU's migration and asylum policy relies heavily on agreements with third countries and Turkey needs support in hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees worldwide. However, the new migration deal needs to avoid raising false expectations on the Turkish side.

Finally, future relations should center around the people-to-people contacts as highlighted by the positive political agenda offered by the EU. Mobility between the EU and Turkey, including the engagement between their civil societies, is key to reducing the mutual lack of trust and to keeping the democratic spirit alive. The EU's Conference on the Future of Europe, which aims to engage civil society, experts, and the EU institutions, could provide an opportunity for this and should include Turkey.

# The Outlook for Foreign and Security Policy Cooperation

**Rosa Balfour**

As one of the European Union's most important neighbors, straddling strategically Europe and Asia, as a supposed candidate to join the EU, and as a member of NATO, Turkey's cooperation with Brussels on foreign and security policy has been remarkably underdeveloped. Their relations span the policy spectrum, from the Customs Union to the all-encompassing accession process, from EU-NATO cooperation to the more recent deal on the management of refugees from the Syrian conflict. Yet this broad agenda and the regular institutionalized cooperation it entails has never encouraged a deeper dialogue on foreign and security policy.

EU-Turkish relations have recently been in freefall and current EU attempts to engage in de-escalation diplomacy are unlikely to bridge this gap. For the foreseeable future, the EU and Turkey find themselves inextricably entangled in foreign policy hotspots, divergences, and crises that are at continuous risk of escalation—a “hostile dance” according to one apt definition.<sup>1</sup> Brussels has been unable to use its accession leverage and its “positive agenda” to defuse the multiple divergences on foreign policy and regional security, nor has it been able to meaningfully engage politically with Turkey as an autonomous actor (but NATO ally).

## *Foreign and Security Policy Cooperation*

Turkey's relationship with the EU is built on three pillars: NATO-EU cooperation, the EU's enlargement process, and the more recent deal on refugees. NATO-EU cooperation has been hampered by mutual

veto of Turkey and Cyprus. One consequence is that Turkey is not participating in EU initiatives on security, such as the European Defence Agency,<sup>2</sup> and participation in Permanent Structured Cooperation is unlikely in light of existing disputes, despite an unexpected application to join.<sup>3</sup>

In principle, accession negotiations to join the EU provide the greatest opportunity to expand cooperation. For decades a membership perspective was one of Turkey's most prioritized and consistent foreign policy goals. The deepening of economic ties started in the 1960s with the progressive establishment of the Customs Union, followed by requests to join the EU, eventually accepted in 1999, with negotiations starting in 2005. Through the accession process the EU can use conditionality to steer Turkey toward its standards or punish the country for deviation. Indeed, the deterioration of human rights and democracy standards has frozen the accession talks since 2018 though neither side wants to formally end negotiations. The EU has also diverted its aid to Turkey from government to civil society support to maintain a relationship with a still vibrant society. Visa liberalization and an upgrade of the Customs Union are also stalled, though the EU's current strategy is to offer both as an incentive to bring Turkey back to cooperation.

Foreign and security cooperation is one of the chapters on the accession agenda. The strategy was to establish bilateral dialogues at the levels of the EU's

1 Nicholas Danforth, “Turkey and the West: A Hostile Dance,” Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), March 2021.

2 Senem Aydın-Düzgit, Ian Bond, and Luigi Scazzieri, “The Role of Differentiation in EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy Cooperation with Neighbouring Countries,” EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability, March 2021.

3 Alexandra Brzozowski, “Turkey's participation request in EU military project apprehended as ‘Trojan horse,’” Euractiv, May 17, 2021.

high representative for foreign affairs and security policy and the commissioner responsible for enlargement with Turkey's foreign minister and minister for Europe, and between political directors and senior officials. The expectation was that Turkey would align with the EU's positions. This occurred significantly during the first years of negotiations but started to change after 2011. In 2020 the alignment rate was 11 percent.<sup>4</sup>

In response to large numbers of refugees fleeing civil war and political violence in Syria and Afghanistan, and trying to get to Europe through Turkey and the Balkan route, the EU reached a deal with Ankara to keep refugees in camps in Turkey and prevent them from crossing the border to Greece. Keen to ensure the continuation of the deal and on humanitarian grounds, Brussels does not exercise any conditionality with respect to the €6 billion it spends to support the livelihoods of 4 million refugees in the camps.<sup>5</sup> While the deal continues to function, albeit imperfectly, the EU has made itself vulnerable to periodic threats from Turkey to let refugees cross the border to Europe.

Relations have been in freefall since 2016, the year of the refugee deal, the United Kingdom's vote to leave the EU, the attempted coup in Turkey, and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, an admirer of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Emboldened also by the United States' shrunken security presence in the Middle East and taking a leaf out of Russia's President Vladimir Putin's playbook, Turkey has engaged in a series of foreign policy adventures in its neighborhood, without pushback from European partners or the United States. It has: pursued military interventions in Syria, northern Iraq, and in Libya; carried out drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean that the EU considers as threatening the sovereignty of Greece and Cyprus; blocked any resolution of the status of Cyprus; supported Azerbaijan militarily

in its war against Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh; and collaborated with Russia in Syria and in military acquisitions.

### *Domestic Challenges*

Turkey's shift in foreign policy focus from integration into the EU to adventurism in its neighborhood that created multiple security dilemmas and challenges to the EU was rapid, and it met little pushback, apart from endless expressions of "concern". After the 2016 attempted coup, much of it was driven by Erdoğan's need to consolidate his power through nationalist sentiment and to cover up the faltering economy. With a presidential election scheduled in 2023, the year of the republic's anniversary, these domestic drivers are unlikely to change.

Domestic politics and internal divisions also explain the reasons for the EU's struggle to engage with Turkey, be it as an accession candidate or in general diplomacy. Mutual distrust has lingered since Turkey started EU accession negotiations in 2005. The appetite to open the EU doors to it began to dwindle soon after, with Germany and France mooting proposals for a "privileged partnership" instead of the membership offer.<sup>6</sup>

The transformative accession agenda centered around supporting Turkey's democratic reforms soon became obfuscated by the reluctance of EU member states to open their doors to a large, populous, and Muslim-majority country of still dubious democratic credentials. This overshadowed the rationale of anchoring a strategic partner through integration and democratic transformation.

Erdoğan's tightening grip on power and the curtailment of civil society, human rights, and the political opposition, heavily criticized by the European Parliament, made the EU leadership limit its dialogue with Ankara. Punitive measures have only been threatened but not used, out of fear of pushing Turkey out of the

4 European Commission and European External Action Service, "[Joint Communication to the European Council State of Play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations](#)," March 22, 2021

5 European Commission, "[The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#)," n.d.

6 Mark Beunderman, "[Verheugen warns EU against 'dangerous spiral' on Turkey](#)," EUobserver, October 9, 2006.



West's sphere, especially in light of its new ties with Russia. The carrots of accession were put on hold, thus weakening EU leverage, but the sticks were not used.

Domestic European politics also drove the terms of the refugees deal: the fear of a far-right upheaval against the political establishment for accepting refugees put the EU in crisis mode to cut a deal with Turkey. That agreement curtailed the liberty to criticize Turkey, made the EU susceptible to blackmail, and sustained the image of a weak and divided EU.

Germany and France's skepticism toward Turkey's accession path did not translate into a shared alternative strategy toward the country, however. The most recent regional tensions of 2020 revealed divergent views between them, with France taking a more belligerent attitude in supporting Greece and Cyprus, and Germany continuing to seek pathways for dialogue. The EU institutions seem to have similarly different views, with the European Commission emphasizing accession conditionality and the External Action Service underlining the need for de-escalation. The

recent "SofaGate" episode only made these divisions within the EU visible to the European public. The March report on EU-Turkish relations tries to synthesize these differences by offering a set of incentives to be activated only upon concrete steps to be undertaken by Ankara.

### *Conclusion*

Since its ambiguous commitment to Turkey's accession, the EU has been walking a tightrope between engagement and sanctions, dialogue and pushback. The membership prospect was insufficiently credible to be persuasive; the reluctance to use conditionality strategically further undermined the EU's strength in the eyes of its partner, which grew more assertive and ambitious as the EU's ambiguities were gradually uncovered. Caught between geopolitical realities and perceptions of domestic crisis, the EU has not made a constructive or effective use of its strategic ambiguity. The ball deciding the future of EU-Turkish relations is in Turkey's court.

This work represents solely the opinion of the author and any opinion expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the institution to which the author is affiliated.

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#### **About Turkey, Europe, and Global Issues**

The fellowship on Turkey, Europe, and Global Issues was launched by The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) in 2017, to emphasize the geopolitical and economic importance of the relationship between Turkey and transatlantic partners. The fellowship promotes high-level debate and provides recommendations focusing on developments in Turkey, EU-Turkey relations and Turkey-Transatlantic relations.

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