

Mapping EU-Turkey relations: State of play and options for the future

SUMMARY

2016 was a challenging year for relations between the European Union (EU) and Turkey, with the on-going management of the migration crisis and the EU-Turkey agreement, the attempted military coup in Istanbul and Ankara, and the severe purge that followed, which the EU criticised for being disproportionately severe. Nevertheless, the EU and Turkey continued negotiations on Turkish accession to the EU and decided in December 2016 to upgrade the 20-year-old customs union.

In the light of opinion polls in some Member States, and recent difficulties arising from Turkish politicians campaigning in the EU ahead of Turkey's April referendum on its constitution, as well as clear human rights breaches, a debate has emerged in some Member States about an alternative to enlargement, such as purely economic integration. Meanwhile, some believe the outcome of the negotiations on the UK's future relationship with the EU might also provide a possible model for Turkey.

Despite the road to accession being paved with inevitable difficulties, accession remains the ultimate objective of EU-Turkey relations, endorsed by the European Council and Turkey, and provides potential for reform and dialogue over common standards, not least in the area of civil liberties.

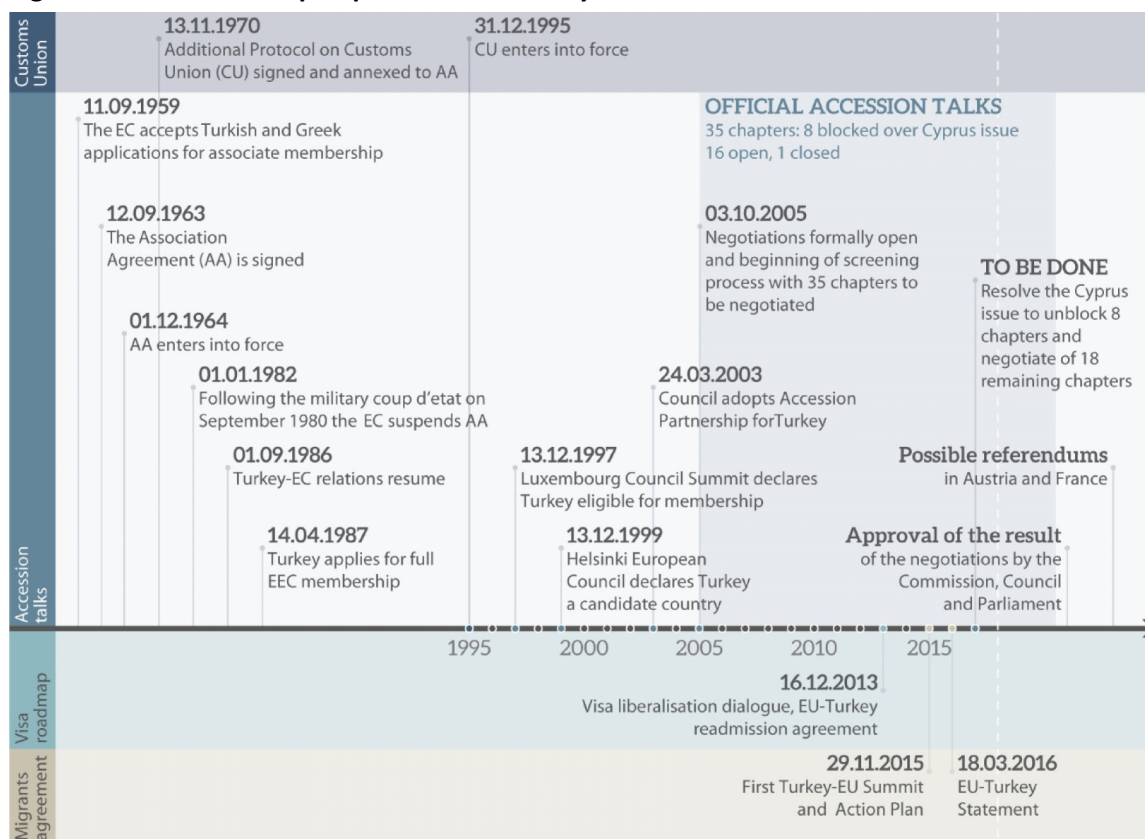


In this briefing:

- Accession as the main objective of EU-Turkey relations
- Integrated markets and a visa-free regime without political union
- Turkey and the United Kingdom in a 'new orbit'

Accession as the main objective of EU-Turkey relations

Figure 1 – Timeline and prospects for EU-Turkey relations



Graphic by EPRS.

2016: a challenging year in EU-Turkey relations

In [March 2016](#), Turkey agreed to take back all migrants who had entered the EU illegally through Turkey if they were not in need of international protection. It also concluded an agreement with the EU on a one-to-one scheme in which, for each illegal migrant taken back by Turkey, the EU would welcome a refugee in need of international protection. In order to help Turkey cope with the crisis, the EU [mobilised](#) €3 billion and set aside an additional €3 billion to be released by the end of 2018. Although the results promised by the EU took time to materialise on the ground, European aid is now getting through.

On 16 July 2016, a group of military officers failed to seize civilian power in Istanbul and Ankara, as thousands took to the streets to oppose them. President Erdogan immediately accused [Fetullah Gülen](#) of staging the coup. The size of the purge that followed confirmed an [illiberal](#) turn in Turkish politics. The Turkish government repeatedly expressed its concern at the perceived lack of support from EU and NATO allies during what was a major attack on a democratically elected government. Statements were made about a possible [return](#) to the death penalty, [unacceptable](#) to the EU. In addition, [disputes](#) in March 2017 over Turkish politicians campaigning in the EU ahead of the April referendum on the constitution led to a new low in the EU-Turkey relationship. Despite this, Turkey and the EU are partners in dealing with [Syria](#) and [managing](#) the migration crisis.

The 2016 political crisis reinvigorated debates about Turkish accession in various Member States. Austria [expressed](#) opposition to continuing the accession process. During the United Kingdom's EU membership referendum campaign, the potential of Turkish [accession](#) was put forward as a reason to leave the EU. The governing party in Denmark voiced [opposition](#) to the accession process. In the EU as a whole, [scepticism](#) about

enlargement is strong, with 52 % against and 37 % in favour in May 2016. This is one reason why Angela Merkel in [2010](#), Nicolas Sarkozy in [2011](#) and the Council in [December 2016](#) stated that the talks are an open-ended process. In November 2016, the European Parliament [called](#) for a halt to talks owing to breaches in the rule of law in Turkey.

Accession remains the main objective, endorsed by the European Council and Turkey

Nevertheless, on both sides, the accession of Turkey to the EU remains the main objective. Since its first association agreement in 1963, Turkey has always made EU accession one of its top diplomatic priorities. EU-Turkey negotiations began in 2005; one chapter has been provisionally closed to date and 15 more are under negotiation. Progress has been slow since 2005, mainly on account of the [Cyprus question](#).

Even if the EU and Turkey conclude negotiations in the medium term, with the Cyprus question having been resolved, the Council and the European Parliament will both have to approve its accession. Then, it will have to be ratified by the Member States, with possible referendums, for instance in [Austria](#) and [France](#). Despite these difficulties, however, the negotiation process has important value in itself: it creates an impetus and opportunities for Turkey to modernise and reform. None of the alternative scenarios for the future (such as purely economic integration) provide the same leverage for the EU or opportunities for Turkey.

Integrated markets and a visa-free regime without political union

The EU-Turkey customs union and the accession process run in parallel. Following the 1963 European Economic Community (EEC)-Turkey Association Agreement, a customs union between the two partners became a priority, finally entering into force in [1996](#). The customs union (CU) was a core element of the EEC, and the EEC-Turkey customs union was conceived as a step toward membership. [Turkey](#) is the only major non-EU country with a trade arrangement of this kind. The CU provides a common external tariff for EU and Turkey, and covers industrial goods and some agricultural products.

Enhanced customs union

Current evaluations of the CU [consider](#) that the deal has been beneficial for both sides, but is outdated. Since 1996 and the entry into force of the CU, the EU has [made](#) a number of free trade agreements (FTAs) with third countries, including provisions across sectors and not only on industrial goods. Under the CU, Turkey should also have concluded FTAs with these EU partners, but did not; neither did Turkey take part in the EU's negotiations. Both the EU and Turkey have acknowledged that the CU needs modernising, and in [December 2016](#) the European Commission asked the Council for a mandate to begin talks to that end. A deal could provide for greater market liberalisation in the field of goods, but also of services and public procurements, in a spirit similar to the FTAs concluded with South Korea and Canada. Turkey wants to be more closely involved when the EU negotiates FTAs with third countries, a situation that can be fully resolved only with Turkey becoming a full member of the EU. Ankara is also keen to see progress in the discussions on a [visa-free regime](#) with the EU, something that has been granted to non-EU accession countries such as Moldova and Georgia alongside their FTAs with the EU.

European Economic Area

Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland belong to the [European Economic Area](#) (which entered into force in 1994), which differs from the EU-Turkey arrangement. Without a customs union, the EEA provides for closer integration within the EU institutional order: it covers the four freedoms, i.e. the free movement of goods, capital, services and people; plus the

competition and state aid rules, and horizontal areas related to the four freedoms. In addition, EEA states contribute to the EU's budget, whereas Turkey does not. Common agricultural and fisheries policies, customs union and trade policies are excluded from the EEA. For a country to liberalise trade in services and capital with the EU through the EEA, the level of development and regulation in these sectors must be close to the EU level. That is why this potential next step for Turkey after a reformed CU, has never been discussed.

Accession talks remain key

Any progress on the customs union or the visa-free regime are connected with the accession process. Even if the three negotiation procedures are formally separate, they reinforce each other. Deeper cooperation through an upgraded CU or visa-free regime is a step towards accession and negotiations on the chapters of the EU *acquis*.

Turkey and the United Kingdom in a 'new orbit'?

One of the possible options circulating in European public debate about a privileged EU-Turkey relationship to have surfaced recently is the idea of a possible common status for the United Kingdom and Turkey. Jean-Claude Juncker has spoken of a '[new orbit](#)' for the two countries. Nevertheless, this option remains difficult to define. First because the future EU-United Kingdom relationship remains uncertain, pending its [negotiation](#). Second, the current EU-Turkey customs union is likely to remain [unique](#) in terms of the types of relationship the EU has with its main partners. In any case accession remains a moving target, as the EEC has evolved into a more comprehensive EU since Turkey began negotiating the customs union, and the EU looks likely to continue to develop in the coming years, bearing in mind current discussions on the future of the EU. For now, the EU and Turkey remain committed to advancing accession talks and reforming the CU, taking into account the EU's insistence on respect for universal values and the rule of law.

The European Parliament and Turkey

In [January 2015](#), Parliament expressed concern at the large number of journalists awaiting trial in Turkey and the pressure being exerted on the media on account of the country's Anti-Terrorism Act (TMK) and penal code articles relating to 'terrorist organisations'. In April 2016, the Parliament [resolution](#) on the 2015 Turkey report acknowledged that the security situation was deteriorating rapidly in the country, both internally and externally, and praised the hospitality of the Turkish population towards the large number of refugees. In a resolution of November 2016, Parliament [considered](#) that the Turkish government's repressive measures under the state of emergency were 'disproportionate and in breach of basic rights and freedoms' and called on the Commission and the Member States to freeze the ongoing accession negotiations with Turkey.

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eprs@ep.europa.eu

<http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu> (intranet)

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank> (internet)

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