

Future EU-Turkey relations

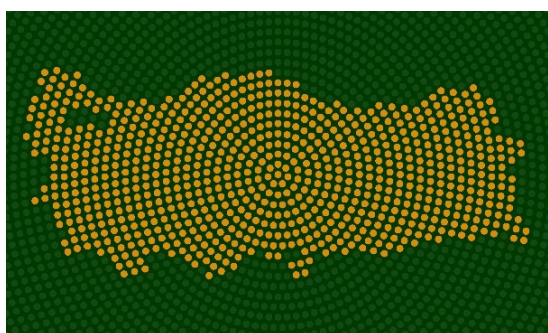
SUMMARY

In June 2018, Recep Tayyip Erdogan was re-elected as president of Turkey, this time with extended powers under the revised Turkish Constitution. Over the previous couple of years, his country's relationship with the EU had been challenged by issues such as the ongoing management of the migration crisis and the EU-Turkey Agreement, the attempted military coup in Istanbul and Ankara, and the ensuing purge, which the EU and international organisations criticised for its disproportionate severity.

With the constitutional referendum and the subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections, President Erdogan further reinforced his position at the helm of the institutional system and raised concerns among the EU and NATO about his commitment to Western institutions. Turkey deepened its relations with Russia, buying military equipment and coordinating with it on Syrian policies on the ground. At the same time, US-Turkish relations worsened due to the Syrian conflict and the imprisonment of a US pastor by Turkey, although he was subsequently released.

Negotiations on Turkey's accession to the EU have nevertheless continued, despite an increasingly lively debate in some Member States about whether or not they should be halted. Some have proposed striking an economic agreement with Turkey as an alternative to membership. Others believe the outcome of the negotiations on the UK's future relationship with the EU might also provide a possible model for Turkey.

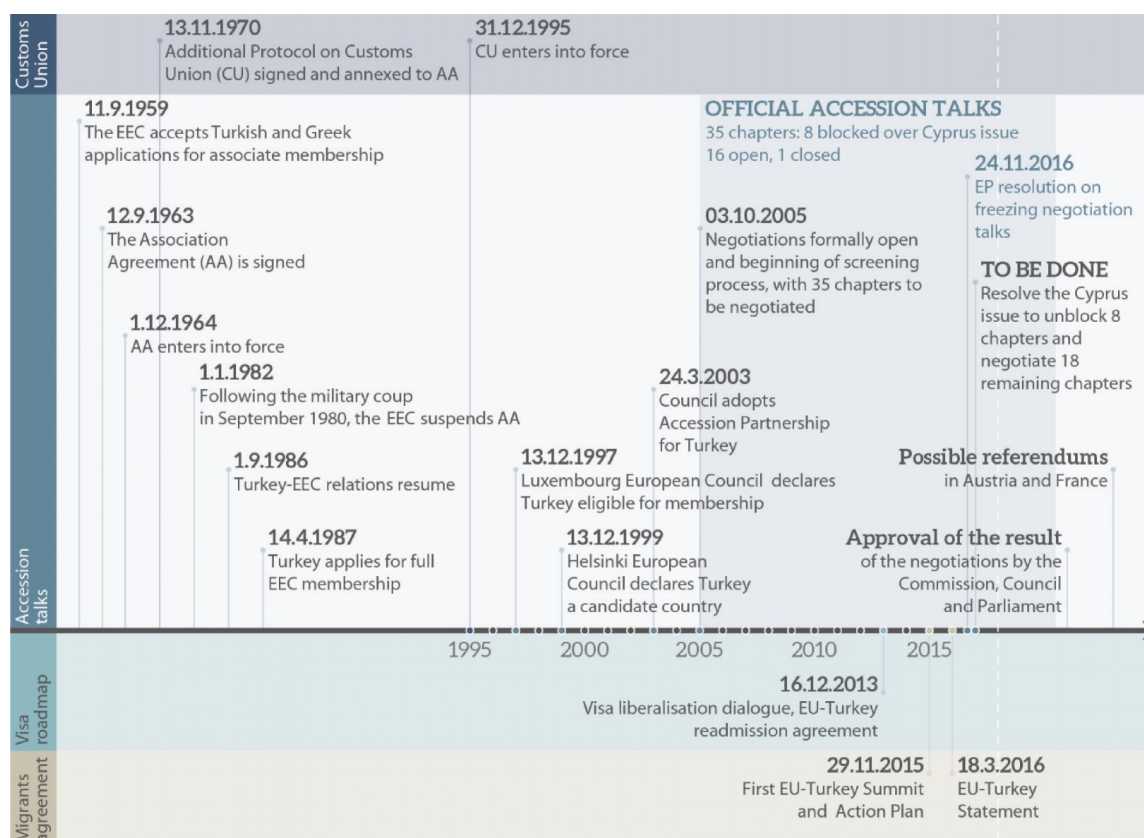
Despite the numerous hurdles before it, accession not only remains the ultimate objective of EU-Turkey relations, endorsed by both the European Council and by Turkey, but it also provides potential for reform and dialogue regarding common standards, not least in the area of civil liberties.



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

Figure 1 – Timeline and prospects for EU-Turkey relations



Source: EPRS.

Challenging years in EU-Turkey relations

Failed military coup of 2016

On 16 July 2016, a group of military officers attempted a coup but failed to seize civilian power in Istanbul and Ankara, as thousands took to the streets to oppose them. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan immediately accused the Muslim cleric in exile in the US, [Fetullah Gülen](#), of staging the coup. Even though the EU repeatedly condemned the coup, Turkey expressed disappointment over the perceived lack of support from its EU and NATO allies during what was a major attack on its democratically elected government.

Post-coup repression and constitutional change

The magnitude of the purge that followed confirmed an [illiberal](#) turn in Turkish politics: President Erdogan made statements about a possible [return](#) to the death penalty, which the EU found [unacceptable](#).

With the introduction of the emergency rule in 2016 following the failed coup, more than [125 000 persons](#) working for the government, academia, the media or the private sector, were prosecuted and often later sacked. More than 60 000 persons were arrested, and some of them were denied access to a fair trial. Turkish academics suspected of links with the Gülen movement, which was strongly present in the Turkish education sector, were arrested or fired. The crackdown affected students as well: in 2018, a number of [campuses](#) were raided and students were arrested over their anti-war stances. This happened despite the fact that since entering into power in 2002, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party ([AKParti](#)) had opened long-forbidden academic debates on religion, Kurds and the treatment of the Armenians during World War One (the AKParti still refuses to recognise it as genocide).

The [media](#) landscape has come under greater control from corporations linked to the AKParti; as part of this trend, prominent journalists have been arrested and operations have been launched to close opposition outlets or put them under the control of pro-government allies. In addition, freedom of speech has been restricted and local governments have been put under strict surveillance, with local mayors replaced by appointees.

According to US NGO Freedom House, the situation in Turkey [deteriorated](#) sharply from 2015 to 2018: the new Constitution, adopted in 2017 and presented as an answer to the coup, centralised all powers in the hands of the directly elected president (there is no longer a post of prime minister). The [ODIHR/OSCE](#) observation mission criticised the organisers of the April referendum, ahead of the adoption of the Constitution, for not giving opponents proper access to the media and for banning civil society organisations from taking part in the debate. This debate was far from fair, given the state of emergency and the scale of post-coup repression. In addition, [disputes](#) in March 2017 over Turkish politicians campaigning in the EU ahead of the referendum led to a new [low](#) in the relationship of some Member States (Germany, the Netherlands, Austria) with Turkey.

Following the 2017 referendum, Erdogan announced that early presidential and legislative elections would be held in June 2018. Erdogan and AKParti won both elections in a climate of 'no equal opportunities', [according](#) to OSCE/ODIHR, which noted the difficulty for other candidates in getting access to the media.

Economic difficulties, partly linked to the US-Turkey crisis

Even if Turkey has been recording continued growth on average over the past 15 years (in 2017 alone growth stood at 7.3 %), [forecasts](#) are negative due to the severe currency crisis that almost halved the value of the Turkish lira (-45 %) against the US dollar between January and August 2018. Correspondingly, growth in 2018 is forecast to stand at 3.1 % – half the level of 2017 – and in 2019 at around 1 %.

The Turkish lira [crisis](#) partly resulted from a diplomatic escalation between Ankara and Washington over the imprisonment of US pastor Andrew Brunson, who had been [accused](#) of terrorism in Turkey in 2016. After having issued a number of warnings in relation to his fate and having requested his release, in August 2018 the US government [decided](#) to double tariffs on Turkish metal imports and [took](#) personal measures against a couple of Turkish ministers. The Turkish government retaliated by doubling tariffs on a number of key US imports. This third crisis since the election of Donald Trump as US President only aggravated the already poor [performance](#) of the Turkish lira. The second crisis resulted from the [arrest](#) of a Turkish employee of the US consulate-general in Istanbul, followed by the [suspension](#) of US visa services in Turkey (to be renewed in 2019). The first crisis occurred when Turkish and US troops – representing NATO's two biggest armies – nearly clashed in Syria over the Kurdish-controlled regions. While the US [backs](#) Kurdish armed groups, Turkey fights them to avoid their consolidation near its border. Last but not least, US [refusal](#) to extradite Gülen is another factor in the souring of US-Turkey relations.

The crisis in US-Turkey relations is [threatening](#) Turkey's ongoing [mega-projects](#) (initiated by the government to sustain the construction sector). A key point in the AKParti's electoral programme, these projects are meant to raise the country's profile in the run-up to the 100th anniversary of the Turkish republic in 2023. Examples include the construction of a third Istanbul airport – the biggest in the world – and of a second canal – Canalistanbul – parallel to the Bosphorus.

A shift in alliances?

Over the past few years, Turkey has been sending mixed signals about its commitment to NATO and EU integration. When a Turkish Air Force F-16 [shot](#) down a Russian warplane in December 2015, it relied on NATO support against Russian threats. However, in the context of deteriorating US-Turkey ties, President Erdogan publicly displayed his closeness to the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and

even considered [buying](#) military equipment from Russia. Under existing US law, if Turkey were to buy the Russian S-400 missile system, it would be subject to [sanctions](#).

This proximity is also based on Turkey's [desire](#) to influence the future of Syria. The US and some NATO members back the Kurdish troops in the north of Syria and have rejected the possibility of establishing a security zone along the Turkish border, to which Turkey could return a part of the 3 million displaced Syrians it received. Consequently, Turkey sided with Russia and Iran to help them solidify their positions in the Syrian war, and took part in several trilateral meetings. In order to influence the outcome of the conflict, Turkey launched a military intervention against Kurdish forces in the north of Syria, yet downplayed its opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's staying in power.

Over the past 15 years, Turkey has also tried to increase its influence on the geopolitical orientation of central Asia and Azerbaijan, with which it has strong cultural links. It has also boosted its participation in the [Organisation of Islamic Cooperation](#) (OIC). In 2016, Turkey hosted the OIC [summit](#) for the first time, and Erdogan [blamed](#) the West for its double standards regarding Muslim victims of terrorism.

Similar to some other G20 members, such as Brazil, Turkey is calling for UN reform, especially of the Security Council (SC). Erdogan has [described](#) the system of permanent SC members as an 'unequal system'. Turkey deplores that no permanent SC member is a Muslim country and [advocates](#) a system that would represent all continents (Africa is not represented) and religions. The EU has no official position on this matter, nor do France and the United Kingdom, both of which are permanent Security Council members.

Nevertheless, Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe and NATO, and the EU is by far Turkey's [main trading partner](#). The EU and Turkey have common interests in solving both the Syrian crisis and terrorism in the region. The European Commission has received the green light from the Council of the EU and the [European Parliament](#) to deepen cooperation with Turkey, both in the fight against terrorism and with regard to better data exchange.

Turkey signed the Paris Agreement (COP21 meeting) in April 2016, but has not yet ratified it. Even though Turkey is in a region highly affected by climate change, [Ankara's](#) climate policy is often described as hesitant, given that for the past 30 years its CO₂ emissions have been closely correlated with economic growth and population increase. Nevertheless, Turkey has been categorised as a 'developed country' and has therefore had to commit to CO₂ emissions reductions. As a consequence, Turkish diplomats always insist on 'special circumstances' when describing their position. In its [contribution](#) prior to the COP21 meeting, Turkey did not commit to a substantial decrease in its emissions; at the meeting, it was among the [14 % of countries](#) that failed to assume such a commitment.

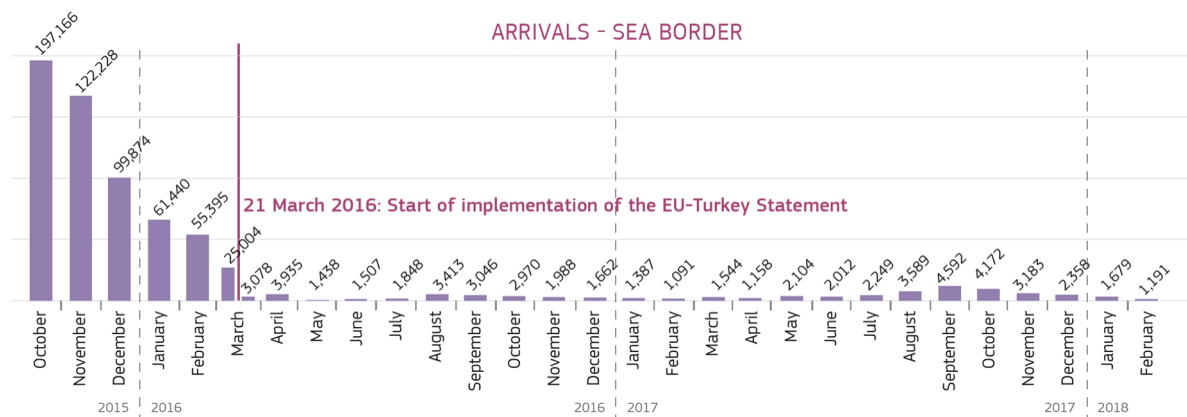
Managing the migrant crisis

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. As a result, the [number](#) of migrants crossing the Aegean Sea since the EU-Turkey Statement has remained 97 % lower than the pre-statement figures, from 10 000 to 80 persons a day on average (April 2018). The number of returns from Greece's islands to Turkey under the statement remains low: 2 164 from March 2016 to April 2018, plus more than 2 000 persons who accepted a voluntary return. Other players, such as the UN's International Organization for Migration [programme](#), have also provided assistance for the voluntary return of around 12 000 persons from the whole of Greece since 2016. In exchange, around 12 000 Syrians have been [resettled](#) from Turkey to the EU (more than a third of them in Germany). Nevertheless, the statement has been [criticised by a number of NGOs](#): as Turkey is considered a safe country, asylum requests filed within Greece are first assessed by the Greek

authorities to establish if the migrants can be returned to Turkey. According to NGOs, this practice can send a signal that the EU is not respecting its values in terms of human rights protection and pave the way for mass returns of Syrians to Turkey.

For its part, the EU committed to granting visa-free travel to Turkish citizens. In February 2018, Turkey submitted a plan on implementing EU rules before a visa-free decision could be taken; the Commission is now [reviewing the plan](#). Nevertheless, without recognition of Cyprus by Turkey, visa liberalisation might prove difficult to implement.

Figure 2 – Number of migrants crossing the Aegean Sea, 2015-2018



Source: [European Commission](#), 2018.

The EU-Turkey Facility for Refugees

In order to help Turkey cope with the crisis, the EU [mobilised](#) €3 billion, [now](#) fully contracted with 72 projects, and set aside an additional €3 billion to be released by the end of 2018 (€2 billion of this amount will be financed from the EU budget and the remaining €1 billion from contributions by the Member States, according to their share of the EU's GNI).

Although the results promised by the EU took time to materialise on the ground, European aid is now getting [through](#), with part of the second €3 billion envelope already announced (€400 million [announced](#) for the education of the displaced Syrians).

Part of the facility is given through a new method of direct support, called the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), which is to cover the basic needs of more than 1.3 million people. The Commission has published a [map](#) of the funded projects.

In July 2018, the [Parliament approved](#) the Council position on amending the budget to finance the EU Facility for Turkey, but 'strongly deplored discrepancy between the absence of Parliament's involvement in the adoption of the decisions on the setting-up and on the prolongation of the FRT on the one hand, and its role as budgetary authority in the financing of the FRT from the Union budget on the other hand' and stated that EP approval is 'without prejudice to its position on the remaining part of the financing of the second tranche of the facility'.

Member State debate about Turkey's accession to the EU

Opposition to continuation of negotiations

Since 2016, a number of leading politicians in Europe, including Heads of State or Government, have voiced their opposition to the continuation of Turkey's accession talks. In 2016, Austria expressed [opposition](#) to continuing the accession process. During the UK's EU membership referendum campaign, the prospect of Turkey's [accession](#) was put forward as a reason to leave the EU. The governing Liberal Party in Denmark has voiced [opposition](#) to the accession process as well. 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](#) following breaches in the rule of law in Turkey.

Prior to Germany's 2017 federal elections, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, stated that she would seek to [stop](#) Turkey's accession talks; in a similar vein, during a visit from President Erdogan to France in 2018, French President, Emmanuel Macron, called for an [alternative](#) to accession.

Merkel's proposal to halt negotiations drew dissent from Finnish and Lithuanian [ministers](#), who said that accession talks should continue to align Turkey to EU standards. However, accession talks have stalled and [no progress](#) has been made on the negotiation of EU *acquis* chapters or on the improvement of the customs union. In addition, Turkey's accession to the EU is hard to imagine without the [Cyprus issue](#) first being solved.

Nevertheless, on both sides, accession remains the main objective. Since signing its first association agreement in 1963, Turkey has always made EU accession one of its top diplomatic priorities. Accession negotiations began in 2005, and Erdogan reiterated the [objective of full accession](#) in March 2018; so far, one chapter has been provisionally closed and 15 more are under negotiation. Progress has been slow since 2005, mainly on account of the Cyprus issue.

Even if the EU and Turkey do conclude negotiations in the medium term, in the event that the Cyprus issue gets resolved, the Council and Parliament will both have to approve Turkey's accession. The treaty of accession would then 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.

Possible end to accession talks

The EU has never terminated accession talks with a candidate country. In the cases of Norway and Iceland, it was them that notified the EU of their wish not to pursue accession. If the EU were to decide to officially halt or terminate accession talks with Turkey, it will have to follow the formal steps described in the [EU-Turkey negotiating framework](#) (2005):

In the case of a serious and persistent breach in Turkey of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law on which the Union is founded, the Commission will, on its own initiative or on the request of one third of the Member States, recommend the suspension of negotiations and propose the conditions for eventual resumption. The Council will decide by qualified majority on such a recommendation, after having heard Turkey, whether to suspend the negotiations and on the conditions for their resumption. The Member States will act in the Intergovernmental Conference in accordance with the Council decision, without prejudice to the general requirement for unanimity in the Intergovernmental Conference. The European Parliament will be informed.

None of these steps have been taken, and there is, for now, no sign of a desire to do so, by either the Commission or a significant number of Member States.

Integrated markets and a visa-free regime without a political union

In a [number](#) of Member States, a possible alternative relationship with the EU has been discussed; nevertheless, neither is its specific content clear nor does Turkey seem to explicitly express any willingness to opt for an alternative to accession. In [2015](#), the upgrading of the customs union seemed to be an alternative or an intermediate goal for the two partners, but accomplishing this goal cannot be viewed [separately](#) from accession negotiations proper.

One reason is that the EU-Turkey customs union and the accession process evolve 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 was a core element of the EEC, and the EEC-Turkey customs union was conceived as a step towards membership. [Turkey](#) is the only major non-EU country with a trade arrangement of this kind. The customs union provides a common external tariff for the EU and Turkey, and covers industrial goods and certain agricultural products.

An enhanced EU-Turkey customs union

According to a 2016 [evaluation of the customs union](#) for the European Parliament, the deal has been beneficial for both sides but is outdated. Since the customs union's entry into force in 1996, the EU has [made](#) a number of free trade agreements (FTAs) with third countries, including provisions spanning different sectors and not only focused on industrial goods. Under the customs union, Turkey should also have concluded FTAs with these EU partners, but has not; nor did it take part in the EU's negotiations. Both the EU and Turkey have acknowledged that the customs union needs modernising, and in [December](#) 2016 the 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 could be fully resolved only with Turkey becoming a full member of the EU. Ankara is also keen to see progress in 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 into the EU institutional order: it covers the four freedoms, i.e. 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, a 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 customs union has never been discussed.

Accession talks remain key

Any progress on the customs union or the visa-free regime is linked to the accession process. Even if the three negotiation procedures are formally separate, they reinforce each other. Deeper cooperation through an [upgraded](#) customs union 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 is the idea of granting the UK and Turkey a common status. Commission President, 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-UK relationship remains uncertain, pending its [negotiation](#). Second, the current EU-Turkey customs union is likely to remain [unique](#) in terms of the types of relationships the EU has with its main partners. Nevertheless, both the UK and Turkey will certainly look at the type of relationship the EU is developing with each of them, as a source of comparison. London has already approached Ankara to discuss a potential post-Brexit trade [deal](#)

and cooperation in a number of fields, including defence. London and Ankara will most likely [consult](#) more often with each other on their EU-related mutual interests.

In any case, accession remains a medium-term possibility, as the EEC has evolved into the 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 its future.

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 in the country – both internally and externally – was deteriorating rapidly, 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.

In July 2017, the European Parliament [denounced](#) hundreds of arrests by the Turkish government, carried out in an attempt to censor criticism over its military assault in Afrin (in Syria), and called on Turkey to lift the state of emergency currently being used to further stifle legitimate and peaceful opposition. Furthermore, the EP called for the funds destined for Turkey under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) to be conditional on improving its record on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In addition, the EP called for the accession talks not only to be frozen, but to be suspended, were President Erdogan to implement the changes to the constitution he had pledged to make.

In [February](#) 2018, the EP called on Turkey to release two Greek soldiers charged with having illegally crossed the Greek-Turkish border.

In October 2018, the EP decided to [cancel](#) €70 million in pre-accession funds earmarked for Turkey, as certain conditions for improving the rule of law had not been met.

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