

The Strategic Significance and Direction of Turkey-EU Relations in the New Era

Yeni Dönem Türkiye-AB İlişkilerinin Stratejik Anlamı ve İlişkilerin Yönü

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Özet

Bu çalışma, Türkiye ile Avrupa Birliği (AB) ilişkilerinin tarihsel arka planı, yaşanan kriz dinamikleri ve 2022-2025 döneminde ortaya çıkan yeni stratejik konjonktür doğrultusunda yeniden şekillenen iş birliği modelini analiz etmektedir. Çalışmada, Türkiye-AB ilişkilerinin 1963 Ankara Anlaşması'ndan günümüze uzanan seyri, dönemsel kırılmalar ve müzakere süreçleri üzerinden değerlendirilmiş, özellikle 2016 sonrasında yaşanan siyasi gerilimlerin ilişkiler üzerindeki etkisi detaylı bir şekilde ele alınmıştır. Ayrıca çalışmada, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, NATO'nun artan önemi, enerji arz güvenliği sorunları ve Donald Trump'ın yeniden ABD başkanı seçilmesi gibi gelişmelerin AB'nin dış politika ve güvenlik önceliklerini yeniden belirlemesine neden olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu gelişmeler doğrultusunda Türkiye'nin Karadeniz'deki jeopolitik konumu, enerji geçiş rotalarındaki rolü, NATO içindeki askeri kapasitesi ve bölgesel diplomasideki etkinliği, AB açısından stratejik değerini artırmıştır. Bu süreçte, 3 Nisan 2025 tarihinde gerçekleştirilen Türkiye-AB Yüksek Düzeyli Ekonomik Diyalog Toplantısı, yalnızca ekonomik ilişkilerin değil, enerji, güvenlik ve dijital dönüşüm gibi stratejik alanların da gündeme taşındığı çok boyutlu bir iş birliği sürecinin başlangıcı olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışmanın ulaştığı temel sonuç, Türkiye-AB ilişkilerinin yeni dönemde tam üyelik perspektifinden uzaklaştığı, buna karşılık "seçici iş birliği" ve "stratejik ortaklık" temelinde yeniden şekillenmeye başladığıdır. Bu yeni ilişki modelinin sürdürülebilirliği ise taraflar arasında karşılıklı güven inşası, diyalog mekanizmalarının işlerliği ve ortak çıkar odaklı çok katmanlı iş birliği modellerinin geliştirilmesine bağlıdır. Türkiye'nin Avrupa Siyasi Topluluğu gibi yeni platformlarda etkin rol üstlenmesi ve AB'nin dışlayıcı yaklaşımlardan uzak, daha kapsayıcı ve pragmatik bir strateji benimsemesi halinde, ilişkilerin çok katmanlı ve işlevsel bir ortaklık zeminine evrilebileceği öngörülmektedir.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye-AB İlişkileri, Yüksek Düzeyli Ekonomik Diyalog, Stratejik Ortaklık, Seçici İş Birliği, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı.

Abstract

This study analyzes the historical background of Turkey-European Union (EU) relations, the dynamics of recurring crises, and the newly emerging cooperation model shaped within the strategic conjuncture of the 2022-2025 period. The research evaluates the trajectory of Turkey-EU relations from the 1963 Ankara Agreement to the present, focusing on periodic ruptures and negotiation processes, with particular attention to the political tensions that have affected bilateral relations, especially since 2016. Furthermore, the study reveals how developments such as the Russia-Ukraine War, the increasing importance of NATO, energy supply security challenges, and the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States have led the EU to redefine its foreign policy and security priorities. In this context, Turkey's geopolitical position in the Black Sea, its role in energy transit routes, its military capacity within NATO, and its diplomatic influence in regional crises have significantly increased its strategic value for the EU. Within this framework, the Turkey-EU High-Level Economic Dialogue Meeting held on April 3, 2025, has been evaluated as a turning point not only for reviving economic relations but also for initiating a multidimensional cooperation process covering critical areas such as energy, security, and digital transformation. The study concludes that in this new period, Turkey-EU relations have moved away from a full membership perspective and have started to be reshaped on the basis of "selective cooperation" and "strategic partnership." The sustainability of this new relationship model depends on the establishment of mutual trust, the operationalization of dialogue mechanisms, and the development of multilayered cooperation models based on common interests. It is further suggested that if Turkey assumes an active role in new platforms such as the European Political Community, and if the EU adopts a more inclusive and pragmatic strategy instead of exclusionary approaches, relations may evolve into a more structured, functional, and sustainable partnership framework.

Keywords: Turkey-EU Relations, High-Level Economic Dialogue, Strategic Partnership, Selective Cooperation, Russia-Ukraine War.

Introduction

Since its foundation, Turkey has adopted reaching the level of modern civilisation as one of its main goals and has closely followed international developments in this direction. In this process, Turkey has taken part in important international organisations such as the OECD, the Council of Europe and NATO in order to ensure its integration with Western institutions or has made attempts to become a member of these institutions. In particular, the Cold War period was a critical period for Turkey, which aimed both to distance itself from the pressure of the Soviet Union and to avoid political and economic isolation by positioning itself within the Western Bloc. In this context, Ankara aimed to establish strong ties with the West in order to support economic development and to strengthen its security within the framework of collective defence mechanisms. Moreover, Turkey continued to seek a balancing role within the US global strategy and diversified its relations with Western European countries not only on the security axis but also on the economic and political levels. Thus, Turkey's relations with the European Economic Community (EEC) became an important part of this multidimensional foreign policy approach. Turkey's application to the EEC was motivated not only by expectations for economic development, but also by the desire to intervene in the political balance in Europe and to take a position against Greece's possible negative initiatives.

In line with the above-mentioned goals and objectives, Turkey made an official application to the EEC on 31 July 1959, but the application process caused controversy in the EEC member countries. In particular, Turkey's Muslim identity, its economic development level and the inadequacy of its industrial infrastructure were criticised by the European public and decision-making circles. However, the geopolitical conditions of the period, namely the Soviet threat posing a common risk to the security of Europe, prevented the EEC countries from completely closing the doors to Turkey and instead of membership, a partnership relationship was proposed. For Europe, Turkey was both a security buffer in the Eastern Mediterranean and a strategic border line against the spread of communism. As a result of these discussions, EEC member states offered Turkey an association relationship rather than membership and Turkey accepted this proposal. In this framework, the Ankara Treaty was signed between Turkey and the EEC on 12 September 1963 and entered into force on 1 December 1964. Although Article 28 of the Treaty envisaged Turkey's full membership as the ultimate goal, it signalled a difficult and protracted negotiation process from the beginning. The gradual progress of the association relationship was directly linked to the geopolitical balances of the period, the sensitivities of European public opinion and Turkey's economic capacity.

Between 1964 and 1970, relations continued in a normal course, but after the 1970s, there was a period of serious fluctuations in the relations between the parties. Especially after the 1974 Cyprus Operation, European countries' criticisms and sanctions against Turkey caused a serious break in relations. In the 1980s, Turkey's efforts to revitalise its relations with the EEC within the framework of liberal economic reforms and rapprochement policies with the West came to the fore. In this direction, Turkey's application for full membership on 14 April 1987 was one of the important turning points in this process. However, the application was rejected by the European Commission in 1989 on the grounds that Turkey's economic and political competences were not sufficient. However, it was decided to continue relations within the framework of the construction of the Customs Union. Therefore, relations were accelerated in line with the construction of the CU. In the 1990s, with the deepening of the institutional structure of the European Union and its enlargement process, Turkey-EU relations entered a new phase. In 1995, the entry into force of the Customs Union partially integrated Turkey into the EU internal market, but the perspective of full membership remained uncertain. At the 1999 Helsinki Summit, Turkey was officially recognised as a candidate country, which created a new momentum in relations.

As a result of this momentum, accession negotiations started on 3 October 2005. Initially, this process was considered as a historical threshold in Turkey-EU relations. However, the Cyprus problem, the EU's double standard policies towards Turkey, and the problems regarding human rights, freedom of expression and judicial independence posed serious obstacles to the accession process. Moreover, the EU's freezing of eight chapters in 2006 and veto threats by France and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus were among the factors that blocked the process. Starting in 2006, this tension between the two sides continued until 2010, and the period after 2010 was a period in which the crisis of trust deepened and political discourses hardened in the relations between the two sides. After the coup attempt in 2016, this tension between the parties was criticised by the EU, especially on the grounds of the regression in the field of human rights, democracy and rule of law, while Turkey criticised the EU for applying double standards and blocking the membership process for political reasons. In this environment, by 2022, Turkey-EU relations had moved away from the formal membership perspective and settled on a pragmatic ground based on selective cooperation, migration management, energy security and trade relations. In particular, Eastern Mediterranean tensions, the Cyprus issue and border disputes with Greece continued to be the main issues that prevented the normalisation of relations. On the other hand, with new initiatives such as the European

Political Community, the EU has sought cooperation models without excluding Turkey. Turkey, on the other hand, has continued to expand its strategic bargaining areas in its relations with the EU by emphasising its geopolitical importance and its role as an energy corridor.

As can be seen, the relations between Turkey and the European Union have been tested by various crises and tensions in the historical process, and although there have been views on the European side to suspend or terminate relations in some periods, the parties have not severed relations and even sought ways to revitalise them. "Strategic Meaning and Direction of Turkey-EU Relations in the New Era", this study will seek an answer to the question of why the relations have not been interrupted despite the crises between the parties and which strategic, economic and geopolitical dynamics have made this process decisive. In addition, the study will chronologically and thematically examine the crises that have emerged between the parties since the 1990s, and then discuss the effects of these crises on today's Turkey-EU relations. In addition, the High-Level Economic Dialogue Meeting held on 3 April 2025 will be examined in detail and the importance of this meeting in terms of the strategic dimension and future of relations will be analysed.

Crisis Dynamics and Conflict Areas in Turkey-EU Relations

Although the relations between Turkey and the European Union were institutionalised with the Ankara Agreement signed in 1963, they have followed an up and down course in the intervening sixty-two years. During this long period, while there have been periods of co-operation in which mutual strategic interests have come to the fore from time to time, relations have occasionally come to a standstill due to serious political tensions and structural incompatibilities. In particular, Turkey's official acceptance as a candidate country in 1999 and the launch of accession negotiations in 2005 created a positive atmosphere between the parties. However, the anti-Turkey policies of EU member states, Turkey-EU foreign policy incompatibility, Islamophobia, the Cyprus problem, the slowdown in democratic reforms, concerns over fundamental rights and freedoms, freedom of expression and press freedom and judicial independence have come to the fore as the main factors undermining the stability of relations. The European Union's foreign policy vision is essentially based on normative values, namely democracy, human rights and the rule of law. However, this idealistic approach is tested by strategic imperatives and often balanced with realpolitik preferences, especially when it comes to geopolitically critical countries such as Turkey. This duality is also evident in Turkey-EU relations. On the one hand, the democratic backsliding in Turkey is criticised, while on the other hand, the will to continue cooperation is maintained due to Turkey's functional role in issues such as migration management, energy supply security, counter-terrorism and regional stability. Therefore, the desire to revitalise relations after each crisis is not only an indication of the continuity of political dialogue, but also of the EU's effort to preserve its own strategic interests.

In this framework, for example, the 1990s is a period in which globalisation gained momentum and trade, capital flows and technological transformation transcended national borders and shaped new economic orders (Kahraman, 2006, p. 28). This transformation has directly affected the European Union's strategic orientations as well as its relations with Turkey. In these years when the EU deepened its internal integration and accelerated its opening up to the outside world, Turkey became an important element in Europe's global market strategy thanks to **its geographical location and economic potential**. In other words, globalisation has had a profound impact on the EU and pushed the union to new searches. Because in the post-Cold

War period, economic borders gradually became meaningless for Western European countries and the free market ideology started to expand. In addition, the European Union did not only expand the internal market in this period, but also needed to establish strategic partnerships and production chains that would increase its competitiveness (Tocci, 2014, p. 11). In addition, many EU countries, especially Germany, sought to shift their labour-intensive production to lower-cost markets (Bluhm, 2000, p. 2). However, at the same time, the EU's initiation of a major wave of enlargement and the inclusion of the Greek Cypriot Administration of Cyprus in this process had a significant impact on Turkey-EU relations. Because according to the founding constitution of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960, the Republic of Cyprus could not be included in any international organisation of which Turkey and Greece were not members (Atalay and Töngür, 2007, 217). The EU accepted the Greek Cypriot administration's application and a timetable for accession negotiations and membership had to be determined for the Greeks. However, in the years when the Greek Cypriot administration applied for membership to the EU, the debate on whether the Greek Cypriot administration could become a member had already started and was about to turn into a deep crisis within the framework of international law. In addition, capital-owning global companies put pressure on the EU to grant Turkey candidate status (Ercan and Gemici, 2023, 865). Moreover, in the late 1990s, developing countries such as Turkey, with its young population and production potential, started to be seen as natural partners that would strengthen Europe's position in the global economy. However, in the 1990s, the EU criticised Turkey with the 28 February process and brought relations to a standstill. This is because the 28 February process led the EU to evaluate Turkey not only economically but also in terms of democratic values and the rule of law. The EU approached the accession process more cautiously and conditionally at a time when Turkey was under military tutelage and lacking in democratisation. In addition, the Cyprus problem, especially the so-called Kurdish issue, the violent incidents in Southeastern Anatolia and the practices in Turkey's domestic law stood out as the points where the EU saw Turkey as lacking in democratisation and blocked relations. However, in the light of global problems and the EU's geopolitical strategies, the European Union adopted a pragmatist approach at the 1999 Helsinki Summit and granted Turkey candidate status (Aykan, 2005, 341). This step was part of the EU's search for a closer relationship with Turkey as a reflection of the economic and strategic challenges it was facing on a global scale. The candidate status granted in 1999 was also a turning point in Turkey's path towards EU membership, allowing relations to revitalise and gain a new dynamism.

The EU's manoeuvre was perceived by Turkey as a positive development in the belief that this step would be followed by membership. This moderate atmosphere between the parties was further deepened by the 11 terrorist attacks and the rejection of the 1 March parliamentary resolution by the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US intervention in Iraq were events that deeply affected global security dynamics. When the US decided to intervene in Iraq under the pretext of the war against terrorism, the European Union opposed this intervention. The EU's lack of support for this operation stemmed from several main reasons. Firstly, the majority of the EU believed that the intervention was contrary to international law and advocated a solution based on multilateral diplomacy and United Nations resolutions. Countries such as France and Germany rejected the operation, criticising unilateral military intervention and the hegemonic approach of the United States. Moreover, many countries within the EU were concerned that the war could create regional instability and threaten international security. For these reasons, the EU's opposition to the Iraq Operation was shaped as both a military and diplomatic stance. Turkey's rejection of the 1 March Thesis in an environment where this mutual conflict between the US and the EU

continued was considered as an important development for the EU in this period. Because Turkey refused to provide logistical support to the US intervention in Iraq, which led to tension in the relations between the two sides. This attitude also reflected Turkey's quest for independence in domestic and foreign policy and its regional security concerns. However, for the EU, Turkey's stance marked a period when Turkey needed to take further steps in the democratisation process and domestic reforms. The EU continued to play an important role in Turkey's accession process and Turkey's implementation of harmonisation packages in many areas highlighted the need for the EU to not only see Turkey as a security ally, but also to make progress on fundamental values such as democratisation, rule of law and human rights. In response to these reform demands of the EU, Turkey has made a series of structural changes in order to create a more favourable impression in the accession process. Turkey's efforts were not ignored by the EU member states and they were obliged to act within the framework of the principle of fidelity, and they had to start accession negotiations with Turkey on 3 October 2005. However, although this process between Turkey and the EU, which started on 3 October 2005, was seen as an important turning point between the parties, it was also the beginning of a long and difficult process. On the one hand, it encouraged Turkey to undertake the reforms necessary for its accession to the EU, but on the other hand it was also fraught with certain uncertainties and obstacles. Although the EU's decision to accept Turkey as a member was a big step for both Turkey and Europe, it was considered as a process of "digestion" (Eravcı, 2020, 1539) and "open-ended" for many reasons.

However, immediately after the start of the negotiations, it became clear that the course of Turkey-EU relations would be determined by issues such as the Cyprus problem, the Gezi Park incident, foreign policy disagreements, the immigration problem and Donald Trump, who came to power in the US with the slogan "America first" and the policies he tried to implement. Between 2005 and 2022, these issues had an impact on relations. In 2005, with the start of negotiations, the Cyprus issue came to the fore as the main obstacle to Turkey's harmonisation process with the EU. However, before Turkey was granted candidate status, the EU sent a letter to Prime Minister Ecevit guaranteeing that the Cyprus issue would not be put before Turkey as an accession criterion in order to eliminate Ankara's reaction to the EU and to ensure the participation of then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit in the Helsinki Summit (Ercan and Gemici, 2023, 865). However, at the very beginning of the negotiations, the EU asked Turkey to recognise the Greek Cypriot Administration's EU membership. Turkey, on the other hand, did not recognise the Greek Cypriot Administration's EU membership and demanded an end to the isolation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. After the EU recognised the membership of the Greek part of Cyprus in 2004, it increased the pressure against Turkey. Since the late 2000s, there have been blockages in the negotiations between Turkey and the EU due to the Cyprus issue, and Turkey's efforts to restart negotiations with the Republic of Cyprus, especially in the 2010s, have not been sufficient to overcome the obstacles in the EU's accession process. Therefore, for a long time, the relations between the parties came to a standstill or even to a breaking point due to the Cyprus issue.

In addition to the Cyprus Issue, the Gezi Park protests that took place in 2013 have been a serious turning point in Turkey's EU membership process. During this period, the EU severely criticised Turkey on human rights, freedom of expression and democratic values (Yüßen, 2024, 70). While the Gezi Park events caused the EU to criticise Turkey harshly, Turkey's rhetoric towards the EU has also been extremely harsh. The mutual harsh rhetoric reached the point where the relations between the two sides were strained and the idea of ending the relations was advocated. However, the EU tried to soften relations from time to time during this period. The most important reason for this is the Arab Spring that erupted in 2010 and the irregular power that emerged afterwards and influenced the EU. The EU tried to find a solution to this irregular

migration that reached the European borders with the onset of the Arab Spring, but it was not successful. In the same period, the EU found the solution to the problem in revitalising relations with Turkey and tried to sign the Readmission Agreement by making some promises to Turkey. In this framework, the EU promised to provide 3+3 billion dollars in aid if the refugees stayed in Turkey. Subsequently, the EU promised Turkey that it would recognise the right of free movement of Turkish citizens across European borders subject to certain conditions. In addition, the EU revived the negotiations, which had been suspended due to the Cyprus issue and the Gezi Park events, and guaranteed that a new negotiation chapter would be opened. Within the framework of these promises, the Readmission Agreement between the parties was signed on 16 December 2013 and entered into force in early 2014 (Sipahioğlu, 2024, 106, Yüßen, 2024, 70). Just as relations with the EU were reviving, a coup attempt against Turkey's democratic order and governance structure took place on 15 July 2016. After the coup attempt failed, Turkey took measures and precautions against FETÖ members who attempted the coup. Within the scope of these measures, Turkey declared a state of emergency (State of Emergency) and thousands of people were arrested and suspended from public office. In addition, a large number of associations, foundations and media organisations were closed down by the Decree Laws (KHKs) issued in the aftermath of the coup attempt. However, these measures taken by Turkey against the coup attempt and those involved in the coup attempt were criticised by the EU. The EU criticised the state of emergency in Turkey, especially in the aftermath of the coup attempt, **incompatible with democratic values** and as **potentially damaging to Turkey's EU integration process**. In addition, the EU Commission and the European Parliament emphasised that Turkey should make reforms based on the rule of law (Kakışım, & Erdoğan, 2018, 18) and that **the negotiation process** should proceed more cautiously and carefully. The EU assessed these developments in Turkey's domestic politics as **authoritarianisation** and a decline in the rule of law. However, Turkey expected the EU to stand by Turkey in the face of the coup attempt rather than criticise it and to hand over to Turkey the coup plotters who took refuge in EU countries after the coup attempt. EU member states did not fulfil any of Turkey's expectations, harshly criticised Turkey and started to discuss the termination of relations. It should be noted here that on the same dates, a terrorist attack took place in France and in the face of this attack, the French government declared a state of emergency and decided to close many mosques. The EU member states considered these developments in France as normal and even made statements that they stood by France and marched shoulder to shoulder on the streets of France. The EU's behaviour in the face of these two developments caused controversy and Turkish public opinion lost confidence in the EU.

Moreover, after the 15 July coup attempt, Turkey-EU relations started to experience disagreements in foreign policy. In the period 2016-2022, the main sources of deepening disagreements between Turkey and the European Union in the context of foreign policy were Turkey's military operations in northern Syria, its energy policies in the Eastern Mediterranean, its intervention in the Libyan civil war and, in general, foreign policy steps incompatible with the EU's regional interests. In particular, Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring, which were carried out against the YPG, which Turkey sees as the Syrian extension of the PKK, with the aim of creating a safe zone and ensuring the return of refugees, were met with reaction by the EU and the European Union criticised these interventions in terms of compliance with international law, Syria's territorial integrity and humanitarian effects (Euro News, 2019). Especially after Operation Peace Spring, some EU member states decided to impose an arms embargo on Turkey, while the European Parliament made statements condemning the operations (Euro News, 2019). In the same period, Turkey's natural gas exploration activities in the Eastern Mediterranean in its continental shelf and in areas licensed

by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus caused serious tensions with Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus, and the EU described these developments as "contrary to the sovereignty rights of its member states". In this framework, sanctions against Turkey came to the agenda and limited sanctions were imposed on some individuals and companies. In addition, Turkey's military support to the GNA in Libya and the Turkey-Libya Memorandum of Understanding, which redefined maritime jurisdiction in the Eastern Mediterranean, caused criticism from the EU and especially France. Turkey's active support to Azerbaijan in the Karabakh War and its problems with the EU's strategic partners in the region, such as Egypt and the UAE, also deepened foreign policy disagreements. In this period, Turkey's foreign policy was shaped on a national security-oriented and autonomous axis rather than the West, while the EU did not consider this as a "harmonious partnership" approach, but as a competitive and problematic form of relationship. All these developments led to a narrowing of the strategic dialogue in Turkey-EU relations and an increase in mutual distrust.

However, the global crises between 2022 and 2025 have reasserted Turkey's strategic importance for the European Union. Developments such as the Russian-Ukrainian War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the re-election of Trump as the US president have made it imperative for the EU to cooperate with Turkey in the fields of security, energy, migration and foreign policy. Turkey has become a key regional security actor for the EU with its role in the Black Sea, its control of the Straits under the Montreux Convention and its grain corridor initiatives. In the context of energy supply security, Turkey's position on the routes from the Caspian, Central Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe has made it indispensable for the EU. Moreover, in the face of increasing migration pressure, Turkey has assumed the role of a buffer country within the framework of the Readmission Agreement, which has led to both financial and political support from the EU. On the diplomatic front, Turkey has contributed to multilateralism through its grain corridor and its role as a mediator in regional crises, leading the EU to consider Turkey not only as a candidate country but also as a geostrategic partner. In particular, Donald Trump's second term in the US presidency and his subsequent nationalist, unilateralist and alliance-oriented foreign policy approach has created a serious uncertainty in the European Union's security and foreign policy perspective. The Trump administration's critical approach towards NATO and its discourses and practices aimed at weakening the traditional structure of transatlantic relations have led the European Union to develop more autonomous strategies, especially in the fields of defence and foreign policy. On the other hand, the US administration's practices challenging the global trade order, especially the trade wars launched against China and increasing tariffs directly affected the European economy and disrupted the functioning of free trade, which led the EU to search for alternative trade partnerships and new markets. At this point, Turkey has come to the fore as an important trade partner for Europe due to its production capacity and its membership in the Customs Union. Therefore, Trump's economic and foreign policy-oriented moves have caused the EU to reconsider its relations with Turkey at a strategic level, and Turkey's importance in the fields of security, energy and trade has become more visible. In this framework, the EU decided to restart the High-Level Economic Dialogue Mechanism (IKV, 2016, p. 6), which was established on 29 November 2015 and held its first meeting on 25-26 April 2016. Previously, three meetings were held in 2016, 2017 and 2019 within the framework of the High-Level Economic Dialogue (Palabıyık and Davut, 2025) and in the following period, the EU-Turkey-EU High-Level Economic Dialogue meetings had lost their functionality by being overshadowed by political tensions. In fact, Turkey's full membership negotiations with the EU had virtually stalled at that time, and no progress had been made on updating the Customs Union. However, the European Union decided to revive the High Level Economic Dialogue meetings with Turkey at the EU General Affairs Council meeting following the election victory of US President Donald Trump.

In line with the schedule set by the EU, the Turkey-EU High Level Economic Dialogue meeting was held on 3 April 2025 and the parties agreed on strengthening economic cooperation, increasing trade volume and promoting joint investment projects.

Turkey-EU relations in the new era; Strategic Meaning and Direction of Relations

Within the framework of the Turkey-EU High-Level Economic Dialogue Mechanism established between Turkey and the European Union on 29 November 2015, the latest meeting to strengthen economic and financial cooperation between the parties was held in Istanbul on 28 February 2019. During this meeting, various issues for deepening economic relations, particularly increasing bilateral trade volume, improving the investment climate and updating the Customs Union, were discussed and views were exchanged. However, due to political tensions and diplomatic crises in the following period, the mechanism lost its functionality and regular meetings were cancelled. After waiting for a long period of time, the EU took a decision to revive the dialogue at the EU General Affairs Council meeting held in December 2024, and this decision was approved and formalised at the EU Heads of State and Government Summit. Following this decision, the Turkey-EU High Level Economic Dialogue Meeting was held on 3 April 2025 with the participation of the representatives of the parties. So what has changed from 2019 to today that the EU has decided to revitalise relations with Turkey? The answer to this question is obvious. The reason for this change in the EU is closely related to both the changes in the geopolitical conjuncture and the redefinition of the EU's strategic interests, as in previous periods. In other words, the détente in EU-Turkey relations is shaped by geopolitical necessities, energy and trade strategies and the pressures created by the US global policies. The following factors stand out in this process: Firstly, the Russia-Ukraine War and the Growing Importance of NATO, Russia's aggression led the EU to reconsider its security policies, and Turkey's strategic position in the Black Sea and its military capacity in NATO became indispensable. In addition, Turkey's mediation role in Ukraine (Grain Corridor) and its balanced relationship with the West have positively influenced the EU's approach to Ankara. The second important factor is the security of energy supply and Turkey's increasingly critical role as an energy corridor. In the aftermath of the Russo-Ukraine War, the EU's strategic objectives to reduce its dependence on Russian energy resources have brought energy projects through Turkey to the forefront. In this context, Turkey has become an important energy supply and transit country for the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the transportation of alternative energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe. This geo-economic role of Turkey in the energy field has become a strategic factor in the EU's energy security policies, which has elevated cooperation with Ankara to a strategic level. Another important factor in the process is the US Trade Wars and the emergence of the EU's need for economic diversification. The trade wars, which started in the Trump administration and continued under the Biden administration, increased US-EU trade tensions and directed the EU to alternative markets. In particular, the US steel and aluminium tariffs and technology export restrictions have negatively affected the EU economy, making trade cooperation with Turkey attractive. In addition, Turkey's young population, production capacity and the potential for updating the Customs Union were seen as an important alternative to reduce the EU's vulnerability in global supply chains. Another important factor is the expanding role of NATO and Turkey's defence contribution. Increasing global security threats (Russia, China) have reinforced the importance of NATO, and Turkey's military capacity (UCAVs, presence in the Middle East, Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean) has become a factor to be taken into account in the EU's defence strategies. As a natural consequence of all these developments, the decision to restart the Turkey-EU High-Level Economic Dialogue meetings in 2025 is a critical milestone in terms of bringing the strategic rapprochement between the parties to the institutional level. The resumption of this dialogue mechanism will not only ensure that mutual economic interests are

managed in a sustainable and predictable framework, but also pave the way for concrete cooperation in areas such as the update of the Customs Union, the European Green Deal, digital transformation and the resilience of supply chains. Moreover, it is envisaged that this process will contribute to the development of a cooperation model that deepens interdependence for a more effective integration of Turkey into the EU internal market and enhancement of Europe's global competitiveness.

However, in the face of this development, Turkey's **full membership to the European Union should not be expected in the short term. Because**, although geopolitical imperatives, energy security and global trade dynamics will revitalise EU-Turkey relations today, the process of full membership requires a much deeper and multidimensional transformation and should also be evaluated through **the historical and cultural identity of the European Union, especially the value foundations established on the basis of "Christian brotherhood"**.

Firstly, the political will for Turkey's membership within the EU is still limited. Some member states, notably France and Austria, are not in favour of Turkey's full membership and instead propose alternative models such as strategic partnership. Moreover, the EU frequently emphasises Turkey's shortcomings in areas such as democratisation, human rights, judicial independence and freedom of expression and expects Ankara to reform these areas.

Second, the Turkish case remains challenging for the EU's internal cohesion and enlargement policy. The EU is more cautious about post-Brexit enlargement, prioritising smaller countries with high adaptive capacity, such as the Western Balkans. Establishing a full membership relationship with a large, dynamic and strategically independent actor like Turkey raises serious debates in terms of the existing EU structural balances.

Thirdly, and most importantly, although the European Union is officially a union built on secular, pluralist and democratic values, its founding philosophy has a political and cultural code that is nourished by the Catholic and Christian democratic traditions of Western Europe. The Catholic Christian democratic roots of the founding leaders such as Schuman, Adenauer and De Gasperi gave the European project a "Christian peace" understanding. This cultural background has been influential in the formation of the European identity over time and has in a sense made the EU the modern expression of the idea of "Christian Europe". In this context, Turkey's Muslim identity and the fact that it comes from a different civilisational basin is seen in some EU circles as a fundamental reservation about the accession process. The argument that "Turkey is outside the cultural boundaries of Europe", which was frequently emphasised especially during the Nicolas Sarkozy era in France, is the clearest expression of this historical-cultural approach. Likewise, the Christian Democratic line in Germany has for many years defended the "privileged partnership" proposal for Turkey and distanced itself from the full membership perspective (Ömerci, 2012). This shows that beyond geopolitical and strategic interests, there is a structural obstacle to Turkey's EU membership as an identity issue. The fact that Turkey is governed by a secular constitutional system, is a member of NATO and has established strong relations with the West is not enough to overcome this cultural barrier. The issue is not only political, but also about European identity and collective memory. However, despite this cultural and historical barrier, structural imperatives such as deepening global crises, the threat of Russia, energy supply security, migrant crises and trade restructuring push the EU to act more pragmatically. Therefore, the EU prefers to establish functional partnerships with Turkey by keeping its reservations based on cultural identity in the background for a while.

In fact, the emphasis on strengthening cooperation between the parties in the fields of security, energy and economy at the Turkey-European Union High-Level Economic Dialogue Meeting held in Brussels on 3 April 2025 shows that EU-Turkey relations are being redefined and

maintained on a functional basis. If this meeting had been considered as a strategic step towards the resumption of the suspended accession negotiations within the framework of Turkey's full membership perspective, the EU could have positioned this meeting differently or cancelled the meeting citing domestic political developments in Turkey. As a matter of fact, in the context of the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu and the political developments that took place afterwards, it is known that some circles in Brussels expressed their opinions in favour of postponing the meeting. However, as a result of the assessments made, the European Union did not put this option into practice and concluded that the continuation of the dialogue was a more rational choice.

The meeting of 3 April 2025 clearly set out the priority areas of the EU's relations with Turkey. The main strategic issues that came to the fore in this framework are as follows:

- **Macroeconomic Stability and Structural Reforms:** During the meeting, the economic outlook of the parties was assessed and Turkey's fiscal discipline and structural reform agenda were discussed favourably.
- **Upgrading the Customs Union:** The need to update the existing Customs Union was confirmed by the parties. Turkey's production capacity and the EU's vulnerabilities in the global supply chain were among the main factors that increased the importance of this update.
- **Energy Supply Security and Turkey's Role as a Transit Country:** In the context of the EU's strategy to reduce its dependence on Russian energy, Turkey's key role in TANAP and other energy transit projects was emphasised.
- **Deepening Investment and Trade:** During the meeting, it was emphasised that mutual direct investments should be increased and joint projects should be developed in areas such as green transformation and digitalisation.
- **Visa liberalisation and financial cooperation:** Facilitating visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens and enhancing cooperation between Turkey and European financial institutions were among the main agenda items discussed.

The content of the meeting reveals that the EU prioritises the non-membership but strategic cooperation model with Turkey and that a period in which relations are redefined has been entered. This shows that the EU adopts a pragmatic approach in line with common interests by maintaining constructive dialogue with Turkey.

Conclusion

Although the relations between Turkey and the European Union have been tested by periodic fluctuations and structural problems in the historical process, it has been one of the rare foreign policy files that has survived without reaching a breaking point due to strategic and geopolitical imperatives. As the study reveals, the relations between the two sides are shaped not only by the membership perspective, but also by the relationship of interdependence in areas such as geopolitical requirements, energy security, trade and regional security. The dialogue mechanisms, which weakened due to political tensions and foreign policy disagreements, especially in the post-2016 period, tended to regain functionality with the impact of the global crises that deepened between 2022-2025.

Two main external factors have been decisive in the background of this rapprochement. The first one is the war environment that started with Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 and radically transformed Europe's security architecture. In the face of Russia's aggressive and

threatening policies, the EU sought to strengthen its defence capacity within NATO, and in this context, it considered Turkey's geopolitical importance and military capacity in the Black Sea as an indispensable element. Turkey's diplomatic contributions, such as the grain corridor initiative, and its balanced foreign policy stance have also contributed to a more constructive perception of Ankara in the EU.

The second external factor is the re-election of Donald Trump to the presidency in the US and the nationalist, unilateralist foreign policy approach pursued in this direction. Trump's critical rhetoric towards NATO and his distant approach to European security pushed the EU to seek more independent action in the fields of defence and foreign policy; in this process, Turkey has become a critical actor for Europe with its military power within NATO, its functionality in regional diplomacy and its role in energy transit routes. Moreover, the Trump administration's challenges to the global trade system and EU-US economic tensions have made the European Union more in need of dynamic production and trade partners such as Turkey.

In this context, the Turkey-EU High-Level Economic Dialogue Meeting held on 3 April 2025 was an important turning point where not only economic cooperation but also strategic and geopolitical cooperation areas were redefined. Looking at the agenda of the meeting, it is seen that the parties demonstrated a concrete will to cooperate on topics such as increasing trade volume, updating the Customs Union, energy supply security, digital transformation, green consensus and resilience of supply chains. This confirms the EU's tendency to develop a non-membership but strategic co-operation model towards Turkey.

Although this process offers functional cooperation opportunities for both sides, the likelihood of Turkey's full membership is very limited in the short and medium term. The lack of political will within the EU, the prioritisation of alternative geographies such as the Western Balkans in enlargement policies, and the EU's historical-cultural understanding of identity remain as the main factors weakening Turkey's membership process. Nevertheless, the EU is aware of the necessity to continue its cooperation with Turkey due to the geopolitical conjuncture, the Russian threat and post-Trump transatlantic uncertainties. Interdependence, especially on issues such as migration, energy and defence, constitute the main parameters that do not allow the relations between the parties to break down.

In conclusion, Turkey-EU relations are being reshaped along the axis of "selective co-operation" and "strategic partnership" even though they have moved away from the perspective of full membership. In this new era, the development of mutually beneficial, flexible and multi-layered co-operation models by the parties offers important opportunities both in terms of meeting Europe's security and energy supply security needs and supporting Turkey's goal of becoming a global actor. However, the ability of these opportunities to produce sustainable and functional results depends on building mutual trust between the parties and ensuring the functioning of dialogue mechanisms at the institutional level. In this framework, Turkey's active role in new regional and continental platforms such as the European Political Community and the European Union's adoption of an inclusive rather than exclusive strategic approach towards Ankara are critical for the transformation of relations into a multi-layered and long-term cooperation model.

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