

**THE EVOLUTION OF TURKEY – EU
RELATIONS: A PARADIGM SHIFT
FROM INTEGRATION TO MANAGED RIVALRY**

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Abstract. This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the fundamental paradigm shift in the multifaceted relationship between Turkey and the European Union, examining the trajectory from a model of integration towards one of transactional engagement and managed rivalry. By employing a synthetic theoretical framework integrating Liberal Institutionalism, Realism, and Social Constructivism, the research utilizes a qualitative descriptive-analytical methodology to dissect the cooperative, competitive, and ideational dynamics of the partnership. The analysis highlights that while deep structural impediments – specifically democratic backsliding, the unresolved Cyprus issue, and geopolitical tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean – have stalled the accession process, the relationship remains anchored by enduring mutual interests in migration management, economic ties via the Customs Union, and security cooperation. Consequently, the study argues that the post-2016 era is defined by a more adversarial dynamic, driven by Turkey’s pursuit of strategic autonomy. The article concludes that since full membership is no longer a viable near-term prospect, the strategic imperatives of a volatile shared neighborhood necessitate a recalibrated partnership based on a conceptual framework of “managed rivalry” and structured cooperation.

Keywords: *Turkey; European Union; EU Accession; Migration; Democratic Backsliding; Strategic Partnership; Customs Union; Normative Divergence; Geopolitics; Eastern Mediterranean*

Introductory Framework

The relationship between the Republic of Turkey and the European Union stands as one of the most enduring, complex, and consequential sagas in modern international relations. For over six decades, since Turkey first applied for associate membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959, this relationship has oscillated dramatically between moments of hopeful integration and periods

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of profound estrangement¹. It is defined by a unique and often contradictory blend of deep strategic interdependence, robust economic symbiosis, and fundamental normative divergence. Its connection to important scientific and practical tasks is clear, as strategically positioned at the nexus of Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea, Turkey remains a partner of vital geopolitical importance to the EU². Its role as a key NATO ally, an energy transit hub, and a frontline state bordering conflict zones like Syria and Iraq makes stable relations a strategic imperative for Brussels.

An analysis of recent research and publications, which initiated the problem research, the author refers to dissect the intricate layers of the EU-Turkey relationship, a singular theoretical lens is insufficient. This study, therefore, employs a synthetic framework that integrates insights from Liberal Institutionalism, Realism, and Social Constructivism. This multi-pronged approach allows for a more comprehensive explanation, capturing the cooperative, competitive, and ideational dimensions of the partnership.

- *Liberal Institutionalism*: This theory, which posits that international institutions, economic interdependence, and shared democratic values can foster cooperation and mitigate conflict, provides the foundational logic for the EU's enlargement policy. The EU was long seen as a "normative power," capable of transforming candidate countries through a process of "Europeanization" – the diffusion of EU norms, rules, and practices³. The accession process, with its rigorous conditionality and the ultimate prize of membership, was designed to incentivize profound domestic reform in Turkey. The "golden age" of reforms in the early 2000s appeared to validate this model. From this perspective, the current impasse represents a significant failure of the EU's transformative power. This failure can be attributed to several factors: a lack of a credible membership perspective from the EU, which weakened the incentive structure; inconsistent application of conditionality; and the rise of powerful domestic political forces in Turkey resistant to further liberalization⁴.

- *Realism*: In stark contrast, Realism contends that international relations are primarily an arena of competition for power and security, driven by national interests (*raison d'état*). This perspective explains the enduring, transactional core of the EU-Turkey relationship, where strategic imperatives frequently supersede normative considerations. Realism elucidates why cooperation not only persists but thrives in areas of high strategic value – migration control, counter-terrorism, and energy security – even as the political relationship deteriorates. It effectively explains Turkey's pursuit of "strategic autonomy," its assertive foreign policy in

¹ Halil T. Mokalled, "Turkiyā wal-Ittiḥād al-Ūrūbbī bayna al-'uḍwiyya wal-sharāka", in *Damascus University Journal for Economic and Legal Sciences*, vol. 26, 2010, p. 45.

² Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Al-'Umḳ al-istrātījī: Mawqī' Turkiyā wa-dawruhā fī al-sāḩa al-duwaliyya*, Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut, 2011, p. 112.

³ Senem Aydın-Düzgit, Nathalie Tocci, *Turkey and the European Union*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2023, p. 24.

⁴ Ali H. Bakir, *Turkiyā al-dawla wal-mujtama': Al-muḳawwimāt al-jiyūsiyāsiyya wal-muḳawwimāt al-jiyūstrātījīyya*, Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut, 2009, p. 88.

the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, and Syria as a classic pursuit of regional influence, and its use of migration as a geopolitical lever. It also explains the EU's pragmatic, if reluctant, engagement with Ankara on security files, revealing the limits of its normative agenda when faced with hard security threats.

• *Social Constructivism*: This third lens is essential for understanding the ideational and identity-based dimensions of the conflict, which materialist theories like Realism and Liberalism often overlook. Constructivism argues that interests are not fixed but are socially constructed through shared norms, identities, and discourse. The EU-Turkey relationship is deeply embedded in competing identity narratives. Debates within Europe about Turkey's candidacy have often been a proxy for larger anxieties about European identity, the role of Islam, and the cultural boundaries of the continent (the "Christian Club" debate)⁵. Similarly, in Turkey, a discourse of national pride, historical grievance, and neo-Ottoman revivalism has gained traction, constructing the EU as an unreliable, neo-colonial "other." These competing identities and narratives have created a profound lack of trust and have actively shaped the political possibilities for the relationship.

By synthesizing these three frameworks, this study posits that the EU-Turkey relationship cannot be understood through a single lens. It is a dynamic arena where the liberal institutionalist project of integration has been overwhelmed by the realist logic of power politics, a process both fueled and framed by the constructivist dynamics of competing identities and narratives.

Previously Unsolved Parts of the General Problem the Very Problem of the Research

The evolution of this partnership serves as a critical case study for understanding the shifting dynamics of international politics. Economically, the relationship is deeply institutionalized through the 1995 EU-Turkey Customs Union, yet this foundation is now a source of contention as modernization efforts have stalled. Paradoxically, the 2015-2016 refugee crisis underscored Turkey's indispensable role, leading to the transactional EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016, which shifted the relationship's focus from normative integration to mutual leverage. Politically and culturally, Turkey's EU candidacy remains a focal point for debates about European identity, which have been exacerbated by a significant "democratic backsliding" in Turkey. The erosion of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms has created a profound normative chasm between Ankara and Brussels, bringing the formal accession process to a complete and indefinite standstill. The unsolved problem this research addresses is the lack of a comprehensive framework to analyze this new reality, which has moved beyond the simple binary of accession versus non-accession.

⁵ Dietrich Jung, Catharina Raudvere (eds.), *Religion, politics, and Turkey's EU accession*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, p. 15.

The Aim of the Article (Statement of the Task)

This study, therefore, addresses a central research question that has evolved significantly over the past decade. It is no longer a question of when or if Turkey will join the EU, but rather: Amid profound strategic and economic interdependence, why has the EU-Turkey relationship devolved from a paradigm of integration to one of transactional and often adversarial conflict management, and what political, economic, and normative factors will shape the future of this pivotal yet deeply troubled partnership? By systematically dissecting the historical evolution, the structural impediments to accession, the enduring mutual interests, and the contemporary dynamics of strategic rivalry, this paper aims to provide a sophisticated and nuanced understanding necessary for policymakers and academics to formulate effective strategies that can foster stability in a volatile shared neighborhood.

To achieve this, the research utilizes a qualitative descriptive-analytical methodology. It is grounded in a systematic examination of the historical evolution and contemporary state of EU-Turkey relations through a process-tracing approach. This method is particularly well-suited for a deep, contextualized understanding of a complex, path-dependent relationship. The research relies on the in-depth analysis of a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including: official EU documents (annual Commission progress reports, European Council conclusions, European Parliament resolutions); bilateral agreements; speeches and statements by Turkish and EU leaders; academic literature from leading peer-reviewed journals and university presses; and in-depth policy analyses from reputable think tanks such as the Carnegie Europe, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), and the German Marshall Fund (GMF). This approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of the political, economic, and social variables that have shaped this partnership over several decades, allowing for a rich and textured analysis of its evolution from a logic of accession to one of managed rivalry.

*The Main Research Material with the Full
Justification of the Scientific Results Obtained
The Historical Arc of a Complex Relationship:
From Hopeful Candidate to Estranged Partner*

The trajectory of EU-Turkey relations is not linear but can be divided into three distinct phases, each characterized by a different prevailing logic and set of political dynamics.

Phase 1: The “Golden Age” of Europeanization and Reform (1999-2006). Following the landmark Helsinki European Council decision in December 1999 to officially grant Turkey candidate status, the relationship entered its most hopeful and productive phase. This decision unlocked a powerful dynamic of “Europeanization,” particularly after the Justice and Development Party (AKP), with its pro-European and socially conservative platform, swept to power in 2002. The Turkish government, led by figures like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah

Gül, embarked on an unprecedented series of sweeping political and legal reforms aimed at meeting the EU's rigorous Copenhagen Criteria⁶. This period saw the implementation of multiple "harmonization packages" that fundamentally altered the Turkish political landscape. Key reforms included the abolition of the death penalty, the lifting of restrictions on broadcasting and education in the Kurdish language, comprehensive reforms of the penal code, the abolition of State Security Courts, and significant measures to establish civilian oversight over the powerful military establishment. This reformist zeal was driven by a powerful coalition of liberal intellectuals, business elites, and a significant portion of the Turkish public who saw EU membership as the culmination of Turkey's century-long project of Westernization. The formal launch of accession negotiations in October 2005 marked the zenith of this "golden age." There was a palpable sense of optimism, a belief on both sides that despite the significant challenges ahead, Turkish membership in the EU was a tangible, if distant, reality.

Phase 2: Stagnation, Mutual Disenchantment, and the Erosion of Trust (2007-2015). The period following 2007 was marked by a significant and corrosive loss of momentum. The reformist dynamism in Turkey began to wane as the political climate in Europe shifted decisively against its membership. The public opposition of key EU leaders, notably newly elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who explicitly favored a "privileged partnership" over the prospect of full membership, dealt a severe blow to the credibility of the accession process⁷. This created a perception in Ankara that the goalposts were being moved for political, rather than technical, reasons, which in turn undermined the domestic consensus for difficult reforms. More structurally, the accession process became institutionally hamstrung. The unresolved Cyprus issue emerged as the primary technical and political obstacle. In December 2006, the EU decided to freeze the opening of eight negotiation chapters and provisionally close none after Turkey refused to implement the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement, which would have required it to open its ports and airports to traffic from the Republic of Cyprus⁸. This decision created a debilitating and long-lasting deadlock, effectively paralyzing a significant portion of the technical negotiations. A vicious cycle set in: the EU's perceived lack of a credible membership commitment weakened the leverage of pro-reform actors in Turkey, while the slowing pace of reforms in Turkey reinforced skepticism and opposition within the EU. This period was characterized by growing mutual disenchantment. In Turkey, a narrative of EU double standards and bad faith began to take hold, while in Europe, concerns mounted over Turkey's authoritarian drift, particularly after the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the government's heavy-handed response.

Phase 3: The Transactional Turn, Geopolitical Rivalry, and the Post-Coup Break (2016-Present). The Syrian refugee crisis of 2015 dramatically reconfigured

⁶ Bernard Hoekman, Şübidey Togan, *Turkey: Economic reform and accession to the European Union*, World Bank Publications, Washington D.C., 2005, p. 30.

⁷ Nathalie Tocci, *Turkey and the European Union: A journey in the unknown*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2014, p. 55.

⁸ Nathalie Tocci, *Turkey's Cyprus challenge: A diplomatic impasse*, Carnegie Europe, Brussels, 2021.

the relationship, forcing a pragmatic and urgent shift towards transnationalism. With over a million refugees and migrants heading towards its shores, a deeply divided EU turned to Turkey for assistance. The resulting EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 became the new, and arguably sole, centerpiece of the partnership⁹. It effectively sidelined the moribund accession process in favor of a clear quid pro quo: Turkey would curb irregular migration in exchange for €6 billion in financial aid for refugees, the promise of visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, and a re-energizing of accession talks. While the deal succeeded in its primary objective of reducing migration flows, it fundamentally altered the relationship's DNA, transforming it from a normative, values-based project into a raw, interest-driven transaction. The failed military coup in Turkey on July 15, 2016, was the definitive turning point. It represented a profound trauma for the Turkish state and society. The ensuing state of emergency and the unprecedented scale of the government's purges – which saw the arrest or dismissal of tens of thousands of soldiers, judges, prosecutors, civil servants, academics, and journalists – were viewed in Brussels not merely as a response to a security threat, but as an opportunity seized by the government to dismantle remaining opposition and consolidate authoritarian rule. This shattered the last vestiges of trust between the two sides. The European Parliament repeatedly called for the formal suspension of accession talks, and the European Council concluded in 2018 that the negotiations had “effectively come to a standstill.” The relationship has since been governed by a logic of selective engagement and often-acrimonious conflict management, characterized by deep political estrangement and escalating geopolitical rivalry, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean.

*Principal Impediments to Turkey's EU Accession:
A Multi-Layered Analysis*

The *de facto* collapse of Turkey's accession process can be attributed to a formidable and interconnected set of challenges. These impediments are not merely technical but are deeply rooted in political, geopolitical, economic, and ideational structures. This cluster of issues remains the most significant and intractable hurdle, directly related to the Copenhagen political criteria. Democratic backsliding and the erosion of the rule of law is the most frequently cited reason for the current impasse. The 2017 constitutional amendments, which replaced Turkey's parliamentary system with a hyper-presidential one, have been heavily criticized by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission for dismantling crucial checks and balances and concentrating excessive power in the executive with insufficient judicial oversight. EU progress reports have meticulously documented a “serious and continuing backsliding” in the functioning of democratic institutions. This includes the erosion of judicial independence, evidenced by the politically motivated dismissal of judges and prosecutors; the severe restrictions on freedom of

⁹ European Commission, *EU-Turkey cooperation on migration*, European Commission Reports, Brussels, 2022, p. 5.

expression, exemplified by the high number of jailed journalists and the use of broad anti-terror laws to silence dissent; and the clampdown on civil society and political opposition, including the ongoing legal proceedings to close the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)¹⁰. This profound normative divergence has made it politically impossible for the EU to proceed with the accession process. The unresolved Cyprus issue remains a fundamental political and legal barrier. As long as Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus, an EU member state, and refuses to normalize relations, the accession process cannot be completed¹¹. The issue is multi-layered: it involves the continued presence of Turkish troops in the northern part of the island, the political status of the self-declared "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (recognized only by Turkey), and disputes over maritime jurisdiction. Recent calls by the Turkish leadership for a "two-state solution" have further entrenched the conflict, as this stance directly contradicts the long-standing, UN-backed framework of a bizonal, bicomunal federation, which remains the EU's official position. Furthermore, geopolitical tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have transformed the region into a hotbed of geopolitical competition. The discovery of significant hydrocarbon reserves directly pits Turkey against EU member states Greece and Cyprus. Disputes over the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) have led to a dangerous escalation of tensions, with Turkey deploying seismic research vessels and drill ships escorted by naval frigates into contested waters¹². The EU has responded with solidarity towards its member states, imposing sanctions on Turkish individuals and entities involved in the drilling activities and condemning Turkey's actions as a violation of international law. This escalating rivalry has poisoned the broader political atmosphere and reinforced the perception of Turkey as a strategic competitor rather than a future partner.

While often overshadowed by political issues, Turkey's economic and structural challenges pose significant challenges to its capacity to meet the Copenhagen economic criteria. The Turkish economy has been plagued by chronic macroeconomic instability, characterized by persistently high inflation, a large current account deficit, and significant currency volatility. The pursuit of unorthodox economic policies in recent years has eroded investor confidence and drawn sharp criticism from the EU. This volatility raises serious questions about Turkey's capacity to withstand the competitive pressures of the EU's single market. Beyond macroeconomic issues, Turkey faces significant structural challenges, including the need for reforms to improve the business environment, strengthen institutional frameworks, and combat corruption. Socio-cultural and ideational barriers are also profoundly influential. A persistent and widespread "enlargement fatigue" within the EU is compounded by the prospect of admitting a nation of over 85 million people, stoking anxieties about institutional and labor market impacts. More

¹⁰ European Commission, *Türkiye 2023 Rule of Law Report (SWD(2023)696)*, Brussels, 2023, p. 12.

¹¹ Muaffer Assal, S. Lahrawa, *İnđimām Turkiyā ilā al-İttihād al-Ūrubbī: Al-furaş wal-quyūd*, University of Kaşdi Merbah, 2013, p. 70.

¹² Ioana Anghel, G. Fusiek, *Greece–Turkey maritime dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean: From escalated tensions to diplomacy*, ResearchGate, 2021.

fundamentally, Turkey's candidacy has always been intertwined with contentious debates about the cultural and religious identity of Europe. Concurrently, a profound shift has occurred within Turkey itself. The initial pro-EU consensus has eroded, replaced by a more nationalist, skeptical, and at times overtly anti-Western discourse.

Enduring Mutual Interests and the Logic of Strategic Cooperation

Despite the profound political estrangement and the collapse of the accession framework, the EU-Turkey relationship has not been severed. It remains anchored by a set of indelible mutual interests. Migration management and border security remains the most potent example of the transactional nature of the contemporary partnership. For the EU, Turkey's cooperation in controlling irregular migration is a paramount security interest. The 2016 Statement, despite its controversies, is viewed in many European capitals as a necessary tool for crisis management¹³. For Turkey, the agreement provides not only substantial financial assistance but also a powerful instrument of diplomatic leverage. The economy forms the resilient bedrock of the relationship. The EU is, by a significant margin, Turkey's number one import and export partner and the primary source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). This deep interdependence creates powerful business constituencies on both sides with a vested interest in maintaining a stable economic relationship¹⁴. However, the EU has made progress on modernizing the Customs Union conditional on an improvement in the broader political climate. Finally, in security, defense, and counter-terrorism, Turkey remains an indispensable, if often difficult, partner. As a major NATO ally, its cooperation in counter-terrorism against groups like ISIS and its control of the border with Syria are critical. Turkey's geopolitical influence and military capabilities make it a key actor in numerous regional conflicts that directly impact European security, compelling the EU to engage with Ankara even amidst deep disagreements.

A Paradigm Shift: From Accession to Managed Rivalry

The period since 2016 has cemented a fundamental paradigm shift in EU-Turkey relations. The logic of integration and accession has been definitively superseded by a more complex and fluid model that can best be described as "managed rivalry" or "competitive cooperation." This paradigm is characterized by several key features. The first is de-coupling and compartmentalization. Different policy tracks operate on separate logics; pragmatic cooperation on trade and migration can proceed even as the political dialogue on human rights remains frozen. This "de-coupling" allows both sides to pursue their interests without allowing

¹³ Andrew Geddes, L. Hadj-Abdou, L. Brumat, *Migration and mobility in the European Union* (2nd ed.), Red Globe Press, London, 2020, p. 140.

¹⁴ Branislav Stanicek, *EU-Turkey customs union: Modernisation or suspension?*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), Brussels, 2020, p. 3.

disagreements in one domain to completely derail the entire relationship. The second feature is a fragmented and bilateralized approach from the EU, which often struggles to act as a unified actor¹⁵. Member states' positions are increasingly dictated by their own national interests, creating blocs of "pragmatists" and "skeptics." This lack of a unified EU position provides Ankara with opportunities to bypass Brussels and pursue a more bilateral foreign policy. The third feature is a relationship of leverage and conditionality. The contemporary relationship is defined by the constant use of leverage. Turkey uses the migration file and its potential spoiler role in regional conflicts as its primary instruments. The EU, in turn, uses its economic power – the prospect of modernizing the Customs Union and the threat of sanctions – as its main tool of conditionality. The result is a relationship of continuous negotiation and tactical maneuvering, where cooperation is rarely based on shared values but is instead a calculated exchange of concessions.

Conclusions from this Study and Prospects for Further Development in this Direction

The relationship between Turkey and the European Union stands at a critical and uncertain crossroads. This study has argued that it has undergone a fundamental transformation, moving from a normative project of integration to a pragmatic, often adversarial, reality of managed rivalry. The prospect of full membership, the foundational anchor of the relationship for decades, has effectively vanished from the political horizon, leaving a vacuum that has been filled by transactionalism and geopolitical competition. This new paradigm, while more reflective of the current realities, is inherently unstable and fraught with the risk of miscalculation and escalation. Yet, despite the profound political estrangement, the deep structural interdependence between Turkey and the EU remains an undeniable fact. Their shared geography, intertwined economies, and common security challenges mean that they cannot afford a complete rupture. The future of this vital relationship, therefore, lies not in reviving a moribund accession process, but in architecting a new, more realistic, and mutually respectful framework that can effectively manage both cooperation and conflict. This requires a strategic recalibration on both sides, moving away from the all-or-nothing logic of membership towards a more flexible and modular model of partnership. For further development in this direction, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

For the European Union: The EU should formalize a new strategic framework by proposing negotiations for a new, comprehensive "Strategic Partnership Agreement." This agreement should create a flexible and modular framework, allowing for deep cooperation in areas of mutual interest while acknowledging fundamental political disagreements. The EU also needs to embrace strategic realism and principled pragmatism, balancing its normative principles with its strategic interests. Finally, to break the cycle of negative conditionality, the EU should

¹⁵ Wulf Reiners, Ebru Turhan, "Current trends and future prospects for EU–Turkey relations", in *The Future of EU-Turkey Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021, p. 315.

proactively propose “positive agendas” in areas of clear mutual benefit, such as launching negotiations on modernizing the Customs Union and enhancing cooperation on green transition and digital transformation projects.

For Turkey: To rebuild trust, the Turkish government should implement credible democratic reforms to strengthen the rule of law, guarantee the independence of the judiciary, and protect fundamental freedoms. Releasing political prisoners and respecting the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights would be powerful confidence-building measures. Turkey should also pursue a de-escalatory and multilateral diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean, committing to resolving disputes through dialogue and international law. Lastly, the Turkish leadership should engage in strategic recalibration, acknowledging that the current path of cyclical confrontation with the EU is economically unsustainable and that a more stable, cooperative relationship would better serve Turkey’s long-term national interests.

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