



# The European Union and Turkey in 2017

## Move On or Apart?

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Turkey's efforts to negotiate for full membership in the European Union have now dragged on for more than a decade. Instead of bringing Turkey and the EU closer together, today the two are more estranged than ever before—and rapidly moving in opposite directions. While many of the relevant European countries have—albeit with difficulties—managed to stave off a wave of populist nationalism for the time being and are on a solid or at least stable growth path, the economic and political environment in Turkey continues to deteriorate. With mounting private debt, often denominated in foreign currencies, Turkey is desperately dependent on foreign direct investment—two-thirds of which comes from EU member states—and a renegotiation of the customs union.<sup>1</sup> Even more concerning has been the profound political polarization, ethnic tensions, and sectarianism that have come to dominate public life in Turkey. The ruling party has overseen an enormous centralization of power, jailing opposition parliamentarians, reassigning thousands of judges and prosecutors, and bringing relentless political pressure to bear on Turkish civil society organizations. At last count, 15 of Turkey's 191 universities have been closed by government decree, more than 130 journalists have been jailed, 178 media outlets have been shut down or put under government control, and 5,000 university professors from 112 universities have been dismissed.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a low-intensity civil war continues between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state in Eastern Anatolia, with dozens of casualties on both sides every week.<sup>3</sup>

Cumulatively, these developments have brought the relationship between the EU and Turkey to a decision point—it is time for the EU to revisit past strategies, readjust, and devise a path forward that encompasses both elements of a hard line approach when it comes to human rights and democracy within Turkey and an even stronger emphasis on continued engagement. At times, these strategies will exclude each other, but given the current state of affairs, there is no alternative. All elements of the complex relationship are at play and should be considered assets in a redefined EU strategy, one that will increasingly have to shift from political pressures to economic quid pro quo to generate the necessary leverage.

A stronger approach is not only needed to save Turkey from further deterioration; these developments also have a direct impact on Europe, given Turkey's close ties with the continent and with large emigrant communities, especially in Germany, the Netherlands, and France. While there is consensus that the current turmoil within the European Union and in Turkey requires decisive action, EU policymakers still disagree about the best path forward. Traditional tools of policy engagement—the membership process, high-level consultations, and increased economic cooperation—more often have seemed to exacerbate problems in recent years than resolve them, and other options are lacking. Each one of these tools has become less effective the more Turkey has gravitated into a state of centralized authoritarianism. Given this current situation, a more systematic and strategic engagement with Turkish civil society is one of the few potentially productive avenues open to EU policymakers who seek to support Turkish democracy and maneuver it toward more enlightened EU-Turkish relations.

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### EU-Turkey engagement: A rocky path forward

Some Europeans still agree that Western countries should support attempts to maintain open debate in and with Turkey. But this is a contested idea in Turkey, and EU relations have become entangled in Turkey's deeply antagonistic domestic politics. The governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has grown away from its Europe-friendly roots and now openly questions the EU's good faith and the value of ties with the West. On the other hand, many Turks—particularly in urban areas and among opposition parties—remain convinced that Turkey's interests are advanced by close political, economic, social, academic, and civil society ties to the oft-maligned Europeans.

Support for friendly—or at least tolerable—relations with Turkey are buttressed within Europe by Turkey's vital role in the Levant; the clichéd image of Turkey as the gateway to Europe has its roots in truth, and it pays to be friendly with the gatekeeper. It is this broader regional picture, and specifically European reliance on Turkey to manage migration, that has prevented the wholesale breakdown of EU-Turkish relations. But there are powerful countervailing forces, mostly rooted in the domestic social and political dynamics within European countries and within Turkey. Indeed, there are few more stark examples of the intermingling of domestic politics and foreign policy than Europe's relations with Turkey.

Turkey has become hopelessly ensnared in right-wing European efforts to channel or drum up populist fear of immigration and the inevitably Muslim “other.” Indeed, relations with Turkey are often used as a shorthand way for politicians to, with a wink and a nod, assure conservative Europeans that they intend to preserve what they see as the essential character of Europe, with the implied subtext that it should be a white,

Christian continent. While policy toward Turkey might otherwise be—and, possibly, should be—a minor part of European political discourse, its role as a symbol in right-wing populist appeals strikes to the core of the social foment underway in parts of Europe today—the “battle of the eyes” that Christophe Guilluy describes playing out in many neighborhoods in France, for example.<sup>4</sup> The reality of Turkey’s profound anti-democratic drift and its leaders’ frequent anti-European outbursts only exacerbate these tendencies.

Similar acts of political signaling play out in Turkey, of course. Deep disagreements over the meaning of Turkish nationalism and sovereignty, the proper role of religion in public life, and Turkey’s policy toward the region are often wrapped up in attitudes toward—and rhetoric against—Europe, the United States, and the amorphous West. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in particular, has built his political career on whipping up and capturing a deep sense of grievance among working class, more religious Turks that have been excluded from political power. In recent years, Erdoğan has added to his rhetoric a hard-edged appeal to Turkish nationalists, harping on the importance of Turkish strength and sovereignty and pointing to international conspiracies behind every crisis. In many ways, Erdoğan pioneered the divisive, domineering approach subsequently adopted by right-wing populists in Europe and the United States.

These political and social dynamics create a reality in which important leaders on both sides rely on constituencies built on foundations of mutual antipathy. This political landscape gives leaders every incentive to lash out across the divide and few reasons to compromise or moderate their rhetoric.

And there are few political leaders able or willing to bridge the gap. Gone are the years when U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero spent considerable political capital and worked with adversaries to push for Turkey’s EU membership. Rather, the debate about how to rethink EU-Turkey relations separate from the accession process is well underway.<sup>5</sup> In the spring of 2017, four of the most senior policymakers in the European Parliament laconically stated that “Turkey no longer fulfils the Copenhagen criteria,” noting that the constitutional changes passed through a highly disputed referendum were incompatible with the Venice Commission, an advisory group of the Council of Europe.<sup>6</sup> The authors concluded that “with the current state of democracy in Turkey, full membership of the EU is no longer realistic” and suggested that “instead of continuing the falsehood of accession talks and driving the EU-Turkey relationship towards a dead end, the European Council must look reality in the eye, stop the accession negotiations and put the relationship on new footing.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the main factors—often overlooked in Turkey—that is driving a stronger European stance is the need to reinforce internal EU coherence. The bloc is undergoing a profound transformation and cannot allow for backtracking on civil liberties and democratic standards, either among its members or candidate countries. Much as the EU must be seen to punish the United Kingdom for the Brexit vote that approved Britain's withdrawal from the EU lest other countries seek better deals, Brussels cannot compromise its values to accommodate Turkey for fear that others will follow suit. Specifically, Serbia's membership prospects and the EU's response to recent authoritarian trends in Hungary and Poland loom large.

This dynamic was visible in comments by Dutch member of the European Parliament Kati Piri, an outspoken progressive who has been critical of the EU Commission's handling of relations with Turkey. After the April 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum, Piri argued that “with such a constitution ... Turkey cannot become a member of the European Union. ... Suspension of accession talks [could] be the only answer, if Brussels is serious about its own values.”<sup>8</sup> Piri went on to cite the credibility issues the EU would face with other potential member countries in the Balkans, should it give in to Turkey. Turkey has become a litmus test for EU coherence and moral clarity, with huge implications for Brussels' legitimacy.

Rather than make it easier for European leaders to make accommodations for Turkey, given the tremendous strains on the country, President Erdoğan has made it nearly impossible for EU leaders or politicians in relevant member states to compromise. His repeated accusations of hypocrisy and “Nazi” actions have left deep tracks in Dutch and German public opinion and have bred strong, personal resentments among European policymakers. The fate of Turkey and the EU are as intertwined as they have ever been, yet the conditions for political rapprochement could hardly be more challenging.

With senior leaders on both sides unwilling to take the political risk of offering the first compromise; with Turkey driven by the paranoid, majoritarian rule of Erdoğan; and with the EU forced to take a hard line to maintain its internal coherence, much of the onus for charting a path out of the current morass falls to civil society groups on both sides. Given the uneasy political stalemate within and toward Turkey, civil society has to work to maintain and deepen nongovernmental ties, bring together diverse social actors, and slowly reduce sociopolitical tensions between Europe and Turkey. For the EU, with bilateral ties in tatters and its brand contaminated in Turkey, a renewed focus on political reform and more support for civil society offers one of the few remaining ways to reduce polarization and work to preserve Turkish democracy.

In a recent paper, the European Stability Initiative argued that the future relationship will center on “the quality of the EU’s regular feedback [on the accession parameters]: how informative and convincing it is and how many people it reaches.”<sup>10</sup> This means that engagement with remaining Turkish civil society organizations of all thematic and political orientations could help to refocus this conversation, making it “less about chapters and more about EU standards and norms in different fields, and how far Turkey is from meeting these. The better the EU communicates this, the more likely it is to have a positive influence on the Turkish reform process.”<sup>11</sup>

## What went wrong?

To be certain, both sides share blame for the current crisis, which has deep roots. Even in 2005, when the AKP was still committed to political reform and to bringing Turkey in line with EU standards, European support for Turkish accession was limited. Just 25 percent of Greeks thought that Turkey should be part of the EU, while just 20 percent of the public in France and 10 percent in Austria supported Turkey joining the bloc.<sup>12</sup> On the other side of the equation, a 2014 study by the Independent Commission on Turkey—a group of senior EU policymakers that examines Turkey’s membership prospects—showed that support for EU membership within Turkey stood at 73 percent in 2004 but “dropped dramatically after 2007, hovering between 34 percent and 48 percent over the last seven years.”<sup>13</sup> Since that study, most Turkish polls confirm the leveling off of support.

There are many reasons for this low level of public support on both sides. As mentioned, residual resentment in Western Europe toward Turkish émigré communities plays a role, as does latent prejudice against Muslims. Both have been exacerbated and exploited by irresponsible politicians. Turkey’s authoritarian turn and crackdown on dissent also has taken a toll on the nation’s reputation abroad. Perceived Turkish hubris following a period of rapid economic growth that coincided with Europe’s economic struggles probably also played a role on the European side, while Turks deeply resent Europe’s early refusal to share the burden of the Syrian refugee crisis. Certainly, European leaders should stop selling narratives of cultural incompatibility due to religious traditions, while Turkish leaders should see EU membership as more than a means to an end for domestic political gain within Turkey.

During the first decade of this century, Turkish society mobilized a “powerful coalition of actors from different walks of life—from within its governing institutions, in political parties, civil society, and the private sector—which united in propelling the country towards a distinctly higher level of democracy and economic development.”<sup>14</sup> While the EU process undoubtedly helped open the public sphere within Turkey, legislative reform has stalled since 2008; indeed, the past nine years increasingly feel like a lost decade. As Nathalie Tocci has observed, “After the opening of accession negotiations in 2005, the momentum in Turkey’s accession process was lost.”<sup>15</sup>

Still, the opening of new pluralistic spaces—facilitated by political reforms pushed by the EU and implemented by the AKP—provided the conditions for Turkey’s most dramatic civil society activism, the Gezi Park protests of 2013. Indeed, many protestors were animated by the feeling that the more open, reformist period in Turkey was under threat from government repression. But this outbreak of civic activism prompted an unreasonably harsh and violent response by the Turkish government. Despite their early reformist impulses, virtually no AKP leaders objected to the crackdown, with the exception of former Deputy Prime Minister and AKP co-founder Bülent Arınç. Gezi marked a turning point, and new limits on freedom of speech and curbs on Turkish civil society have provided a steady rhythm for the downward spiral in EU-Turkey relations.

This deterioration has been amply covered in the European press, and the mood in the public and in the European Parliament has tracked the decline. Turks have often accused the EU of discrimination or pointed to the outsized importance that the Republic of Cyprus plays in blocking their accession process; certainly, there is some merit to those claims. Today, however, the most important drag on Turkey’s standing in the Europe is the steady self-destruction of Turkey’s own democratic institutions.<sup>16</sup>

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### A new strategy with civil society engagement at the center

It is clear, then, that political realities in the EU and the actions of the Turkish government make formal bilateral engagement very difficult. Public and elite opinion within the European Union have never been more negative toward Turkey. Yet Turkey and the EU rely upon one another for their economic well-being, as well as to manage migration and security challenges. So how should the EU proceed?

The EU urgently needs a strategic plan for how to expand its policy outreach beyond the Turkish government and engage directly with civil society. This plan should include a reassessment of the groups the EU supports and the issues on which the EU focuses in Turkey. In the current atmosphere in Turkey, the traditional roster of civil society partners—many of whom are under immense government pressure—is unworkable. The Turkish government is unlikely to allow the EU to deepen ties with those partners, but it may permit engagement with groups on economic and social priorities such as refugee integration, women’s economic integration, and high-tech manufacturing. EU outreach should court conservative civil society organizations with government ties, even ones supported by the AKP, and not just liberal and secular organizations. EU support for and cooperation with these important segments within the broader religious conservative movement is important, both to build credibility and because some of these conservatives would embrace a more liberal, unified Turkey with greater democratic freedoms.

In this context, former EU Ambassador to Turkey Marc Pierini suggests that the EU prioritize not only the modification of the customs union and refugee cooperation but also implementation of Turkey's multisector modernization program and cultural and education activities such as the Erasmus exchange program.<sup>17</sup> Extensive interviews with civil society leaders in Turkey point to two other priorities—captured in a recent CAP report—that civil society actors can advance with support from the EU: the reduction of political polarization within Turkish society, even if only for the sake of the long-term stability of the country, and engagements that foster ethnic integration and reduce sectarian tensions.<sup>18</sup> The EU should solicit input from Turkish civil society groups through a mechanism similar to the 2010 and 2011 advisory meetings conducted with 730 civil society representatives. Those meetings led the EU to ease funding procedures and to broaden its traditional support for nongovernmental organization advocacy programs to include small and informal groups.<sup>19</sup>

The EU can also prod civil society actors to tackle Turkey's "structural capacity deficit and lack of institutionalization," which scholar Bülent Aras recently described in detail as too centralized, exclusive of important social groups, and insufficiently representative of Turkey's regional and demographic diversity.<sup>20</sup> The absence of pluralistic inputs to Turkey's state structure has become glaringly apparent over the past decade, especially since the July 2016 failed coup attempt. At least in part, these issues should be addressed through inclusive civil society activities to move beyond monopolistic government control.

Of course, the EU cannot abandon support for groups advancing the rule of law or monitoring human rights in Turkey, and the EU should not shy away from being explicit about value-driven goals when it comes to supporting civil society organizations. But these groups might benefit from being included in a broader program that addresses priorities shared by the Turkish government.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, one must be skeptical of the current Turkish government's willingness to allow meaningful political or societal influence to accrue at any organization devoted to these goals. This reluctance has likely intensified in the wake of the AKP's loss of most large cities in the April referendum.

As mentioned, such a strategy will certainly meet resistance from the AKP government, but the EU is in a strong position to "get tough with the regime," in the words of critics, given its economic leverage.<sup>22</sup> Advocates of such a position believe a hard EU line will support "remaining political opposition, human rights defenders and civil society organizations ... [and] be a more effective antidote to the authoritarian rule of President Erdoğan."<sup>23</sup> Despite Erdoğan's rhetoric, Turkey has few options but engagement with Europe. Russia wants only to manipulate Ankara to its advantage and sell its energy, while the current attempts for a rapprochement with President Donald Trump should not be overestimated; Turkey may soon come to miss the Obama administration's level-headedness and customary restraint.<sup>24</sup>



The recent informal meeting of EU heads of state in Malta demonstrated an emerging consensus about the need for new EU institutional engagement with Turkey, recognizing that member states already engage in greater bilateral conversations.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the nature of EU leverage has changed. As one EU parliamentarian observed after the meeting, because EU leverage is no longer tied to the accession process, “Brussels should attach political benchmarks to economic agreements.”<sup>26</sup> No doubt she was referring to upcoming talks on revising the customs union.

Beyond the customs union, the EU has substantial direct economic leverage, having allocated 4.45 billion euros of pre-accession funding between 2014 and 2020—roughly 650 million euros of direct government support to Turkey per year.<sup>27</sup> Should the accession process continue at its sclerotic pace or formally end, some of these substantial funds should be redirected toward civil society engagement and institution-building, including the management of the Syrian refugee community within Turkey and the development of new ways to meaningfully run capacity-building initiatives in the Kurdish regions.

No doubt these measures will be difficult to implement and may cause additional rifts with the Turkish government. But EU engagement is key. Europe cannot give up on Turkish society and must find convincing arguments for democracy and pluralism, for its own sake as well as Turkey’s. Ultimately, Turkish society will decide which path the country takes, but it should do so with as many options available as possible.

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## Endnotes

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