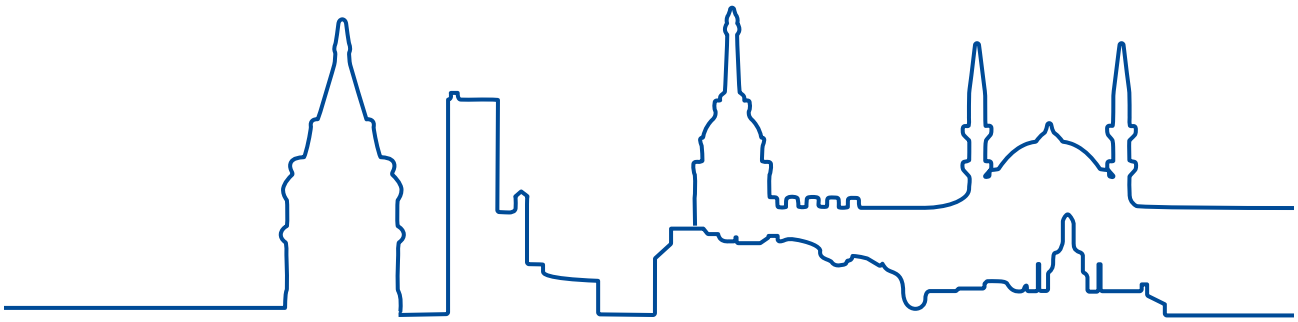


**IPC–MERCATOR POLICY BRIEF** April 2020

# NARRATIVES MATTER: IN SEARCH OF A PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY

**Wolfgang Wessels**

## Executive Summary

Relations between Turkey and the European Union (EU) are dramatically shifting: many controversial issues are on the agendas of Ankara and Brussels as well as the main players in the EU like Berlin. Following the changing of the guards in Brussels in 2019, this policy brief pursues a triple "A" approach to the EU's narratives on Turkey: it analyzes and assesses the narratives of the Union's political leaders, who as members of the European Council—which is composed of the Heads of State or Government, the President of the European Commission, and the European Council itself—formulate the Council's conclusions. Based on these reflections it will propose some advice for action. This policy brief finds that these statements over the last three decades frame the mental and conceptual maps of EU-Turkey relations. They not only offer opportunities to change EU-Turkey relations but also increasingly constrain the activities of the Union's institutions, e.g., by blocking plans for upgrading the Customs Union. My analysis shows a move from the 1990s until 2020, from understanding Turkey as a candidate country—perhaps with some specific characteristics due to its size—to Turkey as a de facto partner country, as documented in the spring 2016 statement, and, finally, Turkey as a problematic neighbor with a rising number of conflicts. As to be expected in a pluralistic system, there is no single, unrivalled, master narrative: we observe the coexistence of different mental maps of a moving target. In support of policy action and academic activities between Turkey and the EU, this policy brief advises to keep the debate open and not to let the narrative over the last three years dominate the discussion on EU-Turkey relations. We need to stabilize and reinforce bridges through a cooperative partnership, as Chancellor Merkel stated in early 2020.[1] The main task is to design and frame a narrative that identifies the necessary instruments for joint problem solving, formal and informal cooperation, and adequate procedures to agree on a resilient institutional set up.

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## Narratives Matter More Than Ever in Times of Change

In order to analyze the long history of EU-Turkey relations, it is useful to evaluate changes in the relevant political constellations in the EU. In 2019 after the European Parliament elections, new leaders were elected as the heads of the EU's institutions: a new president of the European Commission, a new President of the European Council, and a new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. All will have a strong say in the Union's external action vis-à-vis Turkey. Furthermore, to frame and shape the agenda for the next five years, the political leaders in the European Council agreed in June 2019 on a "new strategic agenda 2019–2024,"[2] and the Commission President presented her political guidelines.[3] Though Turkey is not directly mentioned, this statement will affect the EU-Turkey relationship. Thus, formulations like, "promoting European interests and values on the global stage" with more "geopolitical" thinking as well as "protecting our European way of life" through "upholding the rule of law,"[4] will have an impact on framing EU-Turkey relations—even though concrete challenges, like migration waves, might overshadow these generic statements.

To put current issues in the relevant political context, it is important to analyze and assess the fundamental (master-)narratives that have shaped the Union's debates on and perceptions of its relations with Turkey over the last three decades. For an adequate analysis and assessment of the EU's political actions in future, we need to identify mindsets as mental maps that use past interpretations of certain historical events as explanations for the unsatisfactory state of present-day political affairs. From these mental maps actors then propose strategies to get to the desired future in one's relationship. In this sense narratives are based on a certain version of the Union's collective memory that in one way or another has an impact on the way concrete policies are made and pursued. The design of the Union's narratives includes several dimensions of constructing one's own identity—often in contrast to those of the "other." Visions and missions are presented as messages both to keep the in-group together as well as to give signals to outside actors. A main function of narrative is to legitimize current policy activities and actions, e.g., in dealing with neighbors and partners.

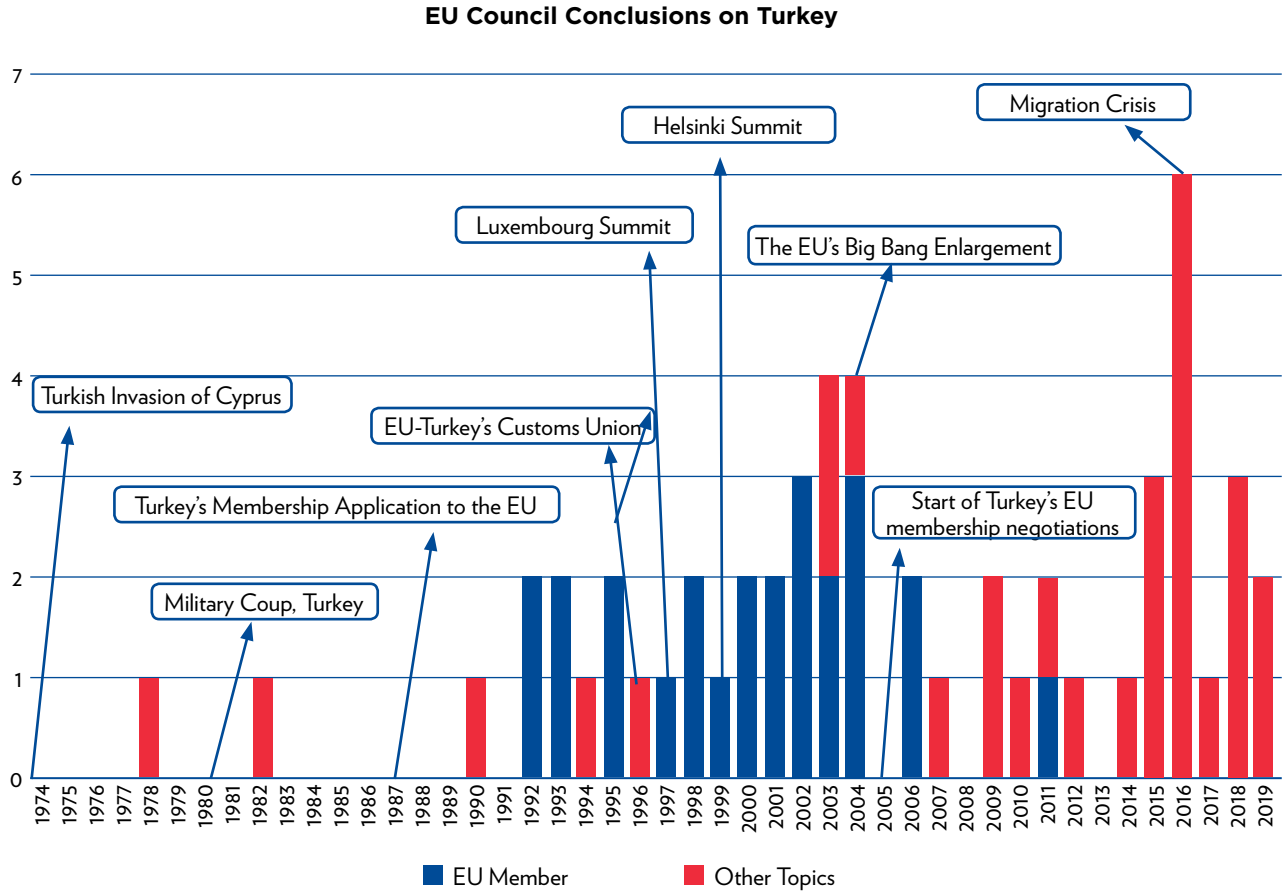
In pluralistic societies like the Union, debates on vital issues show a large degree of variation; rare are "master" narratives that dominate discourses and determine the course of action. While the narratives surrounding the Lisbon Treaty that portray the EU as a community of values[5] legitimize the Union's external action,[6] they are also open to manifold interpretations and controversial debates.

Framing the Union's narratives, the official conclusions of the European Council are highly relevant as they are the results of careful preparation over several administrative and political levels aiming to reach a consensus among the political leaders of 27 member states. They not only directly or indirectly document certain fundamental features in mapping the perceptions of bilateral relations but also have a strong impact on the way policies are prepared, decided upon, implemented, and controlled by EU institutions. The European Council's statements do not represent public opinion and all its variations. They are products of a political process, which explains why they apparently overlook—on purpose or without further reflection—certain issues and ignore some taboos.

Analyzing over 50 conclusions of the European Council, this policy paper examines competing narratives. One master narrative stresses Turkey's Europeanization process leading up to its status as a candidate state. A second master narrative focuses on a factual and rules-based cooperation in a few key policy fields, namely migration and terrorism. A third master narrative points at the growing divergences especially related to the community of values and geopolitical interests, such as the conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria. In June 2019, the European Council adopted the narrative formulation of the General Affairs Council, claiming, "Turkey has been moving further away from the European Union."[7]

Given these developments, this policy brief advises all actors to maintain an open debate on several scenarios and options for Turkey's EU relations and not to let the narratives of past years dominant the discussion on EU-Turkey relations. In academia, we need to look for cooperation based on a collegial partnership.

## Analysis and Assessment: Shifting between Competing Narratives




Source: compiled by CETEUS, based on the conclusions of the European Council, online available: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/conclusions/ (accessed: February 4, 2020).

Over the past four and a half decades, the European Council has formulated positions on Turkey through over 50 conclusions (Figure 1). According to these documents, Turkey has only been a regular issue on the leaders' agenda since the 1990s, appearing frequently in 2004 (opening of membership negotiations) and 2016 (related to migration issues). In the Cold War period Turkey was seen as a reliable ally in NATO as well as a country with a specific association status in the EU. With the exception of the military coup in 1980, the Heads of State or Government apparently did not see a major reason to discuss Turkey in the European Council throughout this decade.

After the end of the bipolar world, the European Council needed to shape a new Europe by widening its membership and deepening the European Union's architecture; in this context the EU's relations with Turkey and its role in this new geopolitical context was and remains an issue of high political relevance for the EU's political leaders.

Looking at the statements from the early 1980s to 2020, we find some recurrent formulations and, at the same time, many changes in the European Council's narratives on Turkey.

## *The Normative Narrative: Human Rights, Rule of Law, Fundamental Freedoms and the Independence of the Judiciary*

From 1982—two years after the military coup—until the failed military coup in 2016, a major concern of several generations of the Union's political leaders was and is respect for human rights, rule of law, fundamental freedoms, and the independence of the judiciary in Turkey. In all statements on the EU's progress toward opening the accession negotiations for Turkey, the Heads of State or Government demanded the implementation of the EU's political norms as a condition for starting and pursuing membership negotiations.

These declarations portray the EU's (master-)narrative: namely, that the Union is more than an economic organization with a single market and currency but a community of values[8] and "normative power" that "seeks to advance [its value] in the wider world"[9] and "its regional neighbourhood."[10] The relevant treaty articles signal both a vision and a mission for the EU's role in the international system. In cases of the Union's external action in which concrete interests are concerned—e.g., security of energy supply—these claims for normative guidance are less prevalent than in the joint EU-Turkey statements on migration issues.

Also, since 2004 the European Council has occasionally raised its political criteria as an issue in its relations with Turkey. Turkey's respect for the Union's values is regarded as a precondition for any further formal development in relations, including modernizing the Customs Union, which should be "rules-based."

## *The Membership Narrative: Toward Being a Special Candidate Country*

Though high on the agenda of Turkish leaders, the European Council did not formulate any position on Turkey's demand for membership until the late 1990s. The Heads of State or Government, for example, did not pass any statement on Turkey's first application in 1987/89. In a few cases in the early 1990s, it referred to Turkey as an "associated state." After the end of the Cold War, with Central and Eastern European claims for membership as well as Turkey's changing geopolitical position vis-à-vis the Balkan wars, the European Council tried to find ways to deal with Turkey's new geopolitical role in the EU's neighborhood coupled with its demand for membership.

In a general statement in June 1992, the European Council "underlines that the Turkish role in the political situation in Europe is of greatest importance and that there is every reason to intensify cooperation and develop relations with Turkey in line with the prospect laid down in the Association agreement of 1964 including a political dialogue at the highest level." When setting the Copenhagen criteria for future members in 1993, EU leaders only referred to Turkey when discussing the "establishment of a customs union."

In Luxembourg in 1997 the European Council "confirms Turkey's eligibility for accession to the European Union," although "the political and economic conditions allowing accession negotiations [...] are not satisfied."

The Helsinki conclusion in 1999 defined Turkey as "a candidate State destined to join the Union on the basis of the same criteria as applied to other candidate States." The milestone decision in 2004 to start the negotiation process for membership stressed that Turkey should be treated like other candidate states, but the EU's more specific statement on "the framework for negotiations" put forward some new conditions and considerations that seemed to directly address the challenges of Turkish membership. The European Council opened the way to considering some "permanent safeguard measures," e.g., for the freedom of movement of persons, structural policies, or agriculture. For the first time, the European Council also included an exit clause in the mandate for negotiations:

> the shared objective of the negotiations is accession. These negotiations are an *open-ended process*, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand. While taking into account of all Copenhagen criteria, if the candidate State is not in a position to assume in full all obligations of membership it must be ensured that the candidate State concerned

*is fully anchored in the European structures through the strongest possible bond*.[11]

Thus, three narratives concerning Turkey's membership are explicitly or implicitly evoked:

- Turkey belongs to the group of eligible countries under Article 49 of the TEU: "any European State, which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promote them may apply to become a member of the Union." Therefore, the European vocation for Turkey cannot be questioned.
- Turkey, due to "objective factors" including its size, is a special case for which the EU might need to find permanent opt-outs for the core elements of the EU *acquis*, e.g., free movement of persons.
- For Turkey the EU might pursue a different option—namely, instead of full membership, a new upgraded form of relations often called by EU actors as a "privileged partnership."

Over the last three years the European Council has made no statement concerning Turkey's accession negotiations.

## *An Underdeveloped Economic Narrative: The Customs Union and Its Upgrading*

Few conclusions deal with economic relations. Those that do in some way relate to the creation of the Customs Union and its more recent possible upgrade. The economic criteria for membership seem to be of lesser importance than the political (normative) conditions. We do not find any affirmative statement identifying Turkey as an emerging and promising economic market and partner.

This omission of the economic dimension reflects, for some members, their weak economic relations with Turkey and, for others, a fact. The economic successes and challenges since 2015 are apparently not a topic of direct concern for the EU's political leaders. Furthermore, Turkey's potential importance as an energy transit country is not mentioned.

## *Migration: An Implied Narrative of Transactional and Functional Partnership*

Of major relevance in the European Council's conclusions are the issues related to migration pressures. Since October 2009 the European Council "welcomes the beginning of the reinforced dialogue on migration with Turkey." In 2015, the migration challenge turned into an overt crisis. As in other EU crises before, the European Council was forced to take a role as crisis manager. Thus, its respective conclusions have a considerable impact.

In several conclusions we find longer and—in contrast to other points in the conclusions—more detailed statements. One major point of reference—also in 2020— is the EU-Turkey statement of 2016, which links measures for dealing with the migration challenge to other issues of cooperation, such as visa liberalization, several forms of regular high level dialogues, opening new chapters in the accession negotiations, and efforts to upgrade the Customs Union. Thus, the European Council has demanded the "implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement (of spring 2016) in all its aspects."[12]

There is one recurrent narrative behind these migration-related statements: Turkey is regarded as a key partner in dealing with a challenge of vital interest for both sides. The recurrent references to the implementation of this "joint action plan" show that Turkey's actions are carefully observed in this context. Turkey is seen from a geopolitical perspective as a shield or a buffer zone against migration waves.

This narrative would assume that functional and transactional cooperation is highly regarded as a means of promoting more joint efforts. This expectation follows the logic put forward in the Schuman declaration of 1950: by establishing a working *solidarité de fait*, both sides would create more and more trust leading to further steps toward further cooperation and even integration. However, so far in 2020, the EU-Turkey agreement in this highly important area of cooperation has not served as a driver for a deeper partnership, as the agreement has not been fully implemented. We do not observe any significant spillover from this line of

cooperation into a broader and deeper form of integration. Changes in the political context have blocked major steps in the EU and Turkey's joint action plan on migration. Among other factors, political conditionality has put a brake on constructive cooperation. Therefore, cooperation on migration has so far not been able to function as a driver for deepening relations.

## *Toward Geopolitical Narratives: Syria*

With regard to changing developments after 1989, we do not find any direct, full, and explicit statement on the change of Turkey's strategic position after the end of the Cold War. Some conclusions merely mention Turkey as an important neighbor—in a few cases in the same category with Russia and Ukraine.

This issue has become more relevant with the civil war in Syria. In 2019, we observed a changed formulation in the geopolitical narrative on Turkey to "a key partner of the European Union and a critically importing actor in the Syrian crisis and the region." The message behind these conclusions leads to the formation of a different narrative. With regard to the Turkish actions in Syria in October 2019, the European Council stated, "the EU condemns Turkey's unilateral military action in North-East Syria, which causes unacceptable human suffering, undermines the fight against Da'esh and *threatens heavily European security*."[13] The political leaders in this case did not agree upon joint concrete sanctions.

## *The Cyprus Issue: From Obstacle to Conflict*

For many European observers the case of Cyprus appears to be a minor issue for relations between the EU and Turkey. Many see it as a frozen conflict that has no strong impact on other forms of cooperation or integration. However, the European Council has given this case considerable attention, with increasingly strong statements condemning Turkey's activities in the Eastern Mediterranean.

As it was not yet created as an institution, the European Council did not make any statement on the Cyprus conflict leading to the Turkish intervention in 1974.

In view of finalizing the accession negotiations with Cyprus, in 2002 the European Council "reiterated its preference for a reunited Cyprus to join the Union. However, before reaching a solution for the island, the leaders at the Copenhagen Summit in 2002, which concluded the EU's big bang enlargement of ten countries, declared: "Cyprus will be admitted as a new Member state to the European Union."

With Cyprus as a member state, the European Council reiterated on several occasions, including June 2006, that progress in the accession process for Turkey "includes the fulfilment of Turkey's obligation under the Association agreement and under its Additional Protocol," i.e., recognition of Cyprus and opening Turkish ports to imports from Cyprus, and the "commitment to good neighbourly relations."

With reference to Turkish gas drilling, from October 2014 onward the European Council has on several occasions and with increasing alarm "expressed serious concern about the renewed tension in the Eastern Mediterranean and urged Turkey to show restraint and to respect Cyprus' sovereignty over its territorial sea" as well as "Cyprus' sovereign rights in its executive economic zone." A similar statement on "actions by Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea" was adopted in March 2018. Again, in June 2019, the European Council "reaffirm[ed] previous [...] conclusions [...] strongly condemning Turkey's continued illegal actions."

In summer and autumn 2019, EU political leaders supported a set of sanctions on Turkey that threatened to interrupt bilateral dialogues and companies and persons involved in gas drilling off Cyprus. Undiplomatic wordings of the leaders' conclusions confirm a strongly emerging narrative that claims, "Turkey has been moving further away from the European Union."[14]

## *Terms of the Relationship: Ambiguity toward Solving a Dilemma*

Analyzing and assessing these narratives, we miss the "general political directions," as outlined in Article 15(1) TEU, for a forward-looking strategy in

which the European Council could give guidance to other EU institutions. The European Council has not adopted any general political guidelines in regard to Turkey. In addition, its latest "strategy agenda 2019–2024," adopted in June 2019, did not formulate any strategy for its relation with Turkey. Thus, we do not find any promising concepts through which the European Council could propagate some kind of convincing master narrative on Turkey.

In terms of qualifying the relationship through identifying key words, we find statements characterizing Turkey as an "associate state" in the first years, then as a "candidate state."

As a reaction to the failed military coup in Turkey on July 15, 2016, the Council stated three days later, "Turkey is a candidate country and a key partner for the European Union. The EU remains committed to working together with a democratic inclusive and stable Turkey to address our common challenges."

Even though options for a "strategic" or "privileged" partnership for Turkey have been widely included in public debates, the European Council has not offered any concrete strategy for improving relations. We instead observe an ambiguous and inconclusive narrative that is part of a larger, ongoing dilemma: Turkey is regarded as an important player that should be a reliable partner but is not up to standard to become a member with equal status. Such a mindset evidently lacks a convincing and promising strategy for how relations should be framed.

This narrative is based on an implicit expectation on the EU side that such a partnership will offer more influence but no equal status. In this sense Turkey's worries are justified but are not helpful in moving toward further cooperation.

## Conclusions and Advice: In Search of a Partnership Narrative

In the last four decades of the European Council's conclusions, we can observe at least five narratives on Turkey, which are based on different readings of history and current events.

We can identify:

- A fundamental narrative that stresses the dimension of human rights linking the Union's own identity as a community of values. This political criterion could be regarded as one of the Union's master narratives, which was especially dominant in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s, and remains a deeply rooted condition for new steps.
- A narrative preparing and adopting Turkey's candidate status, though perhaps with some specific conditions, which the European Council formulated for a certain period of time as a membership narrative. However, this lost its mobilizing power.
- A narrative aimed at deepening and widening the Association Agreement, including upgrading the Customs Union. The Customs Union's impact on policy actions is still limited.
- In reaction to the wave of migration (and terrorism shocks) the leaders' conclusions frame elements for a narrative with Turkey as a key partner in tackling vital challenges.
- With the latest statements on Cyprus and Northern Syria, a turn toward a narrative that perceives Turkey as a distant and problematic neighbor.

The Union's narrative enumerating and stressing points of conflict has become more dominant over the last years. However, such a conclusion of the evidence we have observed since 2015 should not lead to apathy. In view of rapidly changing political contexts, one task of academia and civil society is to keep several narratives alive in the pub-

lic debate. The European Council's narratives are and remain relevant, but they should be properly analyzed, explained, and assessed. They are major points of reference for all debates but should not be seen as the final words framing and shaping EU-Turkey relations: We need to keep other narratives on the academic and political agenda.

From the Union's side, academia needs to frame and propose concepts for several and different forms of partnerships. Looking at the typology of formal relations with other third countries, we should reflect on forms of closer cooperation. With the soon-to-be-negotiated agreement with the UK, an additional set of options might appear on the table for Turkey. New strategies for shaping the accession procedures for Balkan countries might also offer some useful input. No treaty or agreement can, however, serve as a simple model for the EU-Turkey relationship. But the Union could develop and discuss several forms of external differentiation.

The March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement could perhaps be seen as a blueprint for constructing some workable and acceptable procedures for a strategic partnership as it has envisaged a comprehensive set of steps for an extensive cooperation and for closer consultations. As declared in June 2017, the European Council "remains committed to the full and non-discriminatory implementation (of this statement)," but the EU's disappointing follow-up to most of these commitments signals that such a loosely formulated, informal arrangement might be a victim of a changing political context.

This policy paper also puts forward advice to stabilize the existing bridges and reinforce transnational links between academia and NGOs in the EU and Turkey. We need to continue a constructive dialogue in order to design and frame a narrative that identifies the necessary instruments for joint problem solving, formal and informal forms of cooperation, and adequate procedures to agree on a resilient institutional set up. The challenges faced today are considerable: even the term "partnership" is already a source of misunderstanding. Thus, while the European Council's narratives should not be ignored, they should not block us from developing resilient and promising concepts for the future of the EU-Turkey relationship.

## Endnotes

1 | Angela Merkel, "Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel zur Einweihung des Campus der Türkisch-Deutschen Universität am 24. January 2020 in Istanbul," accessed February 4, 2020, https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-zur-einweihung-des-campus-der-tuerkisch-deutschen-universitaet-am-24-januar-2020-in-istanbul-1715732.

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4 | Ibid.

5 | Preamble, Article 2 Treaty on European Union (TEU) and Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

6 | See Article 21 TEU.

7 | Council of the European Union, "Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process," Brussels, June 26, 2018, accessed February 4, 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf.

8 | See Article 2 and 49 TEU as well as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

9 | See Article 21(1) TEU.

10 | See Article 8 TEU.

11 | Emphasis added by the author.

12 | See the June 2017 conclusion.

13 | Emphasis added by the author.

14 | Council of the European Union, "Council conclusions on enlargement."

**About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative**

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.

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The interpretations and conclusions made in this policy brief belong solely to the author and do not reflect IPC's official position.

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