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From Accession Conditionality to Strategic Ambiguity: Evaluating the European Union (EU)'s Influence on Democracy and Human Rights in Türkiye (1999–2025)

Katılım Koşulluğundan Stratejik Belirsizliğe: Avrupa Birliği (AB)'nin Türkiye'de Demokrasi ve İnsan Hakları Üzerindeki Etkisinin Değerlendirilmesi (1999–2025)

Seyfeddin Neslinebi[1]

Abstract

This This article examines the transformation of the EU's efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Türkiye from the 1999 Helsinki Summit to mid-2025. It analyses the evolution of EU policy instruments, periods of reform and democratic backsliding, and the internal and external factors shaping these processes. The study adopts a qualitative, historical-institutionalist literature review approach, synthesising EU Progress Reports, official EU–Türkiye documents, Türkiye's legal and constitutional reforms, and key political developments as interpreted in existing academic and policy-oriented scholarship. In the early 2000s, EU membership conditionality supported by accession negotiations, reform benchmarks, and pre-accession assistance contributed to significant democratic reforms in Türkiye. Over time, however, this influence weakened as accession credibility declined. Enlargement fatigue within the EU, domestic authoritarian consolidation in Türkiye, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt, and the growing prioritisation of migration and security concerns transformed EU–Türkiye relations into a more instrumental and short-term engagement. The article argues that this shift has diluted the EU's normative influence and that fostering lasting democratic resilience requires moving beyond narrowly defined geopolitical calculations.

Keywords: EU–Türkiye Relations, Democracy Promotion, Accession Conditionality, Post-Conditionality, Authoritarianism and Europeanization

Öz

Bu makale, AB'nin Türkiye'de demokrasi ve insan haklarını teşvik etme çabalarının 1999 Helsinki Zirvesi'nden 2025 ortalarına kadar geçirdiği dönüşümü inceliyor. AB politika araçlarının evrimini, reform dönemlerini, demokratik gerilemeleri ve bu süreçleri şekillendiren iç ve dış faktörleri analiz ediyor. Çalışma, AB İlerleme Raporlarını, resmi AB-Türkiye belgelerini, Türkiye'nin yasal ve anayasal reformlarını ve mevcut akademik ve politika odaklı çalışmalarda yorumlanan önemli siyasi gelişmeleri sentezleyen nitel, tarihsel-kurumsal bir literatür inceleme yaklaşımı benimsiyor. 2000'li yılların başlarında, katılım müzakereleri, reform ölçütleri ve katılım öncesi yardımlarla desteklenen AB üyeliği koşulları, Türkiye'de önemli demokratik reformlara katkıda bulundu. Ancak zamanla, katılım güvenilirliğinin azalmasıyla bu etki zayıfladı. AB içindeki genişleme yorgunluğu, özellikle 2016 darbe girişiminden sonra Türkiye'deki iç otoriter konsolidasyon ve göç ve güvenlik endişelerinin giderek daha fazla önceliklendirilmesi, AB-Türkiye ilişkilerini daha araçsal ve kısa vadeli bir ilişkiye dönüştürdü. Makale, bu değişimin AB'nin normatif etkisini zayıflattığını ve kalıcı demokratik direncin geliştirilmesinin dar kapsamlı jeopolitik hesaplamaların ötesine geçmeyi gerektirdiğini savunuyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: AB–Türkiye İlişkileri, Demokrasi Teşviki, Katılım Koşulluluğu, Koşulluluk Sonrası Dönem, Otoriterleşme ve Avrupaileşme

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Introduction

The role of the EU in promoting democracy and human rights beyond its borders has long been a central component of its foreign policy. One of the most visible places where this normative agenda has been tested is in its relations with Türkiye, a long-term candidate country whose full membership process has increasingly diverged from the Union's core democratic values. Since Türkiye was formally granted candidate status at the Helsinki European Council in 1999, its relations with the EU have been a critical example for understanding the dynamics, instruments and limits of EU-led norm transposition. Initially presented as a success story of the transformative power of the conditionality mechanism, this relationship has over time become emblematic of a broader trend: the replacement of rules-based participation with strategic pragmatism in the face of democratic backsliding (Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2020; Schimmelfennig, 2021).

This study critically examines the changing impact of the EU on democracy and human rights in Türkiye between 1999 and 2025. It seeks to answer the following interconnected questions: How did the EU promote democracy and human rights in Türkiye during this period? Which institutional mechanisms and political instruments were effective and over what time periods? Which internal and external developments hindered or reshaped the EU's capacity for normative influence? By addressing these questions, the article aims to assess the long-term coherence and impact of the EU's democracy promotion in the context of a strategically important but increasingly authoritarian partner country.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to fill empirical and conceptual gaps in the literature on EU enlargement, norm transposition and external governance. While much work has been done on the EU's normative power (Manners, 2002) and conditionality-based candidate country policies (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005), there are few studies that address both the transformative successes and the collapse of this model in the Turkish context in a holistic and longitudinal manner. In addition, this article contributes to current debates on post-conditionality and strategic uncertainty in cases where the membership perspective has weakened but interdependence continues (Tocci, 2021; Börzel & Risse, 2020).

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, historical-institutionalist approach. It uses a process-tracing method based on primary sources such as the European Commission Progress Reports for the period 1999–2023, European Parliament (EP) resolutions, and Türkiye's official legal-political reforms. These sources are supplemented with secondary academic literature and media analysis to contextualize critical turning points such as the 2007 constitutional crisis, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the 2016 coup attempt, and the EU–Türkiye refugee deal. With this multi-source method, the EU's approach, shaped by both normative tools and strategic interests over time, is revealed in detail.

In this respect, the article positions Türkiye not only as an exception but also as an illustrative example that questions the assumptions on which the EU's democracy promotion framework is based. The Turkish experience reveals the limits of normative power when deprived of a credible membership perspective and coherent interaction; it highlights the need for the EU to reconsider its strategy in neighboring countries.

1. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

1.1. Conceptual Foundations: Normative Power, Conditionality, and Post Conditionality

This study builds its analytical framework around three interrelated concepts in the EU external relations literature: normative power, membership conditionality, and post-

conditionality. Rather than treating these concepts as separate or sequential phases, the article conceptualizes them as components of a single, evolving governance framework through which the EU has sought to shape political change in candidate and neighboring states. The core argument advanced here is that the transformation from conditionality to post-conditionality does not signify the end of EU normative influence, but its reconfiguration under conditions of declining credibility, strategic prioritization, and institutional ambiguity.

The notion of the EU as a normative power rests on its ability to diffuse norms such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law through attraction, persuasion, and institutionalization rather than coercion (Manners, 2002). In the context of enlargement, this normative orientation became operationalized through membership conditionality, whereby access to EU institutions and benefits was made contingent upon compliance with the acquis and adherence to political criteria (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). Conditionality thus functioned as the institutional bridge between normative aspirations and concrete domestic reforms in candidate states.

Türkiye's accession process initially conformed to this logic. The early 2000s demonstrated that when accession prospects were perceived as credible, EU conditionality retained substantial transformative capacity. However, as accession negotiations stalled and political trust eroded on both sides, the linkage between norm compliance and institutional rewards weakened. This erosion marks the transition towards what recent scholarship conceptualizes as post-conditionality (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017; Schimmelfennig, 2021). In this phase, the EU continues to engage with partners, but without a credible accession horizon and with diminished leverage to enforce democratic norms.

This article advances the post-conditionality debate by arguing that the EU–Türkiye relationship is best understood not merely as a case of declining conditionality or functional substitution, but as one characterized by strategic uncertainty. Unlike accounts that frame post-conditionality as a shift toward purely transactional cooperation (Börzel & Risse, 2021), this study highlights how the absence of a clear long-term political objective produces normative ambiguity. The EU neither fully abandons its democratic expectations nor meaningfully enforces them, resulting in selective engagement that prioritizes migration management, security cooperation, and energy dialogue while sidelining political reform.

Türkiye is treated in this study not as an exceptional outlier, but as an analytically illustrative case of a broader pattern observable in the EU's relations with accession candidates and close neighbors whose membership prospects have become uncertain. While Türkiye's geopolitical weight, domestic political trajectory, and institutional history render it a particularly salient case, the dynamics observed here normative dilution, sectoral engagement, and reduced leverage are increasingly relevant to EU relations with other states in its wider neighborhood.

By tracing how normative power is reinterpreted and constrained under post-conditionality, this article contributes to the literature by shifting the analytical focus from whether EU influence persists to how it changes in form and effect. It argues that post-conditionality does not eliminate normative power but weakens its coherence and predictability, thereby reducing its capacity to foster sustained democratic transformation. This theoretical framing provides the basis for examining the evolving limits of EU democracy promotion in Türkiye across different phases of the accession process.

1.2. Methodology and Data Collection

This This study adopts a qualitative, historical-institutionalist literature review approach to examine long-term institutional change and policy evolution in EU–Türkiye relations**.** Drawing on process tracing as an interpretive framework **(**George & Bennett, 2005), the analysis organizes key developments and turning points identified in the existing literature rather than conducting original empirical document analysis**.**

The study synthesizes primary policy documents such as European Commission progress reports and strategy papers (1999–2023), EP's decisions on Türkiye**,** Türkiye's constitutional and legislative reforms**,** official EU–Türkiye communications (e.g. the 2016 Migration Statement)**,** and public statements by EU and Turkish actors as reported and interpreted in scholarly and policy-oriented sources**.** Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic studies and think tank publications**.** The period 1999–2025 is divided into four analytical phases to capture shifts in EU influence and political transformation in Türkiye**.**

1.3. Research Questions and Original Contribution

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How did the EU promote democracy and human rights in Türkiye between 1999 and 2025?
2. In which periods did the EU's instruments of influence generate meaningful reform leverage, and when did they lose effectiveness?
3. How did domestic political developments in Türkiye and changes in the regional and international environment constrain this agenda?

The article's original contribution lies in its integrated and longitudinal assessment of EU normative strategies and democratic change in Türkiye over a twenty-five-year period. While much of the existing literature focuses on specific phases such as the reform-oriented accession period before 2007 or the authoritarian turn after 2016 this study systematically links democratic regression in Türkiye with structural transformations in EU policy instruments. In doing so, it advances the post-conditionality literature by analyzing a case in which declining democratic standards coincide not with disengagement, but with deepening interdependence and selective EU engagement. This perspective refines existing accounts of post-conditionality by highlighting how normative influence may erode gradually under conditions of sustained strategic cooperation.

2. Literature Review

The literature on the external relations of the EU has long emphasized that theEU has a normative power identity (Manners, 2002). Unlike traditional geopolitical actors, the EU has been seen as shaping international outcomes by promoting universal norms/values embedded in international law and human rights regimes. This normative identity was institutionalized in enlargement policy through the political criteria established at the 1993 Copenhagen European Council.

Empirical studies show that conditionality-based enlargement successfully promoted democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe (Grabbe, 2006; Vachudova, 2005). However, these successes depended largely on credible membership perspectives and the demand for social Europeanization elements that have increasingly weakened in the Turkish case. Critics argue that the EU's normative power is inconsistent and selective, especially when strategic interests are at stake (Diez, 2005; Bicchi, 2006).

Türkiye provides a complex case in this regard. Although significant constitutional and civil rights reforms in line with EU norms were implemented in the 2001–2005 period, the impact of conditionality began to weaken in a short time. Researchers such as Aydın-Düzgit and Keyman (2020) point out that transformations in domestic politics, elite resistance, and the rise of a competitive authoritarian regime halted the reform momentum. In addition, factors such as the suspension of some negotiation chapters due to the Cyprus problem and political skepticism in member states have also undermined the credibility of EU conditionality (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2009).

Recent literature conceptualizes the EU's departure from normative interaction within the framework of post-conditionality (Schimmelfennig, 2021) and "ad hoc" approaches (Tocci, 2021). These approaches emphasize that cooperation is no longer norm-based but issue-based (e.g. migration, energy, security) and that transnationalism has come to the fore. In the case of Türkiye, the 2016 EU–Türkiye Migration Agreement is often cited as an emblematic example of this transition. The literature increasingly argues that the EU's external democratizing potential has weakened and that it has lost its effectiveness, particularly in regions where internal receptivity is low and strategic dependencies are high (Börzel & van Hüllen, 2014).

This article integrates these conceptual and empirical insights from the literature into a time-based framework to examine how the EU's tools and influence have adapted or failed to adapt to changing political conditions in Türkiye. It argues that the Turkish case reveals not only the limits of the EU's influence, but also how democracy promotion strategies in hybrid or authoritarian regimes need to be rethought.

3. 1999–2005: The Golden Era of Conditionality

The The period from 1999 to 2005 constitutes the most effective phase of EU democratic influence in Türkiye, not because of the intrinsic strength of EU norms alone, but due to the rare alignment of two enabling conditions: credible membership prospects and high domestic political receptiveness. This convergence created a context in which EU conditionality operated as a meaningful incentive structure rather than a symbolic reference point. The recognition of Türkiye as a candidate country at the Helsinki European Council in 1999 marked the institutionalization of this alignment by embedding domestic reform efforts within the Copenhagen political criteria (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

During this phase, EU conditionality functioned through a clear reward-based logic: progress in political and legal reforms was met with tangible advances in the accession process (Grabbe, 2006). European Commission Progress Reports from 2000 to 2004 consistently highlighted improvements in civil–military relations, human rights protection, judicial reform, and minority rights (European Commission, 2000; 2002; 2004). These reforms were not isolated legal adjustments but part of a broader reorientation of Türkiye's political agenda, in which Europeanisation became both a normative aspiration and a strategic instrument for institutional transformation.

Constitutional reform lay at the core of this process. Between 2001 and 2004, nine reform packages amended more than thirty articles of the 1982 Constitution, addressing long-standing deficiencies related to democratic governance (Kirişci, 2011). Key measures included the abolition of the death penalty, the curtailment of military tutelage over civilian institutions, and limited recognition of Kurdish-language broadcasting and education. Reforms also strengthened safeguards against torture, expanded civil liberties, and enhanced judicial independence (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016). These changes reflected not only EU demands but also the willingness of domestic political actors to internalize EU norms insofar as they aligned with their strategic interests.

The transformation of civil–military relations illustrates this causal mechanism particularly clearly. Reforms adopted in 2003 significantly reduced the institutional power of the military by restructuring the National Security Council (MGK), transforming it into an advisory body with a civilian majority and leadership (European Commission, 2003). Similar limitations were placed on military influence within regulatory institutions such as YÖK and RTÜK. These reforms were politically feasible because EU conditionality provided external legitimacy and protection for civilian actors seeking to weaken the tutelary system.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in 2002, played a central role in this reform coalition. In its early years, the party embraced EU membership as both a legitimizing discourse and a strategic tool to expand civilian political space vis-à-vis the secular bureaucratic establishment (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2009). This orientation was supported by liberal intellectuals, pro-market business groups, and segments of civil society that viewed EU accession as a safeguard against authoritarianism and a pathway to institutional modernization.

Public support further reinforced this alignment. Eurobarometer surveys in 2004 indicated that over 70 per cent of the Turkish public supported EU membership (Eurobarometer, 2004), providing societal legitimacy for reform efforts. Civil society organizations actively monitored implementation and advocated compliance with EU standards, particularly in areas such as gender equality, minority rights, and freedom of expression. Complementing political conditionality, EU financial and technical assistance initially through the MEDA program and later via the 2002–2006 Pre-Accession Financial Framework supported reforms in public administration, judicial training, prison infrastructure, and civil society capacity-building. These instruments enhanced the credibility of EU commitments and facilitated the diffusion of European norms through bureaucratic and institutional channels (Grabbe, 2006).

At the same time, this period was not without limitations. Implementation gaps persisted, particularly in the southeast of Türkiye and within security institutions, where practices often lagged behind formal legal reforms. Reports of police violence, restrictions on freedom of expression, and bureaucratic resistance raised early concerns about the depth and sustainability of the transformation (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016). Moreover, unresolved issues such as the Cyprus conflict and emerging scepticism within some EU member states foreshadowed future erosion of accession credibility.

These limitations are central to engaging with counterarguments in the literature. Some scholars argue that the reforms of the early 2000s were largely instrumental and elite-driven, lacking deep societal roots. While this critique is partially valid, the evidence suggests that even instrumental reforms can produce lasting institutional effects when supported by credible external incentives and broad domestic coalitions. Others contend that domestic political dynamics alone explain both reform and subsequent backsliding. This section does not deny the primacy of domestic agency; rather, it shows that EU conditionality was most effective when it reinforced domestic reform incentives and lost influence when this alignment weakened.

Despite its constraints, the 1999–2005 period remains the clearest illustration of the EU's potential as a transformative actor in Türkiye. It demonstrates that democratic conditionality can generate meaningful change when membership prospects are credible and domestic political actors perceive EU alignment as strategically advantageous. The eventual breakdown of this alignment, analyzed in subsequent sections, helps explain why EU influence proved conditional and reversible rather than permanently transformative.

4. 2006–2013: Stagnation and Fatigue

The period between 2006 and 2013 marks a decisive turning point in EU–Türkiye relations, characterized by the gradual breakdown of the causal mechanism that had previously enabled EU-driven democratic reform. As membership credibility weakened on the EU side and domestic political receptiveness declined in Türkiye, conditionality lost its capacity to function as an effective tool of normative transformation. Although the accession framework formally remained in place, it increasingly operated without meaningful incentives or political commitment.

A critical rupture occurred in 2006, when the European Council suspended eight negotiation chapters following Türkiye's refusal to open its ports and airports to the Republic of Cyprus. This decision had effects that went beyond technical obstruction. It signalled that progress in the accession process was no longer primarily linked to domestic reform performance but to unresolved geopolitical disputes, thereby undermining the credibility of EU conditionality (European Commission, 2006; Aydın-Düzgit, 2016). At the same time, enlargement fatigue within the EU intensified. Political discourses in key member states, notably France and Germany, increasingly framed Türkiye's accession in cultural and strategic terms, casting doubt on the EU's long-term commitment to membership (Schimmelfennig, 2008; Tocci, 2014). As incentives became uncertain and rewards ambiguous, the reform logic underpinning conditionality began to unravel.

This erosion of external credibility coincided with important shifts in Türkiye's domestic political landscape. Following the AKP's electoral victory in 2007, the party consolidated its power and recalibrated its relationship with the EU. Whereas EU norms had previously functioned as a legitimizing framework for reform, they gradually lost their strategic value as domestic constraints weakened (Öniş, 2012; Keyman & Aydın-Düzgit, 2017). Episodes such as the 2007 presidential crisis and the 2008 party closure case reinforced a siege mentality within the governing elite, contributing to a political discourse centered on sovereignty, national will, and majoritarianism. In this context, liberal-democratic norms particularly judicial independence, media freedom, and pluralism were increasingly portrayed as external impositions rather than shared standards.

Although the 2010 constitutional amendments were presented as part of the EU harmonization agenda, they were widely perceived as consolidating executive influence over the judiciary rather than deepening democratic checks and balances (Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2011). This development illustrates a broader pattern of selective and instrumental engagement with EU norms: reforms continued formally, but their substance increasingly diverged from the EU's democratization objectives.

The EU's own internal inconsistencies further weakened its normative influence during this period. The absence of a credible accession timetable, the politicization of progress reports, and perceptions of double standards particularly when similar democratic deficiencies were tolerated in other candidate or member states reinforced skepticism in Ankara regarding the EU's role as a neutral normative actor (European Commission, 2009; 2012; Grabbe, 2006). Consequently, EU criticism was increasingly dismissed by Turkish decision-makers as politically motivated rather than normatively grounded.

Civil society represents another domain where declining alignment became visible. While EU financial assistance had previously empowered rights-based organizations, from the mid-2000s onward these actors faced growing political pressure, regulatory constraints, and bureaucratic oversight (Börzel & Soyaltın, 2012). Although EU funding mechanisms persisted, they became progressively detached from broader political developments and thus less effective

as instruments of democratic leverage (Sissenich, 2010). The Gezi Park protests of June 2013 starkly exposed the depth of democratic backsliding and the limits of EU influence. The EU's muted and delayed response to state repressioncharacterized by excessive use of force, media censorship, and legal sanctions further eroded the credibility of its normative commitment (Tocci, 2014; Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2020).

This period also invites engagement with key counterarguments in the literature. Some scholars argue that EU influence was never deeply transformative and that earlier reforms were primarily elite-driven and instrumental. The developments between 2006 and 2013 lend partial support to this view, as the rapid reversal of reform momentum exposed the fragility of institutional change lacking strong societal anchoring. Others contend that domestic political dynamics alone explain democratic backsliding. While domestic agency was undoubtedly central, this section demonstrates that the decline of EU influence cannot be understood independently of the EU's diminishing credibility and strategic ambiguity. Backsliding accelerated precisely as the alignment between external incentives and domestic reform coalitions collapsed.

By the end of 2013, the accession process had lost its function as a mechanism for democratic convergence. Conditionality, once the cornerstone of EU–Türkiye relations, had been hollowed out by both external deadlock and internal political transformation. This phase paved the way for a more transactional and interest-driven relationship, setting the stage for the post-2013 period in which normative convergence would be largely replaced by strategic pragmatism.

5. 2013–2020: Authoritarian Turn and Transactionalism

The The period between 2013 and 2020 represents the consolidation of a structural shift in EU–Türkiye relations, during which the causal mechanism underpinning EU democratic influence effectively collapsed. As membership credibility was largely abandoned by the EU and domestic political receptiveness in Türkiye disappeared, the accession framework ceased to function as a channel for normative convergence. EU–Türkiye relations were reconfigured into a transactional and issue-specific partnership in which strategic interests consistently outweighed democratic considerations.

The Gezi Park protests of June 2013 marked a critical rupture in this process. While initially triggered by a local urban development project, the protests quickly evolved into a broader challenge to authoritarian governance, shrinking civic space, and the erosion of pluralism. The government's response characterized by excessive police violence, mass detentions, and media repression signaled a clear departure from EU democratic standards. Although EU institutions formally criticized these developments, the absence of sustained political or economic consequences underscored the declining credibility of EU conditionality (European Parliament, 2013; Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2014). This episode revealed that EU normative influence had become largely symbolic, no longer capable of shaping domestic political behavior.

The failed coup attempt of July 2016 accelerated authoritarian consolidation and further widened the gap between EU democratic norms and domestic political developments in Türkiye. The prolonged state of emergency enabled extensive purges across state institutions, the judiciary, academia, and the media, contributing to a significant restructuring of the political system (Freedom House, 2017; Yabancı, 2019). Although EU institutions expressed concern over democratic regression, their responses remained limited and fragmented, reflecting both concerns about regional stability and the EU's increasing reliance on Türkiye in the fields of

migration and security. Consequently, democratic conditionality became progressively subordinated to strategic considerations.

This shift was institutionalised through the 2016 EU–Türkiye Statement on migration. While formally linked to the broader accession framework, the agreement operated largely outside the logic of rule-based conditionality and prioritised functional cooperation over political reform (Carrera, Radescu & Guild, 2017; Tocci, 2016). Migration management emerged as the central axis of engagement, while issues related to human rights and the rule of law assumed a secondary role. The agreement therefore illustrates the transition towards post-conditionality, where cooperation persists despite limited compliance with democratic norms.

Domestically, reduced external pressure coincided with the further concentration of executive authority. The 2017 constitutional referendum institutionalised the presidential system and weakened existing legislative and judicial checks. Although EU institutions questioned both the process and democratic implications of these reforms, their criticisms lacked effective enforcement mechanisms (European Commission, 2018; Börzel & Soyaltın, 2020). At the same time, shrinking civic space, restrictions on independent media, and increasing pressure on civil society organisations further limited the domestic environment in which EU-supported democratic initiatives could operate (Kurban, 2020).

These developments suggest that democratic backsliding cannot be understood solely through domestic political dynamics. While internal factors were decisive, the declining credibility of the accession process and the EU's growing emphasis on geopolitical cooperation reduced the leverage of democratic conditionality. By 2020, accession had become largely symbolic, and EU–Türkiye relations were increasingly structured around selective cooperation in migration, trade, energy, and security. This evolution reflects the consolidation of a post-conditionality framework in which strategic engagement continued despite widening normative divergence.

6. 2020–2025: Strategic Ambiguity and Post-Conditionality

The The period from 2020 to 2025 marks the consolidation of a post-conditionality equilibrium in EU–Türkiye relations. With EU membership credibility largely exhausted and domestic political receptiveness to EU-driven reform significantly diminished, accession conditionality no longer functions as an effective mechanism of democratic influence. Instead, the relationship is increasingly characterised by strategic ambiguity: cooperation continues in selected areas, but without a credible pathway towards democratic convergence or membership.

From the EU's perspective, this phase reflects a combination of political disengagement and institutional inertia. Enlargement has ceased to operate as a meaningful strategic horizon, and Türkiye's candidacy has largely disappeared from the political priorities of key member states. Although the European Commission continues to document democratic deterioration, particularly regarding judicial independence, media freedom, and fundamental rights, these assessments are no longer linked to an incentive structure capable of shaping domestic outcomes (European Commission, 2021; 2023). Consequently, conditionality has been reduced largely to monitoring, while engagement has shifted towards "positive agenda" initiatives focused on trade, customs union modernisation, energy security, and migration management (European Council, 2021).

Domestically, the consolidation of the executive-centred presidential system has further narrowed opportunities for democratic reform. Reform initiatives have generally been instrumental rather than transformative, seeking to address external criticism without producing substantial institutional change. The 2021 Human Rights Action Plan illustrates this pattern:

despite reform-oriented rhetoric, implementation remained selective and limited (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Similarly, the 2023 elections highlighted continuing concerns regarding media pluralism, political competition, and judicial oversight (Freedom House, 2024). In this environment, incentives for alignment with EU democratic norms have remained weak.

Despite growing normative divergence, EU–Türkiye relations have not experienced a rupture. Instead, cooperation has intensified selectively in areas of strategic interdependence. High-Level Dialogues resumed after 2021, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which increased Türkiye's geopolitical significance as a NATO ally and regional actor. Rather than reactivating democratic conditionality, the EU prioritised continued engagement based on Türkiye's role in energy transit, regional security, and migration management (Börzel & Risse, 2021; Tocci, 2023). This reflects a broader shift in EU external governance towards resilience, containment, and geopolitical balancing.

The evolution of IPA III further illustrates the logic of post-conditionality. Unlike earlier assistance frameworks closely linked to political reform, IPA III places greater emphasis on administrative capacity and technical outcomes (European Court of Auditors, 2022). Although support for civil society formally continues, its effectiveness has been constrained by domestic restrictions on association, assembly, and foreign-funded organisations (Kurban, 2023). Consequently, EU-supported initiatives have increasingly focused on relatively non-political sectors such as education, climate policy, and digitalisation.

This period also highlights an important debate in the literature. While the rapid erosion of democratic safeguards lends support to arguments that earlier reforms were largely elite-driven, domestic dynamics alone cannot fully explain subsequent developments. Democratic regression accelerated as EU conditionality lost credibility and the Union increasingly prioritised strategic cooperation over normative engagement. The Turkish case therefore illustrates not the disappearance of EU influence, but the consequences of its declining leverage.

Public perceptions of the EU reflect this broader ambiguity. The gap between normative rhetoric and pragmatic cooperation has weakened the EU's credibility among many pro-European constituencies, while providing opportunities for government narratives portraying the Union as selective and unreliable (Erdemir & Kowalski, 2021). This dynamic further reinforces the post-conditionality equilibrium by reducing societal expectations of external democratic anchoring.

Overall, the 2020–2025 period demonstrates the stabilisation of a post-conditionality framework in EU–Türkiye relations. Accession no longer serves as a credible mechanism for democratic convergence. Instead, the relationship is structured around selective and largely transactional cooperation under conditions of strategic ambiguity. This outcome reflects both Türkiye's authoritarian consolidation and the EU's broader difficulty in sustaining norm-based external governance when geopolitical considerations take precedence.

7. Findings and Discussion

The The longitudinal analysis of EU–Türkiye relations between 1999 and 2025 reveals a structured transformation rather than a linear decline. The central analytical finding of this study is that EU democratic influence weakens most significantly when two conditions coincide: the erosion of credible membership prospects on the EU side and the decline of domestic political receptiveness in Türkiye. When either of these conditions is absent, EU influence may be constrained but not entirely neutralized. When both deteriorate simultaneously, conditionality gives way to a post-conditionality environment characterized by strategic uncertainty.

During the early 2000s, these two conditions largely aligned in favor of democratic reform. The EU acted as a transformative actor by deploying clearly defined conditionality mechanisms, legal harmonization requirements, and pre-accession financial assistance. Constitutional amendments, reforms in civil–military relations, and the expansion of minority rights illustrate this phase of high leverage (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Kirişci, 2011). Crucially, these reforms were enabled not only by EU pressure but also by a domestic political context in which reform-oriented elites perceived EU accession as both credible and politically advantageous. This finding supports existing literature on the effectiveness of conditionality, while underlining that EU leverage was conditional upon domestic political incentives.

From the mid-2000s onward, the causal mechanism began to weaken. After 2006, accession negotiations lost momentum due to the Cyprus impasse, enlargement fatigue within the EU, and the gradual consolidation of majoritarian governance in Türkiye. As membership credibility declined, EU conditionality became less enforceable, while domestic receptiveness to external democratic demands diminished. The findings suggest that this phase represents not an abrupt rupture but a gradual decoupling of EU norms from domestic reform dynamics. EU influence persisted rhetorically, but its capacity to shape institutional outcomes was increasingly constrained.

The 2010s marked a decisive shift. Following the 2013 Gezi protests and especially the failed coup attempt in 2016, domestic political receptiveness collapsed, while the EU simultaneously recalibrated its priorities toward migration management and security cooperation. The 2016 EU–Türkiye Statement on migration symbolized this transition, marking the replacement of rule-based democratic conditionality with transaction-oriented cooperation (Tocci, 2016; Carrera et al., 2017). In terms of the guiding mechanism, this period reflects the simultaneous breakdown of both membership credibility and domestic openness, producing a post-conditionality environment in which EU influence became selective, issue-specific, and normatively diluted.

Between 2020 and 2025, this post-conditionality model crystallized further. Although value-based language continues to feature in official discourse, practical engagement has been largely confined to sectoral negotiations in areas such as migration, energy, trade, and security. This configuration allows the EU to maintain institutional engagement without directly confronting democratic backsliding, while enabling Turkish political elites to instrumentalize cooperation as a source of external legitimacy. As a result, classical conditionality has been replaced by issue-specific compliance, confirming arguments in the post-conditionality literature (Schimmelfennig, 2021; Börzel & Risse, 2021), but also extending them by showing how sustained interdependence can coexist with deep normative erosion.

The findings also highlight structural constraints on EU influence that go beyond the bilateral relationship. The absence of a unified political will among EU member states regarding Türkiye's accession, internal divisions within the EU, and the prioritization of short-term stability over democratic norms have further undermined the coherence and credibility of EU strategies (Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2020). Once accession credibility was lost, the EU lacked effective sanctioning mechanisms capable of countering democratic regression, revealing the institutional limits of EU external governance.

At the same time, the analysis engages with counterarguments in the literature. Some scholars argue that EU influence was never deeply transformative and that early reforms were largely elite-driven and instrumental rather than societal. While this perspective is partially supported by the findings, it does not fully explain the timing and sequencing of reform reversals. Others contend that domestic political dynamics alone account for democratic

backsliding in Türkiye. The evidence presented here suggests instead that domestic authoritarian consolidation was reinforced not caused, but facilitated by the declining credibility and coherence of EU engagement. EU withdrawal from normative conditionality functioned as a permissive condition that reduced external constraints on domestic power consolidation.

Finally, the findings show that civil society actors in Türkiye continued to view the EU as a symbolic and material reference point, even under increasingly restrictive conditions. EU funding and diplomatic engagement offered limited protection to rights-based organizations, although this effect weakened significantly after 2016 (European Commission, 2018; Freedom House, 2024). This indicates missed opportunities for sustaining normative influence through more consistent and targeted societal engagement.

Overall, the evolution of EU–Türkiye relations reflects a broader crisis in EU democracy promotion in contexts where strategic interdependence persists despite authoritarian drift. As geopolitical considerations have gained prominence particularly following the war in Ukraine the tension between normative commitments and strategic interests has intensified. Failure to reconcile these priorities risks further undermining the EU's credibility as a democratic actor, not only in Türkiye but across its wider neighbourhood (Börzel & Soyaltın, 2020).

Table 1. Evolution of EU–Türkiye Relations: Conditionality to Post-Conditionality (1999–2025)

Period	**Dominant Logic of EU–Türkiye Relations**	**EU Strategy & Instruments**	**Domestic Political Dynamics in Türkiye**	**Outcome for Accession & Democracy**
1999–2005 Golden Era of Conditionality	Normative convergence through credible conditionality	Clear accession perspective; Copenhagen criteria; progress-linked rewards; MEDA & early pre-accession funds	Broad elite consensus on reform; constitutional amendments; reduction of military tutelage; strong civil society engagement	High reform momentum; EU as transformative power; accession process credible and effective
2006–2013 Stagnation and Fatigue	Weakening conditionality amid political deadlock	Suspension of negotiation chapters; enlargement fatigue; declining credibility of incentives	AKP power consolidation; declining reform incentives; rise of sovereignty and majoritarian discourse	Conditionality loses effectiveness; accession decoupled from democratic convergence

2013–2020 Authoritarian Turn & Transactionalism	Interest-based, issue-specific cooperation	Migration-focused engagement (2016 Statement); symbolic criticism without sanctions	Accelerated authoritarian consolidation; emergency rule; presidential system; shrinking civic space	Accession process hollowed out; EU influence marginal; democracy subordinated to security and migration priorities
2020–2025 Strategic Ambiguity & Post-Conditionality	Selective engagement under strategic ambigu	"Positive agenda"; High-Level Dialogues; IPA III technocratic assistance	Executive-dominated governance entrenched; symbolic reforms; post-democratic tendencies	Accession persists only formally; stable post-conditionality regime; pragmatic, asymmetric partnership

Source: The table 1 is a compilation based on European Commission Progress Reports (2000–2023), European Council conclusions, Freedom House reports, and secondary literature on EU–Türkiye relations (e.g. Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Grabbe, 2006; Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2014; Börzel & Risse, 2020; Tocci, 2023).

Table 1, summarizes the evolution of EU–Türkiye relations across four distinct periods, highlighting shifts in the logic of EU engagement, domestic political dynamics in Türkiye, and the changing function of accession conditionality.

8. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This article has examined the 25-year evolution of the EU's role in promoting democracy and human rights in Türkiyi. From the promising moment of conditionality in the early 2000s to the transition to post-conditionality pragmatism in the 2020s, the EU's normative influence has been significantly weakened, and a form of interaction based on interests rather than values has emerged. The shift from a rule-based framework to strategic ambiguity has important implications for the EU's credibility and effectiveness in promoting democratic governance at the global level. The course of EU–Türkiye relations demonstrates how conditional and reversible democratic reforms driven by external incentives can be.

During the 1999–2005 period, the EU managed to trigger meaningful political change in Türkiye by effectively using accession conditionality. However, the transformative power of conditionality has weakened as the accession process has lost momentum due to geopolitical disagreements, enlargement fatigue, and the lack of a common political will within the EU. Domestic political transformations in Türkiye especially the centralization of executive power have further reinforced this trend. As a result, democracy promotion has detached from the participation framework and transformed into a transactional relationship characterized by selective cooperation and normative withdrawal (Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2020; Schimmelfennig, 2021).

The findings of this study also bring broader policy implications for the EU's external engagement strategy: First, the Turkish case shows that participation-based conditionality remains limited in contexts where the membership perspective loses its credibility. In such environments, the EU should develop alternative frameworks to promote democratic norms. These could be sectoral conditionalities tied to areas such as trade, customs union

modernization, or visa liberalization as long as these conditions are based on transparent criteria and are politically enforceable (Börzel & Risse, 2021).

Second, the EU should refocus its democracy promotion strategy on social resilience. In particular, supporting independent media, academic freedom and rights-based civil society organisations is crucial in this context. These actors continue to be carriers of democratic norms even in repressive regimes. Increasing access to EU funds at the local level and protecting these funds from political interference will strengthen the long-term normative impact of the Union (Freedom House, 2024; European Commission, 2018).

Third, the credibility gap that arises when normative statements are not consistent with political actions should be addressed. This requires a more coherent and determined foreign policy stance among member states, especially in situations where geopolitical and normative interests conflict. Inconsistent signals, such as the EU's hesitant responses to democratic setbacks in Türkiye, weaken the Union's soft power and reinforce authoritarian resilience (Börzel & Soyaltın, 2020).

Fourth, the EU should rethink its strategic partnership architecture. In today's increasingly fragmented global order, partnerships with countries like Türkiye should be based on "principled pragmatism". This model should ensure that basic democratic governance standards are maintained while enabling cooperation in areas of mutual interest. In this context, human rights dialogues should be institutionalized, financial assistance should be tied to democratic performance, and agreements should be subject to periodic review by adding sunset clauses.

In conclusion, the EU's experience in Türkiye reflects the challenges faced by democracy promotion in hybrid and authoritarian regimes especially when long-term strategic interests conflict with normative priorities. The transformative moment of the accession process may have passed, but the EU still has effective tools and influence. Reconfiguring these tools requires moving beyond symbolic gestures to develop a more realistic, flexible, and principled model of external engagement one that will enable the Union to navigate the complex global politics of the 21st century without compromising its founding values.

Evaluation / Değerlendirme:
Double Blind Refereeing System / *Çift Taraflı Kör Hakemlik Sistemi.*

Ethics Declaration Text / Etik Beyan Metni*:*

It is hereby declared that scientific and ethical principles were adhered to during the preparation of this study and that all studies used are cited in the references. This study does not require ethical committee approval, as the data used were obtained through literature review/published sources. / *Çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur. Bu çalışma, etik kurul izni gerektirmeyen nitelikte olup kullanılan veriler literatür taraması/yayınlanmış kaynaklar üzerinden elde edilmiştir.*

Ethics Notification / Etik Bildirim: info@esosder.org

Use of Artificial Intelligence: Yapay Zekâ Kullanımı:
No artificial intelligence-based tools or applications were used in the preparation of this study. All content of the study was produced by the author(s) in accordance with scientific research methods and academic ethical principles. / *Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde yapay zekâ tabanlı herhangi bir araç veya uygulama kullanılmamıştır. Çalışmanın tüm içeriği, yazar(lar) tarafından bilimsel araştırma yöntemleri ve akademik etik ilkelere uygun şekilde üretilmiştir.*

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There is no potential conflict of interest in this study. / Bu çalışmada herhangi bir potansiyel çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

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