

EU-TURKEY RELATIONS IN LIGHT OF HUNGARY'S EU PRESIDENCY

László Szerencsés

Executive Summary

As Hungary assumed the Presidency of the Council of the European Union this month, Budapest's friendly relations with Ankara may provide renewed opportunities to advance EU-Turkey relations. Within the bloc, Hungary supports the integration of countries critical of the West, such as Turkey. At the same time, Turkey, whose accession talks the EU suspended in 2018, will use this opportunity to keep itself on the EU's agenda via Hungary. Hungary will try to achieve progress on files important for Turkey, such as upgrading the Customs Union and taking steps towards visa liberalization. However, Turkey's lack of progress with accession criteria and Hungary's pariah status in the EU due to its controversial stances on the Russia-Ukraine war and rule of law issues limit the chances of any success. This analysis, based on interviews with diplomats in Turkey and Hungary, argues that while Hungary's EU Presidency may help keep Turkey on the agenda in Brussels, it may fall short of facilitating strategic files.



Introduction

Hungary assumed its six-month Presidency of the Council of the European Union on July 1, 2024. If not interrupted by a total boycott of other EU member states,¹ which we will discuss later, the presidency promises to be politically active. During this period, EU candidate countries such as Turkey expect Budapest to facilitate progress on their files.² As a head start, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán initiated a round of meetings with leaders who, in his view, can contribute to making peace in the Russia-Ukraine war. As part of his "peace diplomacy" tour, he visited Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv, Vladimir Putin in Moscow, and Xi Jinping in Beijing. Not surprisingly, Turkey was the first NATO member on his shuttle diplomacy list. Orbán met President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Washington, DC, on July 9, where he praised Turkey for being the only country able to mediate both the Russian and Ukrainian sides. Here, they also discussed Turkey's EU accession process.

Hungary's EU Presidency comes at a time when the Western-dominated, rules-based international order has been shaken by the Russia-Ukraine war. The chaos ensued by the war divides the EU, and Hungary is spearheading this fragmentation. Hungary, a semi-authoritarian post-socialist country governed by the right-wing Fidesz since 2010, is propagating the idea that the EU should leave more sovereignty in the hands of member states, for which it needs allies. It supports the EU integration of autocrats such as Serbia and Turkey, who are both EU candidate countries but are expected to push for more autonomy at the country level if they ever become members. At the same time, Turkey's relationship with the EU has been transactional since the mid-2010s. The EU undid its values-based conditional framework

in 2018 by suspending accession negotiations with Turkey due to human rights and rule of law violations. Based on this, Turkey's incumbent, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), bets on using Hungary's EU Presidency to pursue its own interests, such as the modernization of the Customs Union and visa liberalization, in the EU.

This analysis argues that Hungary's EU Presidency may help keep Turkey on the agenda in Brussels, but it may fall short of facilitating strategic files. Hungary will try to achieve progress on files important for Turkey, such as upgrading the Customs Union and taking steps toward visa liberalization. However, Turkey's lack of progress with accession criteria and Hungary's pariah status in the EU due to its controversial stances on the Russia-Ukraine war and rule of law issues limit the chances of any success.

The Current State of Turkey-EU Relations

Turkey institutionalized its relationship with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1963 and applied for membership in 1987. Ankara's signing of the Customs Union in 1995 and gaining candidate status in 1999 made EU membership a tangible possibility. In the 2000s, under the rule of then Prime Minister Erdoğan's AKP, Turkey was mostly cooperative and implemented several reforms to meet the Copenhagen Criteria. These reforms require a functioning democracy, a market economy, and the candidate's capability to take on the obligations that membership compels.³ However, Turkey's cooperative behavior with the EU eroded in the 2010s as its ruling regime took an authoritarian and anti-Western turn. The situation deteriorated especially after the 2013 Gezi protests,⁴ a serious opposition movement that



the police crushed with the heavy use of force, injuring thousands and killing eight people. The rules-based, enlargement-oriented relationship, including the opening of EU accession chapters,⁵ came to a standstill after the 2016 coup attempt when a group of army officers, widely assumed to be members of the Gülen movement, attempted to overthrow the AKP government. The generally Turkey-skeptic public in the EU expressed even stronger hostility against Turkey joining the EU after the coup attempt.⁶ According to a survey conducted in 2016, 86% in Germany; 83% in Finland; 82% in Denmark; 74% in France; and 73% in Sweden were against Turkey's accession to the EU.⁷

Due to the acceleration of democratic backsliding after the coup attempt, especially “on the rule of law and on fundamental rights, including the freedom of expression,” the EU froze enlargement negotiations with Turkey in 2018.⁸ This, coupled with the anti-Western realignment of Turkey's ruling elites after the coup attempt, sparked the determination to conduct a foreign policy independent of Ankara's Western allies.⁹ This coincided with the introduction of the presidential system in Turkey, which institutionalized ad-hoc, single-handed decision-making and further marginalized the mostly pro-EU foreign affairs bureaucracy.¹⁰ The new system downgraded the Ministry of EU Affairs to the General Directorate for EU Affairs inside the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA EU DG). Although the MFA can still express criticism to the presidency regarding foreign policy decisions, these diplomats have mostly been neglected by the president's advisory council.¹¹

With these changes, the rules-based conditionality framework provided by the Copenhagen Criteria lost most of its relevance. Since the 2015/16 migration crisis, EU-Turkey relations have been transactional, lacking strong “institutional, ideational

and long-term strategic infrastructure.”¹² While cooperation with the EU happens occasionally, such as on migration, the lack of an institutional framework makes the relationship unpredictable.¹³ A quote from an active diplomat from the MFA EU DG, who did not share pro-government opinions, demonstrates the changing judgement of the EU in Turkey's state administration:

What I can say is that we have lost our faith. Since the 2016 coup attempt, the EU has harshly criticized Turkey for its political situation. In general, the momentum should have been kept from earlier. You cannot keep it forever. But it is not only Turkey that has changed. The international context also changed a lot. There is geopolitical competition, alliances are dissolving, nationalist tendencies are growing, increasing protectionism, people are questioning multilateral institutions, and the Global South is growing. Due to all this, the EU lost part of its attractiveness. It is not that Turkey has an alternative: no, there is no alternative to EU membership. However, the EU is not the same as it was. Turkey has leverage and can exploit opportunities through transactional deals, which was not the case before.¹⁴

On the one hand, due to the authoritarian turn in Turkey's politics and the EU's unwillingness to give a credible membership perspective to Ankara, Brussels' normative leverage decreased over Turkey.¹⁵ Since the EU has little to offer beyond membership, it lost its ability to condition Turkey on rule-of-law issues and its alignment with the EU's foreign policy. Beyond this, the EU's ability to reach a consensus on core political issues has been challenged by populist right-wing governments, while the refugee crisis and its restraint to constrain Israel during the Gaza war deteriorated its reputation as a values-based community. Thus,



by now, not only Turkey's ruling regime but even pro-EU bureaucrats in Turkey are critiquing the EU.

On the other hand, Turkey's potential to disrupt the politics of NATO and the EU has increased. It became an authoritarian middle power that can take a confrontational stance and justify this by citing its national interests and security concerns,¹⁶ as it did when postponing Sweden's NATO accession. Instead of pursuing EU integration, Turkey is courting non-Western regional organizations, such as the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Organization of Turkic States.¹⁷ Thus, in the EU, Turkey relies on anti-Western actors such as Hungary to pursue its own interests. Hungary is willing to join Turkey's initiatives as a like-minded nationalist actor, partially disrupting the Euro-Atlantic alliance's coherence and elevating Ankara's status.

Hungary: The Voice of Turkey in Brussels

While Turkey's accession process has been stalled since 2018, Hungary has supported Turkey on many themes in Brussels since the 2016 coup attempt. Budapest's behavior toward Turkey fits into a larger trend in Budapest's foreign policy. Orbán's government has encouraged the EU to forge close relations with and tone down criticism of leaders who have an anti-Western outlook. While not exhaustive, this list includes Aleksandar Vučić from Serbia, Milorad Dodik from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Erdoğan from Turkey.¹⁸

Hungary's support for Turkey in the EU must also be read in the context of the intensifying bilateral relations between Budapest and Ankara since 2013. Orbán and Erdoğan have elevated Hungary-Turkey relations to an unprecedentedly high level between 2013 and 2024.¹⁹ The significance of this relationship is demonstrated by the 20 bilateral meetings between Orbán and Erdoğan in this period, 17 of which occurred after Turkey's 2016 coup attempt. This was the period when both countries became isolated in the Western alliance system, Turkey because of the harsh crackdown after the 2016 coup attempt and Hungary due to its controversial stance on migration and rule of law issues.²⁰ In 2017, Orbán stated in Ankara that despite many EU countries uttering anti-Turkey statements, Hungary would never join those. He added that this is because Turkey is guarding the EU's external borders from immigration.²¹

Putting this policy in practice, in 2019, when the EU wanted to warn the Turkish government about the consequences of Operation Peace Spring, a cross-border military operation in Syria, Hungary vetoed the text,²² arguing that the operation was aimed at creating a safe zone for the return of refugees from Turkey to Syria.²³ At bilateral meetings, Erdoğan publicly expressed his gratitude for Hungary's solidarity at the October 14, 2019 Turkic Council Summit in Baku²⁴ and at his visit to Budapest on November 7 the same year.²⁵ Beyond this, at official meetings, Orbán often praises Turkey for its efforts to halt migration to the EU. Yet, in background discussions, Hungarian diplomats lamented that Turkey's chances of joining the bloc only became lower in the past years because it has only diverged further from the Copenhagen criteria.²⁶



Hungary's Role in Facilitating Turkey-EU Relations during Hungary's EU Presidency

During Hungary's EU Presidency between July and December 2024, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade expects to facilitate Turkey's EU integration.²⁷ This was requested by Turkey,²⁸ and it is included in the official presidency priorities.²⁹ Although the EU Presidency does not provide enough leverage to restart this process, it can bring Turkey back on the agenda.

One of the most important fields is visa liberalization for Turkey. Hungarian diplomats know that while Turkey does not adhere to the accession criteria, progress cannot be achieved on visa liberalization. Hungary is eager to be the quickest among all EU members to issue visas for Turkish citizens. According to an interview with a diplomat in Budapest, there is a political directive expressed by Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó that if a Turkish businessman wants to do business in Hungary, there is no EU member state that issues a visa quicker than Hungary's representations in Turkey.³⁰ Demonstrating the political significance of Turkey to Hungary, this request has even led to conflicts among diplomats in Hungary's foreign affairs bureaucracy. While leading diplomats are interested in implementing the minister's request at almost any price, the consuls' task is to adhere to the laws, which often means issuing visas slower than the political leadership would expect. High-level diplomats proudly shared that issuing visas usually takes only a week. For this, Turkish partners have expressed their gratitude at multi-lateral meetings, reportedly in front of other EU member states' representatives.³¹

On the diplomatic front, the Hungarian EU Presidency plans to facilitate interactions between

high-level Turkish and EU politicians. As its first suggestion, the Hungarian Presidency is working on inviting Turkey's Foreign Minister to the Informal Foreign Affairs Council (Gymnich), which Ankara has not participated in since 2019. In addition, Hungary aims to gather the Turkey-EU Association Council, another platform where EU and Turkish decision-makers can exchange ideas, which has not been assembled since 2019. According to a Hungarian diplomat, this can be done by the European External Action Service, and the Hungarian EU Presidency will exert political pressure on the institution to take steps toward organizing the meeting.³²

Another important Turkish talking point is the modernization of the Customs Union between Turkey and the EU. Although Hungary alone cannot put it on the agenda of the European Council, as the Presidency, it plans to ask the European Commission to report to the member states on the current developments regarding the Customs Union. These are symbolic steps, according to Hungarian diplomats, but they can make Western European leaders in the EU understand Turkey more than simply excluding Ankara from discussions.³³

The political will is strong in Hungary to support Turkey's cause. Keeping Turkey close to the EU is in the interest of the Hungarian government due to migration and energy security. First, Turkey is the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, with 3.4 million people seeking protection there.³⁴ According to a 2016 deal between the EU and Turkey, Ankara receives financial assistance for not allowing refugees to travel further toward the EU. Since one of Orbán's main domestic political themes is halting migration, he argues that keeping Turkey close via favors stops further migration flows into Europe.³⁵ Second, Hungary is an observer in the Organization of Turkic States and holds its only European representation office.



From this, Budapest and Ankara expect increased energy cooperation and trade through Turkey.³⁶

Nevertheless, capitalizing on Hungary's support is not the best insurance in Ankara. Although the incumbent in Budapest will do everything to advance Turkey's progress on the files important to Turkey, what the increasingly isolated Hungary can achieve in Brussels is very much limited. As it currently stands, Orbán's newly created Patriots for Europe in the European Parliament (EP) will be the third largest group. Still, the centrist parties have blocked its aspirations for leading positions in the EP. In addition, Hungary is still fighting for around EUR 20 billion of EU funds that the Commission froze because of rule of law irregularities.³⁷ Further, Orbán's shuttle diplomacy with Putin and Xi Jinping has angered allies in the EU, which has led the Commission and member states to boycott Hungary's Presidency by sending lower-level bureaucrats to meetings in Budapest instead of ministers and commissioners.³⁸ Under these conditions, it would be surprising if Budapest could achieve any progress on strategic files, including enlargement.

Conclusion

Hungary and Turkey are both isolated in the Western alliance system. Thus, they cooperate to extract benefits when their interests do not collide, which is not different in the case of EU-Turkey relations. Since the reputation of both capitals in Brussels has already eroded, it comes at no cost for the incumbents to cooperate on specific themes. On the one hand, if Hungary can increase Turkey's visibility via its EU Presidency, this will be considered a huge success. On the other, if it fails, it will not damage Turkey's progress because it has already reached a point of no return. Additionally, Hungary's Prime Minister Orbán expects

to magnify his own influence by supporting Turkey. By doing so, he postures as the link between the world of anti-Western, non-EU member autocrats and the EU. Although the benefits of this strategy for Hungary remain to be seen, it elevates Orbán's role as an influential dealmaker in international politics.

Looking at the broader picture, Hungary's support for Turkey should be read according to the not yet precisely defined but palpable visions of Orbán and Erdoğan in foreign policy. Turkey and Hungary opt for a post-Western world order in which EU and the US influence fade. Hungary's reluctance to align its foreign policy with the EU goes much beyond its relations with Turkey, with Orbán's soft hand on Russia and China and his open support to Donald Trump in the US presidential race. Due to Turkey's size, Erdoğan's position is more balanced. Turkey can, to a certain extent, mediate and extract transactional benefits in international relations; however, it is certainly not the rule-abiding ally of the United States and the European Union as it once was. Instead, it pursues strategic autonomy, a foreign policy independent of the West. Orbán and Erdoğan may expect that in the near future, instead of a global hegemon or big powers like the United States and the European Union policing rogue allies, everyone would be left to pursue their own interests. This would entail that the rule of law issues for which Turkey and Hungary are now under scrutiny would be less of a problem because there would be no one to enforce these principles on others. Turkey is a middle power with the potential to police its immediate surroundings with military force near Hungary. Thus, from the incumbent's perspective in Budapest, keeping Turkey close can bring benefits. At the same time, for Turkey, keeping Hungary close as an EU member shaping pro-Turkey foreign policy from the inside is beneficial. Nevertheless, these are long-shot bets with many variables, and it is unclear whether this new order will bring more peace amid the chaos it already entails. Thus, it is also uncertain whether such a vision will be realized at all.



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The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/ German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

László Szerencsés is a 2023/24 Mercator-IPC Fellow.

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Istanbul Policy Center

Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 4
34420 Karaköy-Istanbul
T +90 212 292 49 39
ipc@sabanciuniv.edu - ipc.sabanciuniv.edu



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ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER

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