

## Understanding the Ever-Changing Dynamics in Turkish-EU Relations during the AK Party Era (2002-2018)

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**Abstract :** Since the 1960s, Turkey-European Union relations and Turkey's accession process has followed a bumpy road. Brussel's impositions and Ankara's reluctance to implement EU's fundamental reforms have been the main determinant of Turkey's relations with the EU. However, this situation changed drastically with the AK Party coming to power in 2002 considering that the necessary reforms to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria were carried out at an unprecedented pace. Nevertheless, even after 17 years, despite the positive developments that occurred during the AK Party rule, Turkey is still not a member of the EU. This article argues that this situation is the result of the changing dynamics at both the local and international level. In this context, the study examines the accession process during the AK Party by separating in three different phases: 2002-2005 period when the relations improved, 2005-2013 period when the relations became stagnant, and finally 2013-2017 period when the relations were broken. This article argues that the changes in political dynamics in Turkey and Europe followed by the changes in the international balance of power have a direct impact on the fluctuations that occurred during these three phases. As a result, it is important to understand the current dynamics in the Turkey-EU relations.

**Keywords:** Turkey, European Union, AK Party, Anti-Terrorism, Refugee Crisis

### AK Parti Döneminde (2002-2018) Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği İlişkilerindeki Sürekli Değişimin Anlaşılması

**Öz:** 1960'lara kadar dayanan Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği ilişkileri ve Türkiye'nin yarım asırdan fazla süren üyelik süreci oldukça inişli çıkışlı bir yol izlemiştir. Uzun bir süre boyunca Brüksel'in dayatmaları ve Ankara'nın AB'nin esaslı reformlarını gerçekleştirmekteki isteksizliği Türkiye'nin AB ile ilişkisinin temel belirleyicisi olmuştur. Ancak bu durum AK Parti'nin 2002'de iktidara

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gelmesi ve Kopenhag kriterlerini daha önce görülmemiş bir hızda yerine getirmek için gerekli reformları gerçekleştirmesiyle köklü biçimde değişmiştir. Yine de AK Parti döneminde gerçekleşen olumlu gelişmelere rağmen 17 yıl sonra bile Türkiye hala AB üyesi olamamıştır. Makale bu durumun hem AB’de hem de Türkiye’de yerel ve uluslararası düzeyde sürekli değişen dinamiklerin bir sonucu olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma AK Parti döneminde üyelik sürecini ilişkilerin düzeldiği 2002-2005 dönemi, ilişkilerin durgun olduğu 2005-2013 aralığı ve son olarak da ilişkilerin koptuğu 2013-2017 dönemi olmak üzere üç aşamada incelemektedir. Makale, hem Türkiye’de hem de Avrupa’da iç politik dinamiklerin değişmesinin ve uluslararası güç dengesindeki değişimlerin bu üç aşamada etkili olduğunu savunmakta ve Türkiye-AB ilişkilerinin mevcut durumunu anlamak için bu faktörleri analiz etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye, Avrupa Birliği, AK Parti, Terörle Mücadele, Mülteci Krizi

## Introduction

*Turkey’s application* to accede to the European Economic Community, the predecessor of the European Union (EU), dates back to the late 1950s. Relations took a formal shape with the Ankara Agreement in 1963. The Ankara Agreement stipulated a three-stage plan composed of preparatory, transitional, and final stages that called for a customs union. In the framework of this agreement, Turkey strived to become a full member of the European Economic Community first, and later of the EU.

Turkey’s journey to full membership faced many obstacles and opposition from the beginning, which stemmed both from Turkey and EU countries. Many parties and groups inside Europe and Turkey were objecting Turkey’s membership citing economic, cultural and religious differences on the one hand, and on the other hand Kemalist elites within Turkey were reluctant to carry out necessary reforms fearing that they might lose their tutelage and grip over Turkish state institutions. Because of these fears, both sides were not interested in a serious engagement and decades have passed without any meaningful progress in Turkey’s membership bid. That is why after Turkey carried out necessary reforms at snail pace in decades. EU only recognized the candidate status of Turkey for EU membership during the Helsinki Summit held in December 1999 (Oran, 2010: 351).

In 2001 the Turkish voters, after experiencing the most serious economic crises in republican history and being fed up with the poor governance and corruption in the country (Macovei, 2009: 1), brought the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) to the power with a landslide victory that also eliminated almost all of the established political parties from the parliament, with the exception of the CHP (Republican Peoples Party). The AK Party’s determination to carry out necessary reforms in the country, and its possession of an absolute

majority in the parliament, transformed the Ankara-Brussels relations. There was rapid momentum in bilateral relations during the first years of the AK Party government due to the reforms carried out in order to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria. This resulted in the EU's decision to start accession negotiations with Turkey in 2005.

However, one should note that the negotiations were a stillborn process from the very beginning because the EU accepted the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus as a full member without a diplomatic solution in the divided island, and the rise of leaders such as Sarkozy and Merkel to power in France and Germany who were opposing Turkish membership because of cultural differences. Therefore, after going through a golden age between 2002 and 2005 the accession negotiation stagnated between EU and Turkey. In 2013 the relations started to deteriorate starting with Gezi Park protests in Turkey and reached a breaking point with the July 15 coup attempt of FETO (Fetullah Terrorist Organization) in Turkey in 2016.

This article aims to analyze the ever-changing dynamics in EU-Turkish relations during the AK Party era by looking at both domestic and external factors. In order to achieve this, the relations will be analyzed in three periods. In this context, the first phase is the period from 2002 to the end of 2005 when relations were improved due to the willingness of both sides, thanks to the domestic developments both in the EU and Turkey. The second phase is marked by the stagnancy and still born membership negotiations that dominated bilateral relations after 2005 and third phase began when relations reached a breaking point in 2013, during which both sides considered to freeze or even end accession negotiations. Furthermore, the article will also look at the current divergences (conflict points and challenges) and convergences (mutual interests) in Turkey-EU Relations. Finally, this study is also looking at different scenarios in Turkish EU relations. To sum up, this article aims to understand and analyze the main driving forces behind the ever-changing dynamics in Turkish-EU relations during the AK Party era.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Phase (2002-2005): Golden Age of EU-Turkish Relations**

The 2000 Strategy Document, accepted at the Nice Summit organized by the European Council, established the year 2004 as the timeframe in which candidate countries would complete their membership (Economic Development Foundation, 2018; European Commission, 2018). The fifth enlargement of the EU mainly targeted eastern European countries together with Malta and the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus. As a result, these states began membership negotiations in 2000. EU membership for these countries, excluding Bulgaria and Romania, was finalized in May 2004 (Republic of Turkey Ministry for EU Affairs). At this point, it was noted that, in general, the EU focused on enlargement in countries that had been under the influence of the Soviet Union. The EU, striving to increase its influence in Eastern Europe, had 27 members at

the end of the fifth enlargement and the number of languages used in the Union reached 23 (Economic Development Foundation, 2018).

Although Turkey was left out from this enlargement period, Turkey-EU relations were also positively affected because it gave a positive signal to Turkey. This positive climate was especially visible at the 2002 Copenhagen Summit in which the EU acknowledged that Turkey took significant steps to meet its political obligations (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Domestic dynamics in Turkey also played an important role in creating this positive climate. When the AK Party came to power in 2002, it encountered the economic crisis of 2001, the ever-present role of military tutelage in Turkish politics,<sup>3</sup> and the pressure of the bureaucratic elites, who were opposing the EU reforms (Altun, 2009: 5). In this context, the AK Party made serious efforts to achieve EU membership, developed social policies to overcome the issues brought by the economic crisis, and aimed to free itself from the entrapment experienced in the domestic policy arena (Altun, 2009: 5). Thus, AK Party's vision for Turkey aims to strengthen the impact of civilians on political structure by improving democratic institutions. In this context, the democratization process of Turkey made political, economic and social reforms possible for the politicians. As a result of this, AK Party's intention to find a solution to the long lasting political, economic and social problems of Turkey was compatible with the EU's accession criteria.

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In terms of the EU membership, the AK Party added new reforms to the ones initiated by the previous coalition government in the context of the Copenhagen criteria and realized 17 reform packages during the period of 2002-2004 in areas such as freedom of thought, democracy and human rights (Cicioğlu and Yetim, 2017: 2). Changes were also made in 218 articles of 53 laws during the same period (Lahi, 2011).

The AK Party government, which weathered the economic crisis with the help of these developments and the financial aid from the EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF), has experienced increased foreign direct investment from mainly EU countries, which in return ensured the highest economic growth after the 1960s (Altun, 2009: 19). In this respect, the expected economic benefits played an important role in Turkey's strive for a full membership.

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<sup>3</sup> Soldiers in Turkey have tried to take the control of civil administration by staging coups or by declaring memorandums which threatened civilian administration with military coups. In this context, the military completely seized civil administration with the coups of 27 May 1960 and 12 September 1980 and threatened the civil administration through memorandums on 12 March 1971, 28 February 1997 and 27 April 2007. The last coup attempt that Turkey has faced was on July 15, 2016. During the July 15 coup attempt, FETO supporters, who were infiltrated to the Turkish Armed Forces and Police, tried to seize the democratically elected AK Party government.

Another remarkable development during this period was the EU's request related to the minimization of the Turkish military's influence on politics. The military tutelage in Turkish politics was also a big headache for AK Party. For example, the number of civil members in the National Security Council (NSC) was less than the number of the military members. Moreover, the army was involved in areas of politics that was unacceptable from the EU perspective. For this reason, the EU demand regarding the minimization of the military influence on politics (Lagendijk, 2010: 87) accelerated the convergence in relations between AK Party and Brussels. Hence the AK Party began the "normalization" process in Turkey by increasing democratic initiatives (e.g. the reduction of the number of military members in the NSC, and the determination of policies in different areas by the government, which was composed by civil members) against the military tutelage, which were regarded positively by the EU (Lagendijk, 2010: 87-88).

Finally, the developments in international system had caused serious consequences regarding Turkey-EU relations during this period. The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 altered the dynamics of international politics. The US, under the George W. Bush administration, invaded Iraq with false allegations in 2003. However, except for the United Kingdom, leading EU countries, such as France and Germany, opposed this intervention. Blocking the deployment of US troops through its territory on March 1, 2003 brought Turkey and the EU closer in terms of their approach to the Middle East (TEPAV, 2006: 2).

Despite this, an increase in Islamophobia was observed in the EU countries following the September 11 attacks which paved the way for the rise of radical right movements and discourses in Europe (Öner, 2014: 168). Furthermore, the bombings in London and Madrid have strengthened negative attitudes of the Europeans towards Muslims (Aktaş, 2018: 140). For example, in recent years, individuals and parties such as Marie Le Pen in France, ATAKA in Bulgaria, Dansk Folkparti in Denmark, Fremds Party in Holland, Fremdskrittpaetiet in Norway, and Jobbik in Hungary, substantially increased their votes (Ercan, 2017: 55). Therefore, while improvements were observed in Turkey-EU relations at that time, the ground for future trouble was also prepared.

Following the approval of its candidacy status during the Helsinki Summit in 1999, Turkey continued working to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria. Consequently, on October 3, 2005, EU heads of state and prime ministers declared that Turkey met the political criteria and Turkey started membership negotiations (Economic Development Foundation, 2018). This positive climate would soon become stagnant due to developments experienced in European politics, namely the acceptance of the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus

to the EU without a political solution to the Cyprus problem and the rise of extremist parties in the EU.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Phase (2005-2013): Stagnant Era**

EU member states began to also discuss Union's enlargement strategy in this period. Growth in the number of member states as a result of the enlargements in 2004 and 2007 was discussed extensively. Some member states of the EU, argued that the EU has an "absorption capacity" and cannot accept new members, therefore there has to be a limit to the EU's geographic expansion towards the East (Oğuz, 2012: 61). "Enlargement fatigue" was another term that was coined in this period to express the unwillingness of some circles in Europe to push for another enlargement process (Oğuz, 2012: 61). Some have even implicated that this period was the end of EU enlargement. However, no common consensus was reached in the EU regarding this issue. While larger states in the EU were not totally against enlargement, medium and small-scale countries (for example Greece and Poland) took a stance against enlargement because continuing enlargement practices would mean less aid from Brussels due to the reallocations in the EU budget favoring new member states. Also, it was difficult to reach a consensus due to the expectations of a significantly increased number of members (Szolucha, 2010: 2). In order to overcome this issue, EU member states signed the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007. This treaty aimed to re-organize the institutional structure of the EU and its decision-making mechanisms to ensure that it could accommodate itself to the significantly enlarged union (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

In addition to these discussions, radical right parties', such as the National Front in France, United Kingdom Independence Party in United Kingdom or Freedom Party of Austria, negative views about migration, refugees, and multiculturalism gradually started to become more and more dominant in European politics. During this period, conservative leaders, such as Merkel in Germany and Sarkozy in France, took a "marginalizing" stance against migrants, and Muslims in particular (Yardim, 2017: 228). In 2010, Merkel famously declared that "the idea of people from different cultural backgrounds living happily side by side did not work" and therefore, "multiculturalism has utterly failed in Germany" (Auestad, 2014: 15). This approach, regarded as the failure of multiculturalism in the EU, set the direction for future enlargement. Moreover, the aforementioned "marginalizing" attitudes transformed into Islamophobia and grew into opposition against Islam and Muslims. For instance, Sarkozy made a statement that Muslims could pray but that the conditions would be decided by the state (Yardim, 2017: 221). Sarkozy, who disregarded religious freedom, adopted a hostile attitude towards Islam and stated during his address to the parliament in 2009 that face veils "will not be welcome on the territory of the French Republic," and that the purpose of the law "is to protect women from

being forced to cover their faces and to uphold France's secular values" (Waters, 2016: 17).

These developments in the EU have increased the reluctance and suspicion of some circles in Europe to accept Turkey into the EU. Consequently, stagnation in Turkey-EU relations occurred and signals of a rupture began to be seen. As a matter of fact, discussions in the EU related to future enlargement policy and the distance towards Islam and Muslims created as a result of increased radical right views turned into critical obstacles for Turkey's EU membership.

Reforms that had been launched by the AK Party in the first three years of the EU process also became stagnant during this period (Altun, 2009: 20). The most striking problem for Ankara was the EU membership of the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus. This can even be cited as the most important reason for the stillborn membership negotiations, which commenced in 2005. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN at the time, proposed the establishment of the United Cyprus Republic based on a shared state. A referendum was held for this plan and while 75.83% of the Greek population refused it, the Turkish side accepted it with a 64.91% majority. Hence, no progress was made and the Annan Plan was not realized by April 24, 2004. Subsequently, the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus became a member of the European Union as the "Republic of Cyprus" on May 1, 2004 (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). The EU Commission suspended eight chapters in accession negotiations on November 29, 2006 by claiming that Turkey did not meet its obligations in the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement. The Ankara Agreement includes the principle that the Customs Union should be enlarged in favor of all member states. However, Turkey clearly expressed in a declaration in July 29, 2005 that signing of the Customs Union additional protocol would not mean recognizing the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus (Tüysüz, 2012; Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005), and as a result the agreement would not be applicable to the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus. Thus, the issue of Cyprus blocked any progress in Turkey-EU relations. In this regard, the Council of the European Union stated that it decided "in particular to suspend negotiations on eight chapters relevant to Turkey's restrictions with regard to the Republic of Cyprus, and will not close the other chapters until Turkey fulfils its commitments under the additional protocol to the EU-Turkey association agreement" (Council of the European Union, 2006).

Other developments that weakened the relations for Turkey were the amendment to Article 301 in the Turkish Penal Law and the closure trial against the AK Party in 2008. Article 301 required imprisonments for persons who denigrate "Turkishness, the Republic and Turkish government institutions." Finding this article ambiguous, the EU required its removal. During this process, Ankara revised and amended Article 301 as "denigrating the Turkish Nation, the

State of the Republic of Turkey and its institutions” (301. Madde Değişikliği Kabul Edildi, 2008). Despite the amendment, stagnation in relations between Turkey and the EU continued. Legal issues remained the primary problems in bilateral relations. The closure trial of the AK Party in 2008, which was initiated by Kemalist elites, and the EU’s criticism towards this trial became significant developments during this period. The EU stated that the supremacy of law would be damaged in Turkey as a result of the closure trial against the AK Party and that it would mean moving away from European standards (AB’den Hükümete ve Anayasa Mahkemesine Çağrı, 2008). Ultimately, the Constitutional Court did not reach a decision for closure in the AK Party case. Regardless, the EU process remained on the back burner since the AK Party government had to prioritize the domestic developments.

International developments also influenced Turkey-EU relations during this period. First, the relations between Ankara and Brussels regressed as a result of the global economic crisis in 2008. In fact, the severe economic crisis in Europe strengthened radical political views and incited xenophobia (Ozcan, 2012: 56). It was also expected that the EU economy, which was weakened, would affect Turkey through various sectors such as trade, finance, and tourism. While the future of bilateral relations faced risks, the EU membership process and mutual economic ties became vulnerable (Küresel Kriz ve AB, 2012). The stagnation between Turkey and the EU continued as a result of the aforementioned risks. Financial issues were added to problems experienced in bilateral relations and these continued to influence relations throughout this period.

Other international developments of this period were the Arab Spring, which took place in the Middle East in 2010. The grassroots movements induced by unemployment, inflation, political problems, and issues in legal rights faced by the people in this region quickly spread in the Middle East (Duran and Özdemir, 2012: 185). These developments triggered civil wars and eventually led to a massive refugee flood. As a matter of fact, refugees who flocked to Turkey and the EU became the most important dynamic in bilateral relations, especially after the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. In addition, the European countries that opposed Turkey’s membership to the EU based on security reasons strengthened their positions by citing the uncertain environment brought about by the Arab Spring (Küçükkeleş, 2013: 27). On top of all of this, the position of the EU countries in the Middle East and Turkey’s attempt increase its influence in the region increased the competitive environment between Ankara and Brussels. With the advent of the Arab Spring, concerns emerged in the EU that Turkey’s membership would transfer the challenges of the Middle East to the Union. The most noticeable effect of the Arab Spring was the increase of security concerns in the unstable environment (Oğuzlu, 2012: 24-25). Therefore, the Arab Spring adversely affected Turkey-EU relations in a multifaceted way. As



a result, stagnant bilateral relations during this period reached a breaking point after 2013.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Phase (2013-2017): Ruptured Relations**

Turkey witnessed the Gezi Park protests against the elected government in 2013. In addition, on 17-25 December 2013, FETO attempted a judicial coup using members of the police and judiciary and embarked on a mission to wear out the AK Party and Erdogan. Subsequently, on July 15, 2016, FETO attempted another coup d'état and tried to seize the control of the country forcefully. However, it failed due to the resistance of the Turkish people. Despite all these developments, the EU's stance towards Turkey was mostly negative. The EU, in particular, has ignored Turkey's security problems. Most notably, one of the main problems that brought relations between Ankara and Brussels to a breaking point, was related to the EU's complete disregard for Turkey's struggle against FETO. For instance, most of the FETO militants who were involved in both coup attempts fled to European countries after July 15. They were also allowed to continue their activities in Europe. In fact, the EU official intelligence organization, Intelligence and Situation Center (INTCEN), published a report claiming that the FETO was not involved in the July 15 military coup attempt. (Bayraklı, Güngörmez and Boyraz, 2017: 18-19). These initiatives, which caused significant reactions in Turkey, constituted another break point in Ankara-Brussels relations due to the lack of support for Turkey's battle against the FETO by Germany and France, with whom common ties such as NATO membership already exist in the fight against terrorism. In addition, some European countries, especially Germany and Netherlands, were involved in open propaganda against the AK Party before the constitutional referendum that was held on April 16, 2017. Turkish ministers were banned from meeting with the Turkish electorate who lived in some EU countries, e.g. Germany and the Netherlands, whereas opposition parties and politicians were allowed to carry out election campaigns in those countries.

The most striking aspect of developments in Europe was the increasing power of Germany in the Union. As a matter of fact, Berlin, which directly influences EU policies and membership processes, played an important role in Turkey's EU negotiations. When Germany's perspective on Turkey's EU membership is considered, a general dissenting attitude, except for the Schroeder period (1998-2005), could be observed. In this context, the discourse against Ankara regarding EU negotiations was particularly noteworthy when Merkel came to power in 2005. Merkel's "privileged partnership" proposal and her emphasis on this proposal throughout her administration became a central problem in Turkey-EU relations. The privileged partnership proposal turned into the main focus of the relations during the crises experienced after 2013 (Bayraklı, Güngörmez and Boyraz, 2017: 23-24). Moreover, the United Kingdom's exit decision allowed Germany's power to continue to increase within the Union. In

this process, the competitors of Germany and two important powers in the EU, France and Italy, wanted to be treated equally in EU affairs and were disturbed by Berlin's sole domination (Sayılarla Almanya'nın 'Kontrolündeki' Avrupa Birliği, 2017). For the same reasons, the view was strengthened that the EU was undergoing fragmentation in terms of power. Hence, it is obvious that Germany alone cannot determine Turkey-EU relations. In particular, Merkel benefited from opposition to Turkey in domestic politics. However, states such as the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, which oppose Germany's hegemonic attitude in the Union and believe that Germany's economic development will act against them, have displayed a more moderate attitude in their relations with Turkey (Bayraklı, Güngörmez and Boyraz, 2017: 24).

The latest development affecting the balance within the EU is related to the transatlantic policy followed by US President Trump during this recent period. It has been claimed that the White House, which moved away from the classic US-European alliance, will isolate Europe. In this context, it is likely that Trump, who is said to give priority to the US, will cause much trouble for transatlantic relations (Shapiro and Pardijs, 2017: 10). Thus, Washington's policies that isolate Brussels have led to assertions that the close relations born from World War II have now reached to a new phase (Walt, 2017). The fact that the US is breaking away from the EU is likely to overturn the balance in the Union. Both Washington and Brussels, long-term partners with trade and security ties, will have to pursue a new commercial policy with the separation of the US and will need a new security paradigm in international politics. This situation, which deeply affects the balance inside the EU, also affects Ankara-Brussels relations directly. This is because having a strong ally such as Turkey at the "eastern gate" has the possibility of empowering the EU in the case of the breakdown of US-EU relations. However, this situation is not fully recognized due to the power struggle in the EU and since Germany wants to establish hegemony within the Union by using the US situation in its favor. For this reason, Berlin, not choosing to split the power between new members, is taking a stance against Turkey, therefore tensions in relations continue.

In terms of Turkey's internal dynamics, this has been a period in which many political developments have been experienced. Initially, the Gezi Park protests in 2013 initiated an uprising against the elected government (Cicioğlu and Yetim, 2017: 12). The EU openly supported these protests and declared that the Turkish police used disproportionate force (Turkey 2013 Progress Report, 2013). In addition, the Turkey Progress Report in 2013 supported the claims that Ankara moved further away from the EU criteria and increased social polarization (Cicioğlu and Yetim, 2017: 12; Turkey 2013 Progress Report, 2013). However, the AK Party government was elected via transparent democratic elections and has developed policies in line with constitutional rights since then. More specifically, the goal of those who participated in the Gezi Park protests

was to overthrow the government through illegal street protests and they completely ignored democratic legitimacy. For this reason, support from the EU for such illegal action and the EU's sole focus on the practices of Turkish police brought Ankara-Brussels relations to a breaking point.

In international level, the turmoil brought about by the Syrian Civil War and the increased terrorism on the Iraq-Syrian route drew the attention of the whole world to the Middle East. The EU stated that it was involved in multifaceted initiatives towards the Syrian Civil War and that it transferred financial resources to the humanitarian crises (The EU and the Crisis in Syria, 2018). Despite this claim, it is impossible to say that the EU gave its full support. Turkey is the country that shouldered the biggest burden in the region, especially in terms of the refugees who escaped the Syrian Civil War. Thus, the issue of refugees has become an important subject in Turkey-EU relations. In this process, a readmission agreement was signed between Turkey and the EU for refugees who were not accepted in the EU. The EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement took effect in 2016. After this date, illegal immigrants that moved to EU countries from Turkey were sent back in order to be extradited to their countries (Şorularla Geri Kabul ve Vize Muafiyeti, 2015). A pre-condition of the Readmission Agreement was the visa exemption for Turkish citizens in the Schengen Region. However, the EU demanded Turkey to change its anti-terrorism law and fulfill 5 more criteria to implement the aforementioned visa exemption. In this context, Ankara was supposed to fulfill 72 criteria in total, without which the EU would not grant the visa exemption (AB Komisyonu: Geri Kabul Anlaşması Yürürlükte, 2016).

This attitude of the EU was directed at raising difficulties for Turkey over the most important problem of international politics: the refugees. During this process, the EU also promised to provide 3 billion USD in aid to refugees residing in Turkey (The EU and the Crisis in Syria, 2018). However, the payment of this financial aid was slow and discussions of the aid payments along with the Readmission Agreement strengthened the idea that the EU was not trying to help the refugees but rather was trying to stop the refugee flow into Europe. Therefore, the above mentioned developments in refugee issue had a limited impact on Turkey-EU relations, so the cooperation of both parties on this matter did not cause a rapprochement in the relations.

The EU, which introduced a policy based solely on humanitarian aid for the Syrian Civil War, underwent a change in its perceptions regarding threats after 2014 due to the increasing attacks of ISIS and the rise in the number of foreign fighters in Europe. The EU, which has experienced legal and administrative problems due to the fact that its member states have the power to make final decisions regarding counter-terrorism, started initiatives specifically against ISIS. The most striking initiative in this regard was experienced after the Charlie Hebdo attack. The EU, establishing a counter-

terrorism strategy against ISIS, took steps such as cutting off the organization's financial resources, blocking foreign fighters, and strengthening border controls (Özdemir, 2015: 95). However, these initiatives were not really about solving the crisis in Syria and Iraq, which were the root causes of the problem. For this reason, there was little achievement in the EU's fight against terrorists, who have targeted EU countries time and again in the last five years. In the face of these developments, Turkey-EU relations were strained due to the fact that the Union had not created any initiatives on common grounds despite Turkey suffering from an ongoing civil war and increased terrorism inside its borders.

Another terror organization that the EU was unwilling to combat was the PKK/PYD. Although the EU recognizes the PKK as a terrorist organization, the organization continues its operations through shadow organizations and associations in Europe. In addition, the fact that the terrorist organization owns television channels, radios, newspapers, and news agencies in many European countries is a disturbing reality for Turkey. However, the EU ignores Turkey's discomfort in this matter and the PKK/PYD continues its ideological activities in Europe. Moreover, during this period, the PKK/PYD acted with hostility toward Turkish missions and associations in Europe and carried out attacks on them (Bayraklı, Güngörmez and Boyraz, 2017: 15-16).

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In short, tensions between Turkey and the EU have continued with the developments in international politics, which were important factors in reaching the breaking point in the bilateral relations. For this reason, negotiations became clogged and it proved to be a major impasse for the future of relations between Ankara and Brussels.

### **Divergences and Convergences in Turkey-EU Relations**

The recent breakdown in Turkey-EU relations has led certain issues in bilateral relations to oscillate between "divergences" and "convergences." These issues can be cited as countering terrorism, refugees, Cyprus, and economic interdependence. There is a possibility that relations will continue on a healthy basis if Ankara and Brussels can focus on "convergences" by overcoming "divergences." Otherwise, relations that have already reached a breaking point will become impossible to repair and Turkey-EU relations will reach an irreversible point.

### **Fighting Terrorism**

Countering terrorism, one of the "divergences" between Turkey and the EU, has become even more critical due to the current instability in the Middle East. The concrete problems between Turkey and the EU regarding countering terrorism are related to FETO, the PKK/PYD, and ISIS. These damaged relations are especially due to the fact that the EU does not take an orthodox position on the subject of the FETO. Likewise, the EU's ignorance of the PKK/PYD activities in Europe has affected bilateral relations. On the issue of ISIS, the EU has resisted

any military initiatives and continues to ignore Turkey's expectations in terms of security. The most striking example of this situation is the fact that while Turkey is fighting simultaneously with many terrorist organizations, the EU requests that Ankara liberalize its terror laws (Barigazzi, 2016).

Moreover, the EU has not taken any concrete steps on the issue of the FETO and has not recognized it as a terrorist organization. Despite the proof presented by Ankara, Brussels has not taken any initiatives against the FETO (Bayraklı, Güngörmez and Boyraz, 2017: 19). Furthermore, the fugitive FETO members that fled to Europe have not been extradited and are allowed to hide in countries like Germany and Greece (Bostan, 2017). Likewise, the same EU countries give the PKK/PYD multifaceted support and overlook its activities. The unwillingness of the EU to tackle PKK in the EU, even though it was included in its list of terrorist organizations in 2006, poses a significant problem for Turkey.

It is possible to argue that "convergences" can be formed by overcoming these problems in Turkey-EU relations. This is because Turkey and the EU share common security concerns. In this sense, increased cooperation between Turkey and the EU will reduce the security concerns for both Ankara and Brussels. After all, the security in Turkey is a vital precondition for the security of the EU (Keyman, 2017). In order to overcome these problems, the EU should take Turkey's concerns into consideration and acknowledge that terrorism is terrorism no matter which ideology it claims to represent. In this framework, bilateral relations between Turkey and the EU should be converged in the context of security and cooperation in counter-terrorism.

### **Refugees**

The EU has not taken serious steps in terms of refugees; it has only raised its walls and created new border units. In the process, Brussels left the burden of 3,5 million refugees on Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon. Moreover, EU countries, without a consistent policy in terms of refugees, continued their "marginalization" attitudes against the refugees and migrants, with increasing pressure from far-right political movements.

The issue of refugees also carries the possibility of "convergence" for Turkey and the EU because mutual cooperation to end the civil war in Syria and ensure the return of refugees could bring the two parties closer. In addition, work for the integration of existing refugees, both in Europe and in Turkey, makes sense in terms of common interests. In fact, there is a need to establish a coordination mechanism between Brussels and Ankara in order to support the steps taken by Turkey in relation to refugees.

In this context, the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) was launched in March 2016 (Delegation of European Union to Turkey, 2018). However, the EU delayed the aid packages for refugees, which was agreed to be 3 billion euros

(Türkiye'deki Mülteci Projelerine, 2017). In this process, Turkey's EU Minister, Omer Celik, stated that the EU did not undertake their commitments and did not keep its promise to send financial aid in the specified amount (Ömer Çelik'ten AB'ye Tepki, 2017).

In order to increase the likelihood of "convergences" between Turkey and the EU in this whole process, Brussels needs to fulfill Turkey's expectations in terms of financial aid and security in regards to the Syrian refugee crisis. Turkey has tried to resolve the refugee issue with the help of the EU but has not received sufficient support from the Union. If Brussels keeps its promises to Ankara regarding the issue of refugees and takes sincere steps, progress in bilateral relations can be expected. In particular, it is necessary that the EU provides the financial assistance on time, both Turkey and the EU undertake efforts regarding the integration of the refugees, and, most importantly, undertake joint initiatives to end the civil war in Syria.

### Cyprus Issue

Another critical "divergence" in relations is Turkey's sensitivity to the Cyprus issue and the fact that the EU has used the southern part of Cyprus as a trump card by approving its membership to the EU in 2004. Following the Turkey-EU High Level Political *Dialogue* meeting held in 2017, the parties pointed out that the issue of Cyprus is a matter that jams relations. Mevlut Cavusoglu, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, expressed that the "Cyprus issue should not stand in front of Turkey-EU relations like a wall, an obstacle" (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). After the Turkey-EU High Level Political Dialogue meeting, Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated, "We have disagreements with Turkey on Cyprus" (Türkiye-AB Toplantısına Kıbrıs Sorunu Damgasını Vurdu, 2017).

The EU claims that the Cyprus problem is not the only factor blocking negotiations with Turkey. As a matter of fact, according to Brussels, relations are clogged due to Ankara's policies and actions that are in contrast with the EU harmonization process (Wood, 2017). However, it is obvious that the situation is the exact opposite. In fact, Turkey has implemented many reforms and started negotiations, which were mainly blocked because of the Cyprus problem right after 2005 and occurred long before the emergence of the Gezi uprising in Turkey.

In order to increase the likelihood of "convergences" in relations, the EU should abandon this harsh attitude on the Cyprus issue and take Turkey's expectations into consideration. As a matter of fact, the divided state of the island is causing political, economic, and social difficulties. In this respect, the solution of the Cyprus issue, which has become a financial burden on the EU and Turkey, will increase the influence Brussels has on the region.

### **Economic Interdependence**

Turkey and the EU have been interdependent as a result of years of economic relations. Due to this tie, dialogue between Brussels and Ankara continues even as relations become tense (Paul, 2017). As a matter of fact, strong ties between Turkey and the EU have significantly increased since 1996, when the Customs Union was signed. Ankara, which has increased its gross domestic product by four times in this process, is among the fastest growing economies in the world. In return, EU-based entrepreneurs benefiting from the opportunities brought by the Customs Union have increased their investments in Turkey. In this context, the trade volume between Brussels and Ankara reached 145 billion USD in 2016 (Bayraklı, Güngörmez and Boyraz, 2017: 9-10). It is also noteworthy that the EU has serious economic ties with Turkey, not only in terms of trade volume but also in the framework of direct investment. In this context, 23,000 of approximately 50,000 foreign companies registered with Turkey's Ministry of Economy are EU-based (Kılıç, 2017). Thus, a critical economic interdependence between Turkey and the EU can easily be observed.

The role of the Customs Union in relations between Turkey and the EU is also significant. There was some tension in the Ankara-Berlin line in 2017 regarding the 21-year old Customs Union agreement. In this process, Merkel stated that they would not update the Customs Union agreement, while Turkey's EU Minister, Omer Celik, stated that they were not in a hurry to update. Updating the Customs Union not only included the expansion of the industrial outputs between Turkey and the EU but also the expansion of public procurement, agriculture, and service sectors (Gümrük Birliği Krizinin Kaybedeni Kim?, 2017). It is possible to claim that the majority of other EU states do not share the attitude of Germany in this matter. Despite all the discussions and the crises experienced in bilateral relations, it will not be entirely feasible for Turkey and the EU to let go of one another.

High levels of economic interdependence prevent both parties from ending the relationship completely. Indeed, Turkey is the EU's fifth largest partner in trade and since 1996 the trade volume between Ankara and Brussels has increased seven-fold. As of today, the trade volume between Turkey and the EU is 140 billion euros and it represents 41% of Turkey's foreign trade (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). In fact, calling off the relationship will give rise to destructive consequences for both the Turkish and EU economies. This situation can be prevented with the creation of "convergences" in relations. In this sense, both parties can overcome political obstacles by pursuing economic interests and ensuring moderation in their harsh policies.

## Conclusion

Turkey-EU relations have followed a steep course during the AK Party administration and gradually reached a breaking point within a time period covering three phases. The internal dynamics of the EU and Turkey and the international conjuncture have been decisive in this process. Some of the issues that are affecting the relations today include disputes and different priorities in the fight against terrorism, refugees, the Cyprus issue, the irrational policies of Germany, and economic interdependence. These issues, which play a key role in determining the future of bilateral relations, can be both a source of divergence and convergence. It is necessary to reach a consensus on these issues in order to resolve the dilemmas, especially in bilateral relations. Otherwise, the bottlenecks in relations will continue.

The aforementioned issues include political, economic, and social dimensions as well. It has been observed that relations between Ankara and Brussels have been intertwined in multifaceted ways due to long years of cooperation and have remained along the same steep route for a long time. While this constitutes a problem on the one hand, it leads to the continuation of dialogue, even when significant tensions are experienced, on the other. Therefore, the gap between EU policies and the expectations of Turkey has never turned into an abyss.

Rationalizing relations between Ankara and Brussels will solve problems between the two parties. Germany and Austria, have followed irrational and sentimental policies against Turkey and therefore in 2017 relations have deteriorated to a level which we have never witnessed before. However, the majority of EU members do not act in this manner. In this context, it is important for future projections to provide a rational basis for Turkey-EU relations and reestablish them based on common interests. Consequently recent rapprochement in Turkish-EU and especially Turkish German relations demonstrate that both sides are able to focus on mutual interest when they face pressure from outside. In this regard one can claim that Trumps administrations negative and mostly undiplomatic attitude towards both Turkey and EU forced these two actors to put their differences in the background and focus on more positive agenda. It is very early to claim that there is a new positive era in the relations yet one can claim that both sides are on the way to rationalize their relations and prioritize their geopolitical interests.

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