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# **The EU-Turkey strange relationship: forced but necessary**

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## **The EU-Turkey strange relationship: forced but necessary**

*Last 22 November, a vast majority of the political groups in the European Parliament said that the Commission should temporarily freeze the accession talks with Turkey because of its post-coup purges. After the failed coup attempt on 15 July, press freedom is even more limited, media outlets have been closed down, politicians and freely-elected MPs are in prison. Moreover, Erdoğan has already dismissed the vote both because having “no value” and being non-binding. Firstly, this article will explain the nature of the relations between European Union and Turkey, in order to have a historical framework able to explain the evolution of such a relationship. Secondly, the recent social and political events will be presented, to highlight how 2016 has been an important year for the definition of relations between Brussels and Ankara. Finally, the reasons of the frictions between Turkey and the EU will be shown in order to figure out what is the scenario and its features in order to explain the deepest reasons of their relationship.*

### **A path has started in 1959**

In 1959 Turkey was one of the first countries to seek close cooperation with the European Economic Community (EEC). This cooperation was realised in the framework of an "association agreement", known as the Ankara Agreement, which was signed on 12 September 1963. An important element in this plan was that of establishing a "Customs Union" so that Turkey could trade goods and agricultural products with EEC countries without restrictions. The main aim of the Ankara agreement was to achieve continuous improvement in living conditions in Turkey and in the European Economic Community through accelerated economic progress. Twenty years later, on 14 April 1987, Turkey made a formal application to become a full member of the EU. In accordance with the procedure set out in Article 237 of the Treaty of Rome, the Council called on the Commission (on 27 April 1987) to deliver an opinion on the application where it was affirmed that Turkey was a natural candidate for full EU Member State status and it took the view that closer relations should be encouraged. Moreover, an economic and social analysis let us understand that despite the substantial progress made since 1980 in restructuring the Turkish economy and opening it up to the outside world, there still was a considerable lag when compared to levels of development in the EU. In addition, although Turkey had returned to parliamentary democracy, there still were problems in the form of restrictions on political pluralism, constant human rights violations and lasting disputes with Cyprus. Moreover, the Council called on the Commission to make more specific proposals for greater cooperation between the EU and Turkey.

A new step in the relations between Turkey and the EU started on 10 December 1999, during the Summit of Heads of State and Government in Helsinki, where Turkey assumed the "candidate status". At the Brussels summit on 16-17 December 2004, the decisions taken in the 1999 Helsinki Summit were reaffirmed, and the Council decided to open accession to negotiations with Turkey on 3 October 2005. In the accession process, 13 chapters (4-Free Movement of Capital, 6-Company Law, 7-Intellectual Property Law, 10-Information Society and Media, 12-Food Safety, Veterinary and sanitary Policy, 16-Taxation, 18-Statistics, 20-Enterprise and Industrial Policy, 21-Trans-European Networks, 25-Science and Research, 27-Environment, 28-Consumer and Health Protection, 32-Financial Control) were opened so far and one of them (25-Science and Research) has been provisionally closed.

On 16 December 2013 the EU launches the *Visa Liberalisation Dialogue* with Turkey, and two years later (at the EU-Turkey Summit) the EU welcomes Turkey's commitment to accelerate the fulfilment of the Visa Roadmap benchmarks in return for halting the flow of Syrian refugees from Turkey to Greece. The relationship between Turkey and the European Union, began in the form of economic cooperation, it has seen both tensions and cooperation, typical of two actors who alternate approaches in relation of their interests. However, this brief historical path is useful to explain the events of 2016 and the consequences of the Turkish coup attempt of 15 July.

## **2016 - Tensions and forced relations**

For the European Union, 2016 has been a year characterized by the migration crisis. The growing tensions in Syria, and the consequences of the civil war led a drastic increase of landings in the European coasts, following the route of the Aegean Sea. Turkey has played a central role in this geopolitical mechanisms, because it was considered both as the first country of arrival (given that it borders with Syria), and as a gateway towards the EU. For this reason 2016 has been an important year for the EU-Turkey relationship.

On 3 February 2016, the 28 member states agreed on how to finance the €3 billion EU refugee facility for Turkey. This allowed the EU to deliver additional humanitarian assistance to refugees in Turkey and their host communities. The help was mainly focused on meeting immediate needs by providing food, health services and education. “*We are working continuously to stem the flow of migrants to Europe. The agreements between the EU and Turkey are a vital part of this. They aim at targeting human traffickers and launching projects which will help give those in and around the refugee camps the hope of a better future. Europe is following up on its decision to make 3 billion euro available for the Turkey Refugee Facility and we will continue to work hard with our Turkish partners to turn this into concrete results*”, said Mark Rutte, Prime Minister of the Netherlands, which held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU. This agreement put into practice the commitment made by the EU at its summit with Turkey on 29 November 2015 to provide €3 billion additional resources to assist Turkey in addressing the immediate humanitarian and development needs of refugees and their host communities (*the EU-Turkey Action Plan*). The day after, on 4 February, during the London Conference, European Council President Donald Tusk announced a €3 billion EU contribution to assist the Syrian people in 2016. This includes both people inside Syria as well as refugees and the communities hosting them in the neighbouring countries.

On 18-19 February, during the European Council, EU leaders adopted conclusions on the migration crisis. They focused on the need to build a European consensus on migration and on implementation of decisions already taken. The full and speedy implementation of the *EU-Turkey Action Plan* remains a priority, in order to stem migration flows and to tackle traffickers and smugglers networks. However, the flows of migrants arriving in Greece from Turkey remained high. The European Council also called on the Commission and the Member States to swiftly implement the priority projects.

On 7 March, EU leaders held a meeting with Turkey to strengthen their cooperation on the migration crisis. They pushed for the full and speedy implementation of the *EU-Turkey Action Plan*, and the reduction of the number of illegal entries from Turkey to Greece. The Heads of State

or Government agreed that bold moves were needed to close down people smuggling routes, to break the business model of the smugglers, to protect external borders and to end the migration crisis in Europe. They agreed to work on the basis of the principles they contain:

- to return all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into the Greek islands with the costs covered by the EU;
- to resettle, for every Syrian readmitted by Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian from Turkey to the EU Member States, within the framework of the existing commitments;
- to accelerate the implementation of the visa liberalization roadmap with all Member States with a view to lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens at the latest by the end of June 2016;
- to speed up the disbursement of the initially allocated 3 billion euros to ensure funding of a first set of projects before the end of March and decide on additional funding for the Refugee Facility for Syrians;
- to prepare for the decision on the opening of new chapters in the accession negotiations as soon as possible, building on the October 2015 European Council conclusions;
- to work with Turkey in any joint endeavour to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria which would allow for the local population and refugees to live in areas which will be more safe.

On 17-18 March, during the European Council, EU and Turkish leaders reached an agreement aimed at stopping the flow of irregular migration via Turkey to Europe, breaking the business model of smugglers and offering migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk. In order to break the business model of the smugglers and to offer migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk, the EU and Turkey decided to end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU. In order to achieve this goal, they agreed on the additional action points. Firstly, all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 would have been returned to Turkey. Secondly, for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian would have been resettled from Turkey to the EU taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria. Thirdly, the EU, in close cooperation with Turkey, would have further speed up the disbursement of the initially allocated 3 billion euros under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey and ensure funding of further projects for persons under temporary protection identified with swift input from Turkey before the end of March.

On 23 May, during the European Council, Ministers had a discussion on the external aspects of migration. They reviewed the implementation of the *Valletta action plan* and the *EU-Turkey statement*. The Council welcomed the work done on the Eastern Mediterranean route to manage the large refugee and irregular migration flows along the Western Balkans route and underlined the importance of further decisive steps taken in the implementation of the 18th March EU-Turkey statement.

On 15 December, the European Council reiterated its commitment to the *EU-Turkey statement* and underlined the importance of a full and non-discriminatory implementation of all aspects. It

endorsed the Joint Action Plan on the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement elaborated between Greece and the Commission and welcomed the fact that Greece has already taken first steps towards its implementation.

The increase in relations between the European Union and Turkey on the issue of immigration has had concrete consequences on their relationship. Turkey is a candidate country for membership of the EU. However, the type relationships initiated in 2016 were imposed more by necessity than by the spirit of cooperation, this is why the European Parliament has always expressed its doubts about the "soft politics" towards Turkey, accusing the European Council and the Commission of excessive generosity towards Erdogan. However, a balance has been maintained, trying not to fall further down to the Turkish claims on immigration, and trying to maintain a certain harmony within the European institutions on the approach adopted to manage the migration crisis.

### **The Turkish coup attempt and its consequences**

On July 15 2016, the beginning of a breaking point of this relationship founded on mutual need and a forced cooperation was marked. In the night between Friday and Saturday some Turkish military **ies** **have** attempted a coup against the government and against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The coup failed, but not all the military rebels have surrendered or delivered to the police. **On** Friday night the bridge over the Bosphorus in Istanbul was closed, while military groups have occupied roads, airports, and locations of the major television stations and newspapers, especially in the cities of Ankara and Istanbul. Immediately there were reports of clashes between the military coup leaders and police, who have joined hundreds of civilians who demonstrated themselves in support of Erdogan, on his own request.

Police and demonstrators in favour of the government began to fight back with increasing effectiveness and hundreds of soldiers have surrendered or were arrested by the police. At least 265 people died in the clashes. Nearly three thousand members of the military were arrested, and more than 2,700 judges were removed from office. During the afternoon, the air base at Incirlik, from where US planes are bombing the ISIS in Syria, was isolated and electric current was disconnected. The first reaction of Erdogan was to accuse Fetullah Gulen to have been plotting against him and even the Turkish opposition parties have condemned the attempted coup. Gulen has denied any involvement in the attempted coup.

Fetullah Gulen, preacher and Turkish political scientist, leader of the Hizmet movement, from his self-imposed exile in the United States has denied his responsibility. Relations between Erdogan and Gulen have started to crack in 1999, when Gulen moved to the United States. The complete break dates investigation for corruption of 17 December 2013 that swept Erdogan government. And now the Turkish president deems the organizer of a terrorist group, and a real "parallel state" in order to depose him.

According to the major newspapers, on July 18 (that is, three days after the attempted coup), there were nearly 9000 employees of the Interior Ministry that have been relieved of their duties and jailed: police officers, prefects, gendarmes, governors of provincial districts, generals, senior officials of the State. Over 700 judges have been removed and ended up in handcuffs. According to the data provided at the beginning of 2017 there were 41.326 people arrested in Turkey in

connection with the failed coup of July 15, on charges of links with the alleged coup preacher Gulen network. At least 6,325 soldiers, including 168 generals and admirals, 7,624 policemen and 2,286 judges were removed. In total, persons against whom criminal proceedings have been initiated are 103,850.

The European institutions have decided to react in front of the approach taken by Turkey to fight and "punish" the attempted coup. In fact, on November 22, during the plenary session in Strasbourg, the European Parliament asked the Commission to temporarily freeze Turkey's accession in the EU, not only for the purges but mostly because of the intention of Erdogan to reintroduce the death penalty. In fact, on November 24 the European Parliament has overwhelmingly approved a resolution calling for the suspension of negotiations on Turkey's accession to the EU. The document, backed by conservatives, socialists, liberals and greens, got the green light with 479 votes in favour, 37 against and 107 abstentions. The Turkish Ministry for European Affairs said in a statement that the vote had no practical effect, because it is the European Council the only institution that may decide on the suspension. The paper strongly condemns the repressive measures taken by Turkish government after the failed coup. The resolution voted by the European Parliament is not legally binding, since the Parliament has no formal role in the activation of these initial mechanisms, but is a strong element of political pressure.

According to some experts in the field of international relations, the attitude of Turkey is not constructive for EU accession, and it can also undermine relations with the West. Turkey's leaders are heading toward a clear-cut divorce from the European Union, due to current domestic political trends in the country. According to Judy Dempsey, non-resident senior fellow at Carnegie Europe and editor in chief of Strategic Europe, given the unstable domestic environment in Turkey and Ankara's proclivity to denounce the so-called enemies everywhere to ramp up nationalist feelings, the challenge for the EU is to prevent a further deterioration in relations. EU leaders should stick to four key positions. First, Turkey is a strategic partner and dialogue channels should remain open. The Syrian crisis and terrorism are two reasons among many to keep this dialogue open. Second, those EU policies and programs under way—such as the EU-Turkey Customs Union, the March 2016 refugee deal, the Erasmus student exchange program, and projects under the EU's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)—as well as those frozen by Turkey should be continued or restored, to the benefit of all. Third, visa liberalization is an important commitment with mutual benefits, and it should not be dropped. Fourth, Turkey's path toward autocratic rule makes progress on EU accession impossible. This need does not translate into a formal freeze of membership talks, as suggested by the European Parliament in a vote on November 24, but it should certainly lead to a slowdown until better times. The EU simply cannot entertain a normal relationship with a country where thousands of people are jailed or dismissed from their jobs. The situation in Turkey became unacceptable from a Western liberal perspective because the rules adopted after 15 July aren't in conformity with the European principles.

In fact the issue is more complex than it seems. Although the Parliament shows a form of resistance, conforms to the European public opinion, the Commission does not share this view. It is not a matter of foresight or ability; it is simply a game of roles. Turkey, at least for now, is a key partner for the EU, which means that even if Erdogan's policy is not in line with the European principles the Commission wants to keep open the dialogue and cooperation. First, the migration issue is at the heart of the interests of both partners, and cooperation is essential in order to achieve

a "win-win result". This is why the Commission takes a softer approach, considering that Turkey can be an important player for the Syrian issue. Secondly, and as a result, the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey is a step forward for the peace process in Syria. In fact, on December 28, 2016, Russia and Turkey have agreed to a cease-fire in Syria. Looking at this form of approach from a geopolitical perspective, the EU could benefit from this collaboration because the UE knows that achieving peace serves the will of most actors who sometimes have different interests.

In conclusion, even if half a century has passed since the beginning of the "forced" relations between the EU and Turkey, the mutual need is the same. In fact, even Ankara needs a relationship with the EU because of the visa issue, which is still suspended. It appears that the attempted coup of July showed on one hand the true nature of the Turkish approach (considered as inappropriate for the Europeans), and on the other hand it demonstrated how the international system is smooth and elastic, far from the *realpolitik*, and closer to the *balance of power*. Although it apparently seems to be the opposite, no state or organization is static in its position to pursue its own interests at all costs. According to the *balance of power* it is necessary to consider the principle based on the yield/get in the name of a maintained "stable international balance". The stable international balance does not necessarily mean the absence of friction, but it implies the capacity to control the threat: no state or organization is disproportionately more powerful than another. So there is an awareness founded on the idea that the cooperation on the common points is more important than adoption of a personal straight line that put at risk the balance. The European Union and Turkey are two different actors with their own view of politics, religion, culture, and ethical standards. However they both, each in its own way, have a common interest, and that is to maintain a balance. From this point of view, their relationship, which apparently might seem forced in the optical of the game with two pawns, appear to be "harmonious" if we consider the actors of the whole board, which, in their own way, want a groped to maintain a balance.

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