



## TURKEY-EU RELATIONS BEFORE THE MARCH SUMMIT: THE WAY FORWARD?

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## Introduction

Tensions in Turkey-EU relations subsided toward the end of 2020 following the Turkish government's positive engagement with the EU and moderation on the Eastern Mediterranean agenda. EU leaders thus decided to impose an extension of a specific sanctions list that had been adopted one year before rather than impose more comprehensive sanctions toward Turkey during their most recent summit, on December 9-10, 2020. In the same summit, High Representative Josep Borrell and the Commission were given the task of preparing a report on instruments and options regarding how to proceed after an analysis of different aspects of Turkey-EU relations. This report, which is now submitted for the upcoming March summit, proposes a new framework for relations while keeping Turkey's accession perspective frozen. The Council conclusions also noted that the approach toward Turkey would be coordinated with the incoming administration of President Joe Biden in the United States, although a full-fledged discussion on the issue was postponed until the March European Council meeting. This provided some time for the Turkish government to ease tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, make headway in the political reform process, and create a positive environment for reforms on rights and freedoms, rule of law, and independence of the judiciary, especially with regard to high-profile cases such as those of Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş and philanthropist Osman Kavala.

Since the December Council Summit, we have observed the Turkish government's attempts to soften its discourse and attitude as well as de-escalate tensions particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean in order to avoid tougher sanctions. To this end, Turkey revitalized exploratory talks with Greece, stopped its drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, supported the start of the UN process on Cyprus, softened its rhetoric toward France, and began exploring the ways to normalize relations with Israel and Egypt. However, while these foreign policy maneuvers were taking place, Turkey also continued on its path away from democracy. While Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced a human rights action plan and an econo-

mic reform package on March 3 and March 12, 2021, respectively, their implementation has so far proven contrary to what was promised. The decision to remove HDP MP Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu from his parliamentary seat due to a tweet he sent in 2016, the opening of a court case to close down the HDP, and most recently, Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention have negated the human rights action plan and displayed the stark contrast between the government's discourse and its practice. On the economic front, the removal of the third Central Bank governor since mid-2019 after only four months in office has shown the futility of any expectations regarding meaningful economic reform. Political calculations and power struggles between rival party alliances seem to dominate the political agenda in Turkey, diminishing in turn the government's will and ability to engage in genuine political and economic reform as well as a meaningful reset of relations with the EU. We argue below that although there are potential grounds for a revitalization of Turkey's relations with the EU, future cooperation would be baseless and hollow without a firm EU commitment to Turkey's return to democracy, rules-based multilateralism, its adaptation to the Green Deal together with the ratification of the Paris Agreement, and a related rethinking of the relationship in view of the changing transatlantic context.

## Turkish Foreign Policy in the Changing Transatlantic Context

With the Biden administration in power in the United States, we are currently witnessing the beginning of a new era in governance aiming at "overcoming the problem of severe polarization at home" and "enhancing the American leadership abroad." On the foreign policy front, a multilateral United States promoting the revitalization of the transatlantic alliance with a strong emphasis on international democracy is emerging. This shift away from the populist and unilateral Trump presidency takes into account how the processes of democratic backsliding and the weakening of institutions to leverage leaders' power constitute a serious risk for national security at home and abroad.

There is a pressing need to locate the discussion on Turkey-EU relations and Turkey's changing orientation in the Eastern Mediterranean within this shift in the transatlantic context. Ankara is well aware that its foreign policy choices and rhetoric in the last five years are no longer tenable. This policy, which has come to be known as "strategic autonomy," was initiated by Turkey to assert itself as a strong, independent nation-state against a weak EU and Western anchor that could operate by separating, as much as possible, security abroad and democratic backsliding at home. Ankara was able to manage to enact this to some extent, mainly because of the declining leverage of the United States and the EU both regionally and globally. With its flexible alliance with Russia and the help of the leader-to-leader relations between Trump and Erdoğan, Ankara benefited from the near absence of the United States and the EU in its wider region and concomitantly exerted its influence in the MENA region, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Caucasus. However, Ankara is now realizing that strategic autonomy is no longer possible, and that it will ultimately be confronted by the Biden administration's assertive push for multilateralism and reaffirming the transatlantic alliance. Ankara faces a strategic decision to "reset its foreign policy" and explore ways to adapt to the new era of assertive, democratic multilateralism. Turkey-EU relations are not immune to this process. On the contrary, the more assertive, democratic multilateralism shapes global and regional politics, the less space there will be for strategic autonomy and transactionalism without democracy, which will in turn lead a mounting challenge to Ankara's ability and capacity to continue its unilateral, security and hard power-based operations without rules and democracy at home. This also means that rather than insisting on a positive agenda that replicates the usual transaction-based relationship with the EU, we need a new framework for the revitalization of Turkey-EU relations that combines multilateralism with democracy and thus takes into account this changing global context.

The recent political developments in Turkey suggest that during this adjustment process to the changing context, Turkey's leadership will focus more on the area of foreign and security policy and soften its narratives and actions in this field,

particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Turkish government hopes that such moves would create a more conducive environment for the positive agenda, which is on the table in the upcoming March Summit. While the change of narratives and the retreat from militarized/unilateral foreign and security policy are necessary, they are not sufficient to revitalize Turkey's relations with the EU or the West in general in the changing transatlantic context. The EU in recent years has focused on sustaining interest-driven transactional relations with Turkey, centering on migration, the economy, and foreign and security policy. However, a sustainable positive agenda needs to include not only interest-driven issues but also rules-based relations and societal dimensions that take into account the resilience of the country and the multiplicity of political actors beyond the government. The EU's failure to engage with Turkey and dissociate itself from democratic backsliding in the country exacerbates Turkey's drift toward authoritarianism and its decoupling from the West in terms of values and institutions.

### What needs to be done?

The grim circumstances on the domestic front do not change the fact that there is still an urgent need to revitalize Turkey-EU relations in anticipation of the post-COVID-19 era and the twin challenges of the EU internal market: the Green Deal and the digital agenda. Any discussion on the future of Turkey-EU relations should also encompass these areas and remove relations from the vicious circle of mistrust, divergence, and contestation in order to shed new light on a renewed agenda for engagement and cooperation.

While membership is not in the cards for the foreseeable future, the need for closer cooperation and dialogue between the EU and Turkey is also apparent in areas such as migration, trade, production, energy, climate, security, and defense. The EU should indeed encourage Turkey's commitment to further dialogue and engagement in the form of the positive agenda, the content of which can be further refined and elaborated. The constituents of the positive agenda framework are expected to be similar to the components of the positive agenda

proposed to Turkey in the October EU summit, provided that the moratorium and hence stability in the Eastern Mediterranean continue as well as the dialogue between Greece and Turkey. The components of this “cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship” are expected to include the modernization of the Customs Union and trade facilitation, people-to-people contacts, high-level dialogues, and continued cooperation on migration issues in line with the 2016 Turkey-EU Statement.

These are all meaningful components of an important transactional relationship, which would also be welcomed by Turkey. However, cooperation in these areas would be baseless and hollow—and the EU’s leverage in changing the direction of Turkish foreign policy minimal—without a firm EU commitment to Turkey’s return to democracy. Unfortunately, as observed in the presidency conclusions of the last two EU summits, the EU seems to regard Turkey only as a foreign policy matter with which a solely interest-based transactional relationship should be sought. While the rapid deterioration of Turkish domestic governance may appear to EU policy makers as Turkey’s domestic troubles with democracy, the truth of the matter is that these troubles further weaken Turkey’s ties with the West, regardless of the country’s recent foreign policy overtures in the Eastern Mediterranean. History shows us that a mutually beneficial relationship between the two sides is only possible when there are stronger relations between the two parties. Such relations in the past have facilitated Turkey’s track to democracy, a better functioning economy, and stability. A democratically resilient, well-governed Turkey that acts to further European values in and around its region would be an asset for security and stability in the European continent and a panacea for the resolution of conflicts and security threats. However, strengthening and revitalizing Turkey-EU relations within the framework of a positive agenda must go beyond the EU’s perceived interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and be firmly based in democracy and fundamental rights: Only then should the agenda include concerted action and engagement in a number of priority areas.

One area would be the modernization of bilateral trade and the economic relationship through the upgrading of the Customs Union, which should

be expanded to include services, agriculture, and public procurement as well as the digital agenda. As iterated in our previous paper, Customs Union modernization has the potential to rekindle a rules-based approach to the relationship and restart a process of harmonization with the EU *acquis* in Turkey. First and foremost, it would require a functioning rules-based regime in the economic sphere. Although there is a low probability of this transformation gradually crossing over into the political domain, a reformed Customs Union is expected to deeply transform Turkey’s political economy in key sectors such as services, procurement, state aid, and trade dispute settlement. Such a change is also anticipated to bring transparency, competitiveness, and respect for universal law, at least regarding economic transactions.

Another area concerns visa liberalization based on Turkey’s fulfillment of the remaining criteria. The issue of visa liberalization is critical from a societal perspective as it promotes people-to-people contacts and sustains the support of civil society groups, young people, and women in Turkey for the European project. The renewal of the “refugee deal” is also necessary, and both Turkey and the EU are willing to update this agreement. As the EU governments could not agree on relocation, Turkey’s burden has increased as the number of refugees in Turkey rose from 2.5 million to almost 4 million. There is a need for more support for education, vocational training, and integration in addition to humanitarian assistance. However, for the deal to provide a sustainable solution, a joint effort, including from the United States, is needed to improve the humanitarian conditions and stability inside Syria. This issue should also feature prominently in the negotiations on a revised and improved agreement. A revised deal also needs to be brought closer to international law and universal values. The EU should not stop legal migration. Furthermore, when it stops refugees at its borders, it should not violate international conventions and values or pursue inhumane and illegal push-back policies. Turkey should also not instrumentalize the agreement as leverage in resolving its bilateral conflicts with the EU.

A third area where cooperation is essential concerns facilitating Turkey’s adaptation to the Green

Deal by integrating the country further into EU programs and engaging in consultation and coordination.<sup>1</sup> By excluding countries like Turkey, the EU cannot deepen the substantial digital and technological disparity between developed and developing countries. The extension of the Green Deal to the Mediterranean could foster a more inclusive multilateral framework in the region, similar to the EU's orientation toward the Western Balkans. Such a move could help de-escalate tensions prevalent in the energy field and contribute to a more cooperative and inclusive regional framework.

Finally, the EU should support the resolution of the Cyprus issue by asserting the need for an equitable, just, and sustainable order on the island. With its "observer" status, the EU should adopt a constructive approach in the 5+1 talks on Cyprus that will take place at the end of April within the auspices of the UN. One of the main reasons behind Turkey's (and Turkish Cypriots') proposal for a two-state solution is the intransigence of Greek Cypriots to recognize the political equality of Turkish Cypriots. The EU should not contribute to this stance by refusing to recognize Turkish Cypriots' role in the settlement process. Alongside the UN, the EU, the United States, and all other relevant actors should try to bring Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots into discussions on the issue of hydrocarbons before the start of negotiations on the Cyprus issue. In this context, it is also relevant to bring Turkey into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to contribute to decreasing tensions in the region. The proposed multilateral Eastern Mediterranean Conference should also be convened without any delay. This necessitates dropping the condition of a unanimous agreement on the participation, scope, and timeline.

All four areas are meaningful venues of cooperation that could also assist Turkey in remaining on the track toward democracy and multilateral governance, provided that it chooses to move in that direction. As long as the EU reduces cooperation with Turkey solely to the latter's actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and builds a cooperative agenda by decoupling democracy from foreign policy, it should expect little in the way of sustainable cooperation with Turkey.

## Endnotes

- 1 | Senem Aydın Düzgit, Nilgün Arısan Eralp, Atila Eralp, Esra Durceylan Kaygusuz, Fuat Keyman, Çiğdem Nas, Bengisu Özenç, and Güven Sak, "Türkiye "Yeşil Dönüşüm"e Uyumda Geç Kalmamalı,"TEPAV, March 2021, [https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2021/degerlendirme\\_notu/turkiye\\_yesil\\_donusume\\_uyumda\\_gec\\_kalmamali.pdf](https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2021/degerlendirme_notu/turkiye_yesil_donusume_uyumda_gec_kalmamali.pdf).

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