

Will the EU's positive agenda on Turkey amount to anything more than wishful thinking?

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Turkey is one of the EU's most important neighbours and a crucial partner on numerous issues, including migration, counterterrorism, energy and trade. Yet relations have always been challenging, with honeymoon periods few and far between. Mutual distrust has grown since Turkey started its now frozen EU accession negotiations in 2005. Bickering and animosity have become the norm. In 2020, escalating disputes in areas from human rights to maritime claims and military interventions brought the relations to a major crisis.

Still, the EU and Turkey have a mutual strategic interest in developing a constructive, cooperative and sustainable relationship. In an effort to establish a new *modus vivendi*, the EU introduced a new positive agenda (PA) in late 2020.

One year on, it remains to be seen whether the PA will bear fruit. Ankara's domestic and foreign policy ahead of crucial elections in 2023 (or earlier), the Cyprus problem,¹ Germany's leadership change, the 2022 French presidential election and Paris taking over the EU Council Presidency will all impact relations. If the two parties are to move away from years of distrust and muddling through, they will have to acquire a truly strategic vision for the future of relations.

BACKGROUND

Never a bed of roses

Turkish history and identity are inextricably intertwined with that of Europe. Yet relations have always been characterised by cyclical ups and downs. And recently, the downs have been significantly outnumbering the ups.

Although officially an EU candidate country, Turkey's accession process has been frozen since 2018.

Membership talks were doomed from the onset in 2005, with France and Germany touting an alternative privileged partnership. The accession of a divided Cyprus in 2004 also made EU–Turkey relations more problematic. While Turkey managed to open 16 negotiating chapters and close 1,² most of the remaining 19 were blocked, mostly for political reasons by either individual member states or the European Council as a whole.

Turkey's accession negotiations were the anchor of its reform process. When it floundered, EU conditionality no longer had the same impact. The democratic and economic achievements of the early years of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) began to be reversed.

Domestic developments also fed into Turkey's democratic backtracking. In 2007, the military, already weakened by EU reforms, made it clear that it did not want the then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül to become president. Shortly afterwards, an alleged plot to overthrow the government – the 'Ergenekon case' – was uncovered. Hundreds of people, including high-ranking military figures, were accused of links to the 'deep state' and of planning to overthrow the government.³

Thereafter, Turkey's democratic reversal accelerated. It began with Ankara's response to the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Fundamental rights and freedoms were further curtailed following the 2016 failed military coup. The centralisation of power was completed in April 2017 when Turkey shifted from a parliamentary to presidential system of governance. It expanded the president's powers, curtailed the parliament's, and strengthened executive control over the civil service and judiciary.

The 'migration crisis' of 2015–16 revived EU–Turkey relations briefly. Turkey became indispensable in

preventing millions of refugees, mostly Syrian, from entering the EU with the signing of the EU–Turkey statement.⁴ The deal also included vaguely worded commitments to upgrade the Customs Union (CU), liberalise visas for Turkish citizens and re-energise the accession negotiations, although this never happened. The deal also changed how the EU and Turkey do business: short-term issues based on transactional cooperation replaced a more long-term strategic partnership.

The changing face of Turkish foreign policy

As Turkey drifted away from the EU (and, in parallel, the US), Ankara's foreign policy has become increasingly autonomous, militarised and assertive. Driven by a mix of security concerns, regional hegemon ambitions, ideology and domestic politics, its foreign policy is underpinned by a belief that the global balance of power is shifting away from the West. The idea of a new multipolar world – with a weaker US and rising China – is shaping Turkish policymakers' strategic calculus.

Foreign policy has also become an important tool to help secure Turkish President Erdoğan's political survival amid plunging support and deteriorating economic conditions.⁵ Soft power and diplomacy remain an important foreign policy tool. Turkey consistently ranks among the world's most generous foreign aid donors.⁶ Its use of hard power has also skyrocketed. This includes military interventions in Syria, northern Iraq and Libya. Expanding Turkey's defence industry, a cornerstone of Ankara's foreign policy, has also been prioritised. Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones in particular have gained popularity following their prominent role in Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in the 2020 Karabakh War.

Turkey's competitive-slash-cooperative partnership with Russia is also a concern for its Western allies. In 2017, Ankara purchased a Russian S-400 missile-defence system despite objections from its NATO colleagues. It led to the US removing Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme. Ankara also cooperates with the Kremlin on several infrastructure projects. In the absence of Western engagement, particularly Washington's retrenchment from the Middle East, the two carved out respective spheres of influence in Libya and Syria, despite being on opposing sides of the conflicts.

2020, annus horribilis

In 2020, tensions between the EU and Turkey skyrocketed over a plethora of issues. Topping the list was Ankara's exploratory drilling activities in the Cypriot and Greek Exclusive Economic Zones in the Eastern Mediterranean. With Greek and Turkish vessels colliding, a military skirmish looked possible.

France's decision to increase its military presence in the region to support Greece also led to a war of words between Presidents Macron and Erdoğan. Furthermore, the two locked horns over interpretations of Islam, with Paris recalling its ambassador from Ankara. Turkey and France have also clashed over Libya. More recently, a new Franco–Greek defence deal was described by Ankara as

a threat to regional peace and stability and an effort to isolate and alienate Turkey.⁷ Unfortunately, a new cycle of militarisation of the Aegean area has started, with both countries buying weapons – for the air and sea – on a scale not seen for decades.⁸

The EU unanimously condemns Turkey's exploration activities and violation of Cypriot and Greek territorial integrity. In February 2020, the Union imposed (largely symbolic) sanctions. Faced with a defiant Ankara, the EU27 were divided over what to do next. One faction that includes Greece, Cyprus, France and Austria demanded tougher sanctions. A second group led by Germany wanted a more cautious response – and were successful. Throughout the decades, Germany has recognised Turkey as an important strategic partner that should not be isolated. Chancellor Merkel played a crucial role in preventing a total rupture in EU–Turkey relations by initiating a Greco–Turkish dialogue and convincing EU leaders to adopt a new PA with Turkey to solve the crisis.

The PA envisages renewed engagement with Turkey in “a phased, proportionate and reversible manner” in areas of common interest, including the modernisation of the CU, visa liberalisation, people-to-people contacts and migration.⁹ However, it is conditional on Turkey de-escalating tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, normalising neighbourly relations and showing a readiness to resolve differences through dialogue.

STATE OF PLAY

Can words become deeds...

Ankara embraced this opportunity to improve ties with the EU. Turkey's economy is in dire straits: inflation reached 49% in September.¹⁰ In October, the Turkish lira hit record lows against the US dollar after Erdoğan fired senior central bank officials, heightening concerns over his interference in the bank's activities. COVID-19 has also exacerbated the economic situation. This makes economic ties with the EU more vital. The CU's modernisation is significant. Adding services, the right of establishment, public procurement and agriculture to the CU would be a major coup.

In early 2021, Turkey stopped its energy exploration activities. Turkey and Greece resumed talks from 2016 on settling bilateral disputes. Turkey also adopted a less confrontational tone towards many of its Middle Eastern neighbours, including the United Arab Emirates, Israel and Egypt. Erdoğan's narrative changed almost overnight: he suddenly wanted better relations with the EU. A prolonged crisis spiralling towards further sanctions or European investors pulling the plug would have serious implications for Ankara, particularly when its ties with the US are also sour.

Additionally, Erdoğan and Macron exchanged letters agreeing to ease tensions, while at home, the former signalled that he would take steps to improve Turkey's human rights situation. Several high-level meetings between EU and Turkish officials high-level dialogues, on issues like migration, energy and climate change,

have taken place. Most recently, in light of the growing migration crisis on the Belarus–Poland border, Turkish Airlines agreed to suspend one-way ticket sales to Minsk for citizens of countries primarily involved in migrant flows (i.e. Iraq, Syria, Yemen).

The March 2021 European Council Conclusions invited the European Commission to start talks with Turkey to address the current difficulties in implementing the CU and work on a mandate for its modernisation. In June, EU leaders agreed in principle on a new, €3.5 billion financial package for Turkey for hosting refugees and taking back migrants from Greece.¹¹ Hopes that EU leaders would signal that the negotiations to modernise the CU could start at the June European Council summit were dashed. Instead, the ball was kicked down the road.

Cyprus is a hurdle to real progress on the PA. At a UN-backed meeting in April 2021, the leaders of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities found insufficient common ground to resume negotiations for a bi-zonal, bi-communal solution. Turkey – a guarantor state alongside the UK and Greece – is calling for a two-state solution. This is unacceptable for Greek Cypriots and rejected by the UN.

Ankara's approach comes after five decades of failed talks for a bi-zonal, bi-communal solution. Although Turkey has not always been constructive, the Greek Cypriots are also to blame, particularly after joining the EU. In the run-up to the 2017 Crans-Montana talks, and in 2004 when the then President Papadopoulos called on his constituents to vote no to the UN-backed Annan Plan for reunification, the Greek Cypriots made little effort to sell a solution to the population or move away from maximalist goals. The Cyprus situation has been further exacerbated by the reopening of Varosha by Turkey and its ally, Ersin Taner, the Turkish Cypriot community leader, thereby breaching several UN resolutions.¹² The issue is due to be discussed at the General Affairs Council on 14 December.

...or will they remain empty?

There are other concerns, too. Erdoğan's promises of improving fundamental rights and freedoms remain unfulfilled. The European Commission's October 2021 report on Turkey underlines that there has been further democratic backtracking.¹³ In October, calls by 10 Western ambassadors (including France and Germany) for the release of philanthropist Osman Kavala led to Erdoğan threatening to expel them.

Furthermore, despite the talks with Athens, Turkey has not yet given up its maritime claims. Although Ankara is not a signatory of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a compromise on maritime boundaries, where both sides concede some of their claims, is possible. But compromising on any of these prickly issues is not straightforward for either party. For Turkey, it would risk upsetting its nationalist supporters and coalition ally, the Nationalist Movement Party. If a solution is not found soon, there is a risk of renewed escalation, with new gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean scheduled to restart shortly.

PROSPECTS

Turkey clearly must meet its commitments, including halting its development of Varosha. However, the EU should also be pragmatic about its short-term expectations. And the EU, too, must meet its share of commitments. The lack of a common EU policy or strategic vision on Turkey and of political will from some EU governments to take the necessary steps to improve ties risk hindering any real progress. Waiting for a change of power in Ankara is not a strategy. While elections could bring a new government that changes the dynamic in EU–Turkey ties, Erdoğan's ability to return from the brink should never be underestimated.

Germany's recent change of leadership will also impact EU–Turkey relations. The new chancellor's and coalition government's views on Turkey will be crucial. Merkel was a strong advocate of the PA. Whether her successor will also be convinced that the EU–Turkey link is too strategic to break remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, the 2022 French presidential election, coinciding with Paris taking over the EU's Council Presidency, will not be conducive to progress. In fact, it could reheat tensions between Paris and Ankara. Turkey is repeatedly used as campaign fodder in France. More broadly, ties between the two parties are likely to remain conflictual and risk perpetually spilling over into the broader EU–Turkey relations. France increasingly views Turkey as a geopolitical rival that is expanding its regional influence, especially in the Mediterranean and Africa, challenging France's sphere of power.

While Turkish membership of the EU seems highly unlikely, neither Ankara nor the Union is ready to call it quits. Popular Turkish support for EU membership remains high.¹⁴ Nonetheless, with no functioning accession process, EU–Turkey relations need a new framework that reduces the chances of further rupture and creates a new dynamic. Implementing the PA should be the starting point of this framework. In which case, the EU should consider the following four recommendations:

► **Green-light the talks to update the CU.** Given how keen Turkey is for a modernised CU, this would increase the EU's leverage over Ankara and incentivise positive steps. It would also start a new form of structured and rules-based engagement. However, it should not be seen as a gift; Turkey must also reform many areas. The closing of negotiations should be made conditional on Ankara meeting a predetermined set of criteria, including improving human rights and the rule of law.

The EU can help Ankara adjust to the European Green Deal. Turkey lags way behind Europe in terms of transitioning to a carbon-neutral economy by 2050. Ankara has only recently declared that it will ratify the Paris Agreement. The green transition – something that Turkish industry has been pushing for – will help Turkish companies remain competitive. This would also help develop Ankara's economic relationship with Europe within a framework of rules.

► **Enhance migration dialogue.** Following the launch of the EU–Turkey High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Security in October 2021, the EU and Turkey should further strengthen migration cooperation beyond the full implementation of the 2015 EU–Turkey statement. EU financing for projects aimed at supporting refugee communities in Turkey will remain crucial. However, at the same time, the EU’s current approach of throwing money at Turkey (and other third countries) rather than taking on the burden is not right. Refugees and the countries hosting them should be able to count on European solidarity.¹⁵

Further linking migration to security, as the former is increasingly connected to foreign and defence policies, including in Syria and Afghanistan, is crucial. While Turkey is not yet a key transit (or destination) country for Afghan refugees heading to Europe, such a possibility should not be ruled out. Already home to the world’s largest refugee population of 4 million (including over 300,000 Afghans), Turkey cannot handle more. There is growing popular resentment towards existing migrants. With elections on the horizon and support for the AKP at a historic low, Erdoğan cannot afford further erosion of his support base.¹⁶ The EU should continue to help Turkey strengthen its border security with Iran; thousands of Afghan refugees have been fleeing from the Taliban and into Iran every day.¹⁷

► **Continue support for Turkish civil society (CS) and independent journalism.** Turkey has a diverse and dynamic CS alongside courageous and creative independent journalism, particularly online. They are vital sources of objective information. External support, including from the EU, has been crucial for the survival of Turkish CS and independent media. Ahead of Turkey’s elections, independent channels of information are essential. But broadening other areas of external support, such as climate change, would also be valuable. Fostering more initiatives in remote areas like Central and Eastern Anatolia, where the CS is underdeveloped, is also important.

► **Revitalise foreign policy dialogue.** Despite Turkey’s more autonomous foreign policy, there are areas where the EU and Ankara share common interests and where deepened dialogue and engagement can be useful, while also pushing back against Russia’s and China’s growing footprints. These include Black Sea security,¹⁸ the Western Balkans, Ukraine and the South Caucasus. As stated by European Council President Michel during his July 2021 visit to the South Caucasus region, if the EU is to enhance its regional security role, it must deepen its engagement with the relevant regional actors, including Turkey.¹⁹ The EU should also support Erdoğan’s call to normalise relations with Armenia,

thereby strengthening regional cooperation, security and stability. Cooperation further afield, including Afghanistan and the Sahel, should also be pursued.

The European Council conclusions of March 2021 state that a stable relationship between the EU and Turkey is necessary.²⁰ However, this task seems set to be an uphill slog, and 2022 will likely be a testing year. Political will from both sides and a genuinely forward-looking agenda will be required. The EU has never been more in need of a real Turkey strategy, as a continuing cycle of crises is in neither parties’ interest.

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