

The European Council and Turkey

Searching for a positive agenda

SUMMARY

Turkey has featured regularly on the agenda of the European Council in recent years, notably in the context of the migration crisis and military operations in Syria, and as a result of an increasingly tense situation in the eastern Mediterranean, which led to a significant military build-up at sea during the summer of 2020. In all these cases, the European Council (re)acted swiftly, ensuring that the views of the Member States were taken into consideration. In the migration crisis, it stepped up cooperation with Turkey, reducing the influx of irregular arrivals on EU shores, while offering to 're-energise accession negotiations'. This offer has been disregarded, as Turkey has continued to drift away from EU values and principles, multiplying rule of law and human rights violations. In parallel, Turkey has started pursuing an increasingly assertive regional policy in the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and, more recently, in the south Caucasus. Its assertiveness in the eastern Mediterranean led to the increase in illegal exploratory drilling activities in the Cypriot and Greek economic exclusive zones (EEZs), which the European Council has condemned on numerous occasions. In 2020, in an attempt to back de-escalation efforts, the European Council reiterated its offer of cooperation on a positive political agenda, including modernisation of the EU-Turkey customs union, making this conditional upon progress on restoring good neighbourly relations.

Background

The EU's relationship with Turkey is complex and challenging. Turkey is both a candidate country and a 'key partner' in 'migration, counterterrorism, economy and trade'.¹ For many years, Turkey's accession progress was incremental. In recent years, however, EU accession has stalled, as the Turkish regime, following the failed military coup in 2016, has moved towards authoritarianism, disregarding principles and values, including the rule of law and human rights, that are the bedrock of EU integration.

EU-Turkey relations reached a historic low point in mid-2020, when tensions in the eastern Mediterranean rose to a new high. Causes included more assertive action from Turkey in the form of recurrent illegal exploratory drilling activities in the Cypriot and Greek EEZs as well as a late 2019 [memorandum of understanding](#) (MOU) with Libya on the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas. In parallel, either through direct military operations, such as that conducted in north-east Syria in 2019,² or conflicts by proxy, as in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, Turkey pursued its ambition to renew links with its [Ottoman past](#) and consolidate its regional power position.

Concerted efforts from both NATO and the EU led by the end of 2020 to progressive de-escalation in the eastern Mediterranean. NATO, an alliance both Greece and Turkey joined back in 1952, once again played a [pivotal role](#) in facilitating dialogue, while the EU, at successive European Council meetings, offered Turkey a chance to strengthen its ties with the bloc and (re-)embark on a positive

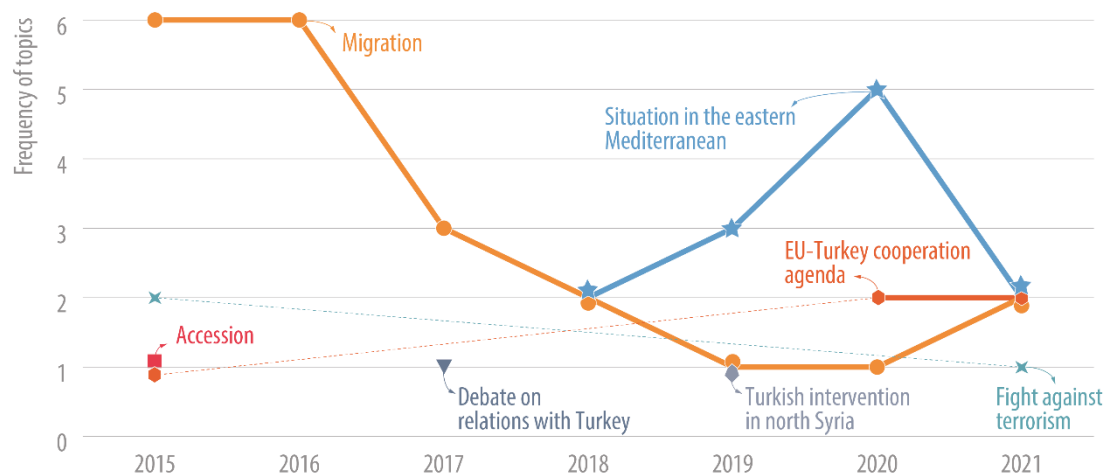
path of cooperation. This offer was conditional on Turkey accepting to play a constructive regional role and refrain from further provocations targeted at two EU members, Greece and Cyprus.

This briefing analyses the European Council's debates and main messages on Turkey since 2015. In doing so, it considers how two events – the migration crisis and the tense situation in the eastern Mediterranean – have shaped EU-Turkish relations thus far.

European Council focus on Turkey

Since 2015, the European Council has referred to Turkey regularly in its conclusions (as shown in Figure 1).³ Between 2015 and 2018, debates focused on migration; a 'rolling' topic that continues to attract the EU leaders' attention. A shift in focus occurred in 2018, when the number of irregular arrivals on European shores dropped, and tensions in the eastern Mediterranean grew following Turkey's successive illegal exploratory drilling activities undertaken first in the Cypriot, and later, in the Greek EEZs. In 2020, EU leaders discussed the situation in the eastern Mediterranean five times, and invited Turkey to engage in cooperation rather than on a confrontational path with the EU and its Member States. Other topics – such as counter-terrorism, accession negotiations and the situation in north-east Syria – have also attracted the European Council's attention regularly.

Figure 1 – Incidence of Turkey-related topics in European Council conclusions



Source: EPRS.

On two occasions, the European Council discussed Turkey under more than one agenda point during the same meeting (see Annex). The first such instance was in [December 2015](#), when EU leaders discussed cooperation with Turkey as part of two separate sessions on migration and on counter-terrorism. Similarly, in October 2017, EU leaders considered Turkey in two separate sessions, one on migration and another on external relations – the focus on the latter was bilateral relations and no conclusions were adopted. The operational 'takeaway' from that debate was summed up by the European Council President, Donald Tusk, in his [post-summit remarks](#). He stressed that EU leaders 'wanted to keep the door open to Ankara' but that in light of the 'current reality' (backsliding on democracy and reforms), this was not possible. The leaders invited the European Commission to 'reflect on whether to cut and re-orient pre-accession funds'. A €70 million [cut](#) in pre-accession funds was agreed by Parliament and Council in 2018.

Between December 2018 and June 2021, migration was not a [stand-alone agenda point](#). During that time, the European Council also used its meetings dedicated to the situation in the eastern Mediterranean to take stock of cooperation on migration with Turkey, confirming on several occasions the EU's support for ongoing programmes for Syrian refugees in Turkey. One exception occurred in March 2020, when EU leaders focused exclusively on the increase in irregular arrivals

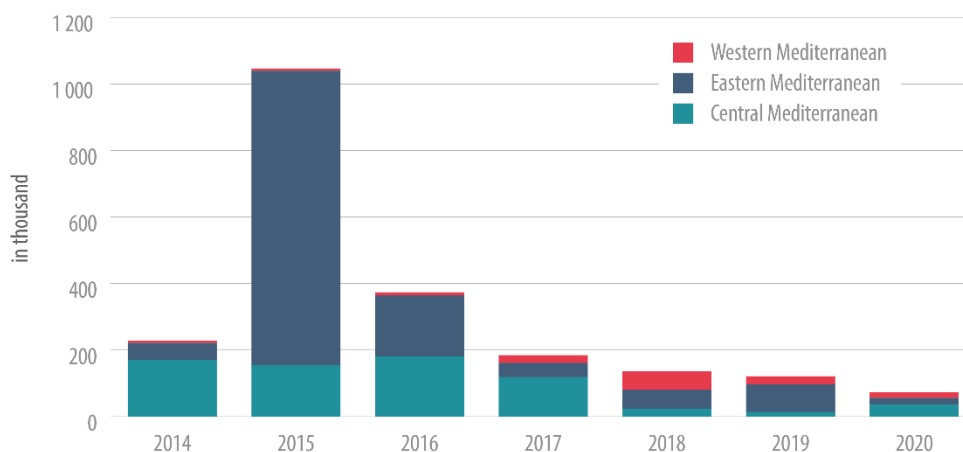
resulting from Turkey's decision to unilaterally open its border. On that occasion, they expressed their [concern](#) and solidarity with the Member States affected: Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus.

European Council, Turkey and the migration crisis

On 23 April 2015, the European Council held its first meeting dedicated to countering migration, opening a two-year-long series of crisis-focused summits.⁴ From the start, EU leaders recognised the importance of stepping up cooperation with Turkey, a message reiterated several times since. Turkey, at the time host to over [1.7 million](#) Syrian refugees, gradually came to be an '[inevitable partner](#)', fully aware of its strong bargaining position and ready to use it.

Two main routes – the [central](#) and [eastern](#) Mediterranean routes – were at the centre of the EU leaders' debates and efforts to stem migration flows. The [eastern Mediterranean route](#), which at the time was also the source of the now (almost) defunct [western Balkan route](#), raised most concern on account of the massive influx of refugees (see Figure 1). Overall, irregular arrivals in the EU rose to over 1 million people in [2015](#), 50 % of whom were Syrians.

Figure 2 – Variation in the number of irregular arrivals in the EU, 2014-2020



Data source: [Frontex](#).

The uninterrupted flow of irregular arrivals on European shores for the rest of 2015 and in early 2016 resulted in [mounting](#) public pressure on the EU leadership. There was a sense of urgency among EU leaders combined with a need to find viable solutions. The European Commission made a [proposal](#) for mandatory relocation quotas, which was intended to support front-line states, principally Italy and Greece. Rather than uniting the European Council, the proposal [fractured](#) it, however, and had a long-lasting impact on the European Council's ability to progress on the internal dimension of migration, an area where Member States' [sensitivities](#) persist and key decisions are still [awaited](#).

The other challenge addressed by the European Council was the [external dimension of migration](#) and the strengthening of the partnership with Turkey. Between June 2015 and March 2016, no fewer than seven European Council meetings focused on the situation on the eastern Mediterranean route. By October 2015, the European Council was prepared to 're-energise' the accession process, pursuing visa liberalisation efforts and stepping-up cooperation inter alia on counter-terrorism in exchange for closer cooperation on migration with Turkey. This line of action was later confirmed by the [EU-Turkey statement](#) of 29 November 2015, which stated the intention of the two parties to activate and implement the [EU-Turkey joint action plan](#).

Although both parties demanded that 'results must be achieved, in particular in stemming the influx of irregular migrants' through the implementation of the joint action plan, the number of irregular arrivals remained high and additional solutions were urgently needed. EU and Turkish officials [pursued](#) the already intense high-level diplomatic dialogue opened months earlier when the crisis

had started. Some Member States, including [Germany](#) and the [Netherlands](#), which held the Council's rotating presidency in the first half of 2016, also stepped up their diplomatic efforts.

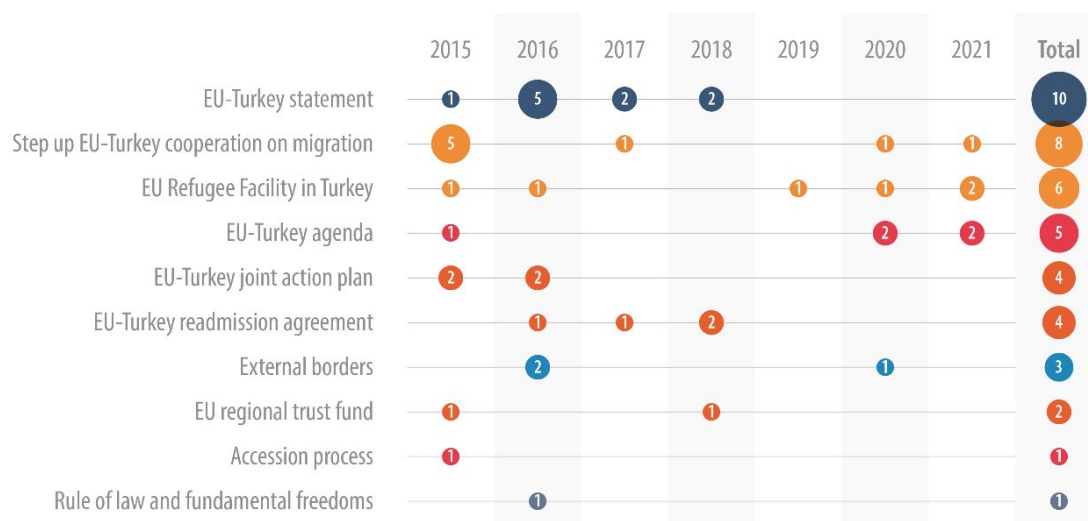
Unity on a common approach to migration still needed to be built within the European Council, and it was the [task](#) of its President to strive to achieve it. By early March 2016, there were signs that a deal was possible and Donald Tusk, who held talks personally with some of his colleagues, was [cautiously optimistic](#) when stating that 'for the first time since the beginning of the migration crisis' he could see 'a European consensus emerging ... around a comprehensive strategy that, if loyally implemented, can help stem the flows and tackle the crisis'. Yet, efforts had to be increased in the period between the [7 March 2016](#) and [17-18 March 2016](#) European Council meetings because some Member States, including [Cyprus](#), still had reservations and threatened not to sign up to the deal.

EU-Turkey statement

On 18 March 2016, the EU and Turkey agreed on a new statement, which was the missing piece of the broader puzzle, including the November 2015 EU-Turkey statement, the EU-Turkey joint action plan and the [statement](#) of EU leaders of 7 March 2016. It was clearly specified in the new statement that the EU and Turkey aimed to 'break the business model of the smugglers' and had agreed that: i) all irregular migrants reaching the Greek islands would be sent back to Turkey; ii) they would apply the 'one to one' principle, which specified that for every Syrian returned to Turkey another Syrian in Turkey would be resettled in the EU; and iii) the funds to be mobilised to support the newly created EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey would be doubled, to reach €6 billion by the end of 2018. These three points sparked most attention from practitioners and analysts who started questioning not only their [legality](#), but also their [moral](#) implications. Human rights organisations argued that Turkey was wrongly considered to be a safe country for asylum-seekers, a [debate](#) still continuing now. The form (statement) raised questions as to the legal nature of the entire document, dividing [scholars](#) between two qualifications: international agreement or non-binding political agreement. The Court of Justice of the European Union was seized of the matter in [NF v European Council](#) where it was also asked to recognise the international agreement character of the EU-Turkey statement and annul it. The Court declined its competence on grounds that the statement was issued by the Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States and not by the European Council as an institution; putting an end to further litigation at EU level.

Two main messages have been repeated by the European Council since 2015: the need to step up cooperation with Turkey on migration, and the need to implement the EU-Turkey statement (see Figure 3). On the EU-Turkey statement, the European Council uses the singular, not the plural, suggesting that the November 2015 and March 2016 statements are seen as a single instrument.

Figure 3 – Main European Council messages on migration



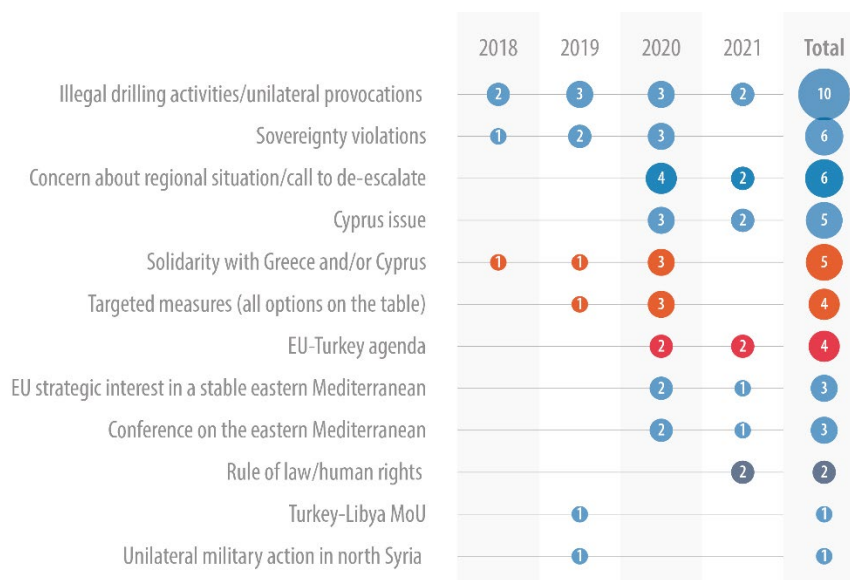
Source: EPRS.

The EU-Turkey statement delivered on its main objective, namely to lift pressure from the EU's external border. Yet, already back in June 2016 analysts warned that the EU was essentially externalising the management of its external border, displaying [vulnerability](#) towards Turkey and other neighbours that might be exploited in the long run. In late 2019 and early 2020, for the first time since 2016, the number of illegal arrivals on the eastern Mediterranean route began to rise once more as Turkey temporarily [opened](#) its border and encouraged refugees to cross into Greece. With this move, Turkey was hoping for [support](#) for its military operation in north-east Syria and also for further financial assistance for the Syrian refugees in Turkey. In late 2019, the European Council [condemned](#) Turkey's unilateral military intervention in north-east Syria and no change of policy occurred in the interim. At the same time, EU leaders agreed to continue financing existing programmes for refugees. In 2020, the sum of €485 million was [pledged](#) to allow humanitarian aid programmes to continue in 2021. [Morocco's](#) recent assertive policy, which has resulted in an increase in irregular arrivals on the western Mediterranean Sea route, led the European Council to [include](#) migration on its agenda in June 2021; confirming that the fear of a spill-over effect was not completely [unjustified](#).

Tensions in the eastern Mediterranean: From crisis to opportunity

The other topic to have attracted close attention from the European Council in recent years is the situation in the eastern Mediterranean. The European Council first [referred](#) to sovereignty violations in 2018, when it condemned Turkey's illegal exploratory drilling activities in the EEZ of Cyprus. EU leaders have reiterated this message on numerous occasions since (see Figure 4 and Annex), and have also condemned Turkey's similar behaviour in the EEZ of Greece (see Figure 4). In parallel, they have called repeatedly for a resumption of talks with a view to resolving the Cyprus problem under the UN framework. Tensions reached a new high in the summer of 2020, when both NATO and the EU expressed concern regarding the military build-up in the eastern Mediterranean and called for de-escalation. By October 2020, EU leaders changed their main messages and approach towards Turkey, looking for a positive exit to the crisis. They offered Turkey the possibility to embark on a renewed positive agenda with the EU, provided de-escalation efforts were pursued and dialogue with Greece and Cyprus opened and maintained. Thus, in both December 2020 and March 2021, the 'positive agenda' was at the centre of European Council discussions with regard to EU-Turkey relations. This point was once again [considered](#) at the June 2021 European Council, but despite [initial expectations](#), no further decisions were adopted given the lack of progress regarding settlement of the Cyprus problem and human rights protection in Turkey.

Figure 4 – Main messages of the European Council on the eastern Mediterranean



Source: EPRS.

By the end of 2019, the regional security situation in the wider eastern Mediterranean region had become more complex and Turkey's illegal exploratory drilling activities in the Cypriot and Greek EEZs represented one of several challenges the European Council had to tackle. First, there was the [memorandum of understanding](#) (MoU) Turkey had signed with Libya on maritime delimitation, which, as [stressed](#) by the European Council, did not comply with the Law of the Sea and infringed upon the sovereign rights of third states, including two EU Member States – Greece and Cyprus. Second, there was Turkey's unilateral military action in north-east Syria, which the European Council had [condemned](#), urging Turkey to withdraw and comply with international law. Third, as already outlined, migration was slowly re-emerging as a challenge despite the European Council's political agreement to continue funding Syrian refugee programmes in Turkey; by March 2020 the situation threatened to breakout into a full scale crisis, when Turkey unilaterally opened its borders.

The European Council reacted to all three situations in late 2019 and early 2020. However, a change of narrative occurred only in the autumn of 2020, following a [dangerous military build-up](#) in the eastern Mediterranean during the summer. The build-up, involving Turkey, Greece and France, had multiple causes, pertaining to a century-long unresolved Greek-Turkish maritime delimitation [dispute](#) in the Aegean and to the more recent Turkish involvement in the [Libyan conflict](#).

Since 2006, the '[blue homeland](#)' doctrine had been gradually gaining ground and became the main military doctrine after the attempted coup of July 2016. Turkey unilaterally stated what it considered to be its maritime space and EEZ, regardless of the lack of international recognition. Consequently, Turkey has built an assertive maritime economic and energy policy, which feeds into its ambition to grow into a regional power. The illegal exploratory drilling in the Greek and Cypriot EEZs was the natural result of implementation of the blue homeland doctrine. Analysts stressed that by embracing the 'blue homeland' doctrine Turkey was departing from the '[strategic depth](#)' doctrine, which allowed the country to come closer to the EU, and to progress on accession negotiations. Two of the principles of the 'strategic depth' doctrine – 'zero problems with neighbours' and a 'balance between security and democracy' – once abandoned, facilitated Turkey's drift away from the EU and its values.

In addition to offering to engage on a positive agenda for cooperation, the European Council, on the initiative of its President, Charles Michel, [called](#) for the organisation of a multilateral conference on the eastern Mediterranean. This would offer an opportunity to engage with Turkey regionally to discuss 'maritime delimitation, security, energy, migration and economic cooperation'. EU leaders [entrusted](#) the High Representative, Josep Borrell, with work on the organisational details, but no time horizon was given on a possible start date for the conference. It will be necessary to step up dialogue in multilateral forums, as Turkey does not [recognise](#) the government of Cyprus.

A (renewed) positive EU-Turkey agenda

The new narrative embraced by the European Council in late 2020 centred on a conditional offer of a (renewed) positive (political) agenda if de-escalation in the eastern Mediterranean and normalisation of neighbourly relations occurred. EU leaders [set](#) the principle of 'phased, proportional and reversed cooperation' which would guide them when deciding, depending on progress made, to step up cooperation with Turkey.

EU leaders also outlined a possible negative path, which, as European Council President, Charles Michel, stressed, was not the EU's preferred option but would be prepared should there be a need to further counter Turkish provocations. In case of further unilateral provocation, the EU could use 'all (its) instruments'. This development [sparked](#) a debate on the possible use of restrictive measures, including whether new sanctions would be introduced and/or if existing ones would be extended and expanded. Only sanctions introduced a year earlier, in October 2019, in solidarity with Cyprus as a result of Turkey's illegal exploratory drilling activities have been extended and expanded so far. In December 2020, meanwhile, several Member States [opposed](#) the introduction of [new sanctions](#), granting Turkey more time to determine the path it wished to take.

Conditionality: Boosting or dampening EU-Turkey cooperation?

The boosting and/or dampening effect of the conditionality introduced by the European Council should neither be under- nor over-estimated. The main condition – good neighbourly relations – is not new. In fact, it is a criterion that needs to be fulfilled as part of the accession process and has not prevented Turkey from drifting away from the EU and its values in the past.

Turkey would have to combine elements of the 'blue homeland' doctrine with elements of the 'strategic depth' doctrine if it genuinely wished to follow the cooperation path offered by the European Council. Initial steps in the direction of a normalisation of relations with Greece were taken in the form of several rounds of ministerial-level talks focusing on a wide range of issues, including on the [delimitation of maritime zones](#). These were followed by a meeting between the Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis and the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on the side-lines of the [2021 NATO summit](#). These talks [offered](#) an initial positive signal of Turkey's willingness to 'resolve differences within the framework of good neighbourly relations, international law and respect for mutual interests' as well as a [promise](#) of a 'quiet year' for Greek-Turkish relations.

A different course was taken with respect to the Cyprus problem. An informal [5+1 format](#) meeting [failed](#) to achieve progress' as not 'enough common ground' was [found](#) to formally resume negotiations. The President of Cyprus, Nikos Anastasiades, [concluded](#) that a halt to illegal drilling in the Cypriot EEZ was not sufficient for the EU, stressing that a positive agenda towards Turkey would be adopted 'when there is positive behaviour'. Given the lack of progress, EU leaders stood [united](#) with Cyprus and did not greenlight the deepening of EU-Turkey cooperation in June 2021.

Analysts [argue](#) that despite its assertive behaviour in recent years, Turkey is fully aware of its reliance on its partners. Trade figures are indicative here. In 2020, Turkey [represented](#) only 3.6% of the EU's total trade in goods, and was thus the EU's [sixth](#) largest trading partner; in the same year, the EU [represented](#) 33.4% of Turkish imports and 41.3% of its exports, constituting Turkey's largest trading partner. This gives Turkey an incentive to cooperate with rather than antagonise the EU, and a direct interest in modernising the customs union, a key point of the EU-Turkey agenda for cooperation proposed by the European Council if conditionality is met.

Content of the EU-Turkey agenda

The initiative of a 'positive agenda' with Turkey dates back to 2012 when an attempt was made to relaunch EU-Turkey relations. The [aim](#) was to 'bring fresh dynamics' into EU-Turkish relations, 'not to replace, but to complement and support the accession process of Turkey'. Both the political criteria – political reforms and fundamental rights – and the more technical aspects – harmonisation with EU legislation, and cooperation on counter-terrorism or migration – featured in the positive agenda launched in Ankara in 2012 (see Table 1). This cyclical nature of EU-Turkey relations, marked by stagnation of relations and periods of efforts to boost cooperation on a wide range of areas of common interest, has been clearly visible since 2005, when the country began accession talks.

In 2015, the European Council confirmed its commitment to 're-energise' the accession process begun three years earlier in Ankara. Migration became one element of a broader offer for cooperation based on regular political dialogue, complemented by high-level thematic dialogues. Political dialogue and not accession negotiations became the main driver of EU-Turkey relations from 2015 onwards, hence the lack of an explicit mention by the European Council of political reforms or harmonisation with EU legislation, two indicators the European Commission continued to monitor in its yearly country reports.

Analysts have [pointed](#) out that political dialogue has not been conducive to [solutions](#) in recent years and has not been carried out on a regular basis. In April 2021, the visit to Ankara made jointly by the European Council President, Charles Michel, and the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, aimed to reverse this course and to convey the European Council's conditional offer for cooperation. President Michel [stressed](#) that the European Council's message was delivered

but that this aspect had been side-lined by 'sofagate', with post-visit discussion focusing on [protocol](#), [external representation](#) and [gender](#) issues. Furthermore, shortly before the visit, Turkey announced that it would be withdrawing from the [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) (Istanbul Convention), sending a strong negative signal on its genuine interest and will to comply with the human rights' conditionality and hampering any advancement on a 'positive agenda' – a development [seen](#) as a 'major setback' by the European Council. Member States' unity within the European Council was not affected by 'sofagate'. The Heads of State or Government remained committed to the principles they had defined and later, in June 2021, stood by them, confirming that real progress on conditionalities would be required to launch the positive agenda.

Table – Comparison of successive EU-Turkey cooperation frameworks (2012-2021)

Topic	EU-Turkey positive agenda 2012	EU-Turkey statements of 2015 & 2016	European Council EU-Turkey positive political agenda 2020/2021
Re-energise accession negotiations	✓	✓	X
Regular political dialogue	X	✓	✓
High-level dialogues on thematic issues	X	✓	✓*
Political reforms and fundamental rights	✓	X	**
Harmonisation with EU legislation	✓	X	X
Visa liberalisation	✓	✓	X
Migration	✓	✓	✓*
Mobility/people to people contacts	✓		✓*
Trade and customs union	✓	✓	✓*
Energy	✓	✓	***
Counter-terrorism	✓	✓	✓
Foreign and security policy	✓	✓	✓* (regional issues)
Health	X	X	✓*~
Climate change	X	X	✓*~

* Areas where cooperation could deepen depending on progress made on meeting the conditions in the offer for cooperation extended by the European Council to Turkey in the autumn of 2020.

~Areas where high-level (thematic) dialogues could be established.

** Dialogue on human rights.

*** Could be considered as part of the forthcoming conference on the eastern Mediterranean, along with economic cooperation, security and maritime delimitation.

Turkey and EU accession: European Council state of play

Enlargement has been absent from the European Council's debates on Turkey in recent years. The topic was raised only indirectly when EU leaders were searching for means first to resolve the migration conundrum and, later, to address the tense situation in the eastern Mediterranean.

Only once, in October 2015, the European Council [stressed](#) in its conclusions that 'the accession process need[ed] to be re-energised', a statement made within the broader framework of a debate on countering migration. References to 're-energising' the accession process were afterwards

included in the successive EU-Turkey statements of [29 November 2015](#) and [18 March 2016](#), with the European Council calling for their full implementation on numerous occasions. Furthermore, in their [7 March 2016](#) statement, EU leaders invited the European Commission to 'prepare for the decision on the opening of new chapters in the accession negotiations as soon as possible'. This led to the [opening](#) of Chapter 33 (financial and budgetary provisions) on 30 June 2016; the last of 16 [negotiation chapters](#) (one being provisionally closed) opened to date.

The failed military coup of July 2016 only accentuated Turkey's [autocratic turn](#). The brutal suppression of the [freedom of expression](#), violations of human rights, massive purges in the public administration and the 'reduction of the [rule of law](#) into rule by law approach' that followed has led Turkey to drift away from EU values and principles. This backsliding has undermined the fragile steps taken in the past to comply with the democratic governance and human rights criterion [established](#) as one of the grounding principles governing enlargement at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993. Consequently, in 2018, the European Commission could only [deplore](#) Turkey's backsliding as regards notably the functioning of the judiciary, respect of fundamental rights, social policy and employment and respect for market economy principles.

In 2019, for the first time in years, in the context of a re-energised enlargement policy towards the western Balkans, the European Council endorsed the Council's [conclusions](#) on enlargement. It therefore indirectly endorsed the Council's assessment that Turkey continued 'to move further away from the European Union', and that accession negotiations were de facto stalled, with no further negotiation chapters being opened or closed, while work on modernisation of the EU-Turkey customs union had stopped. The conditional offer for cooperation extended to Turkey in 2020 refers only to establishing regular political dialogue, and makes no reference to the accession process.

Counter-terrorism cooperation

Counter-terrorism has featured three times in the European Council conclusions, twice in 2015 and once in 2021. 2015 was marked by several [terrorist attacks](#), which touched both the EU Member States and Turkey. EU leaders deplored the [Ankara attacks](#) in October 2015. Weeks later, on 13 November 2015, the [Paris terrorist attacks](#), condemned by both the [EU](#) and [Turkey](#), relaunched the debate on counter-terrorism cooperation. Consequently, on 29 November 2015, at the [first ever](#) EU-Turkey summit at Heads of State or Government level, it was [agreed](#) that the fight against terrorism was a key priority for cooperation. Later that year, in December 2015, the European Council held a debate on counter-terrorism cooperation where it reiterated its intention to step up cooperation with Turkey on counter-terrorism. Although conducted on a regular basis, counter-terrorism dialogue was [postponed](#) in the autumn of 2019 at the request of Turkey, which was unhappy with [EU condemnation](#) of Turkey's unilateral military action in north Syria.

Views of the European Parliament

A recent [resolution](#) of the European Parliament notes that EU-Turkey relations are at a historic low, [underlining](#) that Turkey has infringed the rule of law and fundamental rights and is pursuing 'a confrontational and hostile foreign policy, including towards the EU and its Member States, especially Greece and Cyprus'. It calls on the European External Action Service's StratCom division to monitor and report on Turkish disinformation targeting EU activity in the Middle East and North Africa region.

The Parliament stresses that the recent [joint communication](#) by High Representative Josep Borrell and the European Commission offers 'a succinct summary of the current situation' and calls for a 'comprehensive, unified and coherent [EU] strategy for the medium and long term'. At the same time, Parliament notes that 'Turkey's accession negotiations have effectively and regrettably come to a standstill' as a result of the Turkish government's lack of political will to support and implement reform. The report also identifies areas for bilateral cooperation, including migration, where it recognises Turkey's role in hosting nearly 4 million refugees but deplores its attempts in March 2020

to use them as a political weapon vis-à-vis the EU. It also supports the modernisation of the customs union and sees visa liberalisation as a way to boost people-to-people contacts, which could be pursued if Turkey meets the six justice and home affairs [benchmarks](#) identified.

The way forward

The European Council reacted to both the migration crisis and the situation in the eastern Mediterranean by setting strategic guidelines and principles for cooperation with Turkey. The EU leaders will most probably continue on the same path, reiterating the conditional nature of the 'positive agenda' and, if need be, setting new guidelines. Progress on respect for international law and a rules-based international order, human rights protection in Turkey and towards a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem, largely depend on Ankara's behaviour and willingness to change course from antagonising to engaging with the EU, and is likely to determine the nature of future relations. EU-Turkey relations, including accession negotiations, will be marked by the cyclical nature observed in the past, when deep disengagement has been replaced a number of times by a relaunch process. Turkey will remain a key regional actor, which, as a member of NATO, should play a positive stabilising role in the eastern Mediterranean. A possible conference on the eastern Mediterranean would allow Turkey and its neighbours to engage on issues of mutual interest, including long-lasting disputes still waiting for enlightened solutions.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The EU used to refer to Turkey as a '[strategic partner](#)', whereas the 2020 [country report](#) called it a 'key partner'.
- ² In October 2019, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring, its third military operation on Syrian soil since 2016, following operations Euphrates Shield (2016-2017) and Olive Branch.
- ³ In this briefing, European Council conclusions, statements issued after the informal meetings of the EU Heads of State or Government and remarks/conclusions by the European Council President following meetings held by videoconference during the pandemic are referred to together under the term 'conclusions'.
- ⁴ The 23 April 2015 European Council was first announced as an [extraordinary](#) meeting being afterwards renamed a [special](#) meeting. Most of the points discussed concerned the external dimension of migration, while a smaller share pertained to the internal dimension of migration. Extraordinary meetings of the European Council can be called by the European Council President based on [Article 26\(1\) of the Treaty on European Union](#) if 'international developments so require' with the aim of determining the 'strategic lines' of the EU's foreign policy.

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Annex – Main messages of the European Council on Turkey (2015-2021)

European Council meeting	Focus	Form	Main messages
23 April 2015 (statement)	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call to step up cooperation with Turkey so as to prevent illegal migration flows from Syria and Iraq
25-26 June 2015 (conclusions)	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Step up cooperation with Turkey
23 September 2015 (statement)	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EU Regional Trust Fund in support of Syrian refugees Strengthen bilateral cooperation
15 October 2015 (conclusions)	Migration	Main point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Step up political and financial cooperation Call to 're-energise' the accession process
12 November 2015 (no conclusions)	Migration	Main point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Step up cooperation with Turkey Announcement of a summit with Turkey
17-18 December 2015 (conclusions)	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement the EU-Turkey statement and the EU-Turkey action plan
	Counter-terrorism		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation with Turkey
18-19 February 2016 (conclusions)	Migration	Discussion point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement the EU-Turkey action plan Implement the EU-Turkey agenda (border aspects)
17-18 March 2016 (conclusions)	Migration	Main point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recalled EU-Turkey statement and joint action plan Democracy, rule of law, fundamental freedoms
28 June 2016 (Conclusions)	Migration	Discussion point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Took stock of the decrease in crossings from Turkey EU-Turkey statement - monitored implementation
16 September 2016 (Declaration and Roadmap)	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to implement the EU-Turkey statement Assist Bulgaria in protecting the border with Turkey
20-21 October 2016 (conclusions)	Migration	Discussion point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Further implementation of the EU-Turkey statement
15 December 2016 (conclusions)	Migration	Discussion point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaffirmed commitment to EU-Turkey statement and called for it to be implemented
3 February 2017 (Malta declaration)	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaffirmed commitment to the EU-Turkey statement and to its implementation
22-23 June 2017 (conclusions)	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaffirmed commitment to the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement
19 October 2017 (conclusions)	Migration	Mention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement-implementation
	External relations	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Debate on relations with Turkey
23 February 2018 (no conclusions)	Relations with Turkey	Information point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Condemned Turkey's illegal exploratory drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean
22 March 2018 (conclusions)	Eastern Mediterranean	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Condemned Turkey's illegal exploratory drilling activities/expressed solidarity with Cyprus and Greece Called for normalisation of relations with neighbours
28 June 2018 (conclusions)	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement the EU-Turkey statement 2nd tranche of the EU Facility for Refugees
18 October 2018	Migration	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate effective returns

European Council meeting	Focus	Form	Main messages
(conclusions)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement the EU-Turkey statement
9 May 2019 (no conclusions)	Situation in Cyprus	Information point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Condemned Turkey's illegal exploratory drillings
20-21 June 2019 (conclusions)	External relations	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Condemned Turkey's illegal exploratory drilling Endorsed the possible use of targeted measures
17-18 October 2019 (conclusions)	Turkey's role in north Syria	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Condemned military action in north-east Syria Confirmed support for humanitarian aid assistance
12 December 2019 (conclusions)	External relations	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-affirmed solidarity with Greece and Cyprus and condemned Turkey's illegal exploratory drillings Considered the Turkey-Libya MoU on maritime delimitations to breach the Law of the Sea
26 March 2020 (joint statement)	External borders	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressed concern over the situation at the Greek-Turkish border and full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus
19 August 2020 (conclusions by the President)	Eastern Mediterranean	Raised by Member States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concern about growing tensions Reaffirmed solidarity with Greece and Cyprus and previous conclusions on illegal exploratory drilling
1-2 October 2020 (conclusions)	Eastern Mediterranean	Strategic debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EU's strategic interest in a stable region Reiterated solidarity with Cyprus and Greece Welcomed de-escalation efforts Called for a positive political agenda with Turkey Willing to use all available EU instruments if needed Called for a multilateral conference
15-16 October 2020 (conclusions)	Eastern Mediterranean	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deplored the renewal of unilateral provocations Reiterated solidarity with Greece and Cyprus
29 October 2020 (no conclusions)	Eastern Mediterranean	Mentioned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deplored that Turkey did not choose to embark on the positive path proposed in October 2020
10-11 December 2020 (conclusions)	Eastern Mediterranean	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Called for de-escalation Reconfirmed the offer of a positive EU-Turkey agenda Support for Syrian refugee programmes in Turkey Prepared to continue cooperation on migration Green light for further restrictive measures Expects a report on EU-Turkey relations 'state of play' Work to advance the multilateral conference Coordinate with the US regarding Turkey
25 March 2021 (statement)	Eastern Mediterranean	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcomed the report on the 'state of play' Welcomed de-escalation efforts Further decisions expected on economic cooperation, high-level dialogue and people to people contacts Continue to finance Syrian refugee programmes in Turkey and to cooperate on migration Support a comprehensive settlement – Cyprus issue Concerned about rule of law/human rights violations Expects Turkey to act as a positive regional player Work to advance the multilateral conference
24-25 June 2021 (conclusions)	Eastern Mediterranean	Debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mutual interest in a stable eastern Mediterranean Reiterated EU's readiness to engage in a positive agenda and took note of technical level progress

● Special European Council, ● Informal European Council, ● Video-conferences.