

Peace and security in 2021: The EU's evolving relations with Turkey

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SUMMARY

Turkey first sought cooperation with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959 (European Union (EU) as of 1992), and has since been key partner of the EU on matters relating to migration, counter-terrorism and trade. The EU and Turkey have been linked by an Association Agreement since 1964, and a Customs Union Agreement since 1995. In 1999 Turkey was granted the status of candidate country to join the EU, and negotiations for Turkey's accession began in 2005. However, in recent years, EU-Turkey relations have been suffered from Turkey's lukewarm adoption of EU standards and democratic principles and Ankara's actions in the EU neighbourhood.

Since the failed military coup (2016) and consequent constitutional reform (2017) that have consolidated and centralised power in hands of its president, Turkey has faced a backslide in the areas of democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights, and independence of the judiciary. The country has also undertaken military operations in the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhoods defying international treaties and the rights of EU Member States. A March 2021 statement by the members of the European Council highlighted the EU's strategic interest in developing a 'cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey', in particular within the context of wishing to build a stable and secure environment in the eastern Mediterranean.

Most recently, in June 2021, relations with Turkey were once more a focus of European Council discussions on EU external relations, and the objectives expressed in March 2021 were reiterated. The conclusions of June 2021 welcomed the de-escalation in the eastern Mediterranean region and restated the EU's readiness to engage with Turkey in a 'phased, proportionate and reversible manner'. As per these conclusions, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Turkey remain a key concern of the EU, and dialogue on issues relating to respect for democracy, the rule of law, and women's rights will remain at the centre of any dialogue.

Mapping the EU's changing relationship with Turkey, by sketching out the background to EU-Turkey relations and the matters that have been prominent, this briefing offers an overview of the evolving role of the Commission and of the European Council's approach to EU-Turkey relations. It also outlines the positions adopted by the European Parliament over time. This aim is to aid a general understanding of the developments that have led to the current state of affairs in EU-Turkey relations.

1. Background

Turkey was one of the [first countries](#), in 1959, to seek cooperation with the then European Economic Community (EEC) – European Union (EU) as of 1992. The country is linked to the EU by the 1964 [Association Agreement](#), and a [customs union](#) established in 1995. The European Council [granted Turkey candidate country](#) status in December 1999, and accession negotiations opened in October 2005. Recently, however, relations between the EU and Turkey have [encountered some challenges](#), following a backslide in democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights and independence of the judiciary in Turkey, and Ankara's confrontational unilateral action in its geographical region, defying international treaties and threatening the rights of EU Member States.

The European Commission's [2020 report on Turkey](#), found that despite the end, in July 2018, of the state of emergency put in place after the 2016 attempted coup, 'the adverse impacts of the two-year long emergency ruling, continue to significantly impact on democracy and fundamental rights'. In the fight against corruption, the report found that Turkey [continues to lack](#) the necessary preventive bodies and measures, leaving room for unwarranted political influence in the legal process. Furthermore, the human and fundamental rights situation [has been found to have deteriorated](#), and Turkey's legal framework does not translate into legislation and practice in line with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) case law.

Additionally, Turkey's foreign policy, not least its pursuits in the **eastern Mediterranean** region, has increasingly collided with EU priorities under the common foreign and security policy ([CFSP](#)). Discoveries over the past two decades have transformed the eastern Mediterranean into a [natural gas producing region](#), and potential energy exporter for European and Asian markets, while also generating conflict in the region in connection with **exploration for natural resources**. Turkey has taken [illegal actions](#) and made provocative statements, challenging the rights of the Republic of Cyprus and of Greece. In August 2020, two seismic research vessels were deployed in Cyprus' [exclusive economic zone](#) (EEZ), including in areas licenced to European oil and gas companies.¹ In November 2019, the signing of a bilateral memorandum of understanding on the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas between Turkey and the National Accord Government of Libya ignored the sovereign rights of Greece's islands in the area concerned; and [in July 2020](#), Turkey announced plans to prospect for gas in disputed waters south of the Greek island of Kastellorizo.² The European Council, the Commission and the European Parliament have expressed **full solidarity with the EU Member States concerned**, and called on Turkey to [avoid taking action](#) that could be damaging to good neighbourly relations.

The economic situation in Turkey has declined in recent years: the [World Bank reports](#) that the overall macroeconomic picture in Turkey has become more vulnerable and uncertain. The Turkish currency (Turkish lira, TRY) suffered a [significant depreciation](#) in 2020. When it comes to trade, **the EU is Turkey's largest trading partner** and [Turkey is the EU's sixth largest trading partner](#).³ Although the EU has significantly reduced its financial assistance to Turkey for the 2021-2027 period, namely under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), Turkey was the top beneficiary of [EU aid outside the EU](#) for the 2007-2021 period. The EU is Turkey's [main source of investment](#): in 2020, 33.4 % of Turkey's imports came from the EU at an estimated €62.6 billion. Turkey has also recently become a part of the [Team Europe package](#), supporting EU partners in facing the Covid-19 pandemic – a package that [has secured](#) a **total of €90 million** for the procurement of small-scale health infrastructure and equipment under [the Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#).

Turkey continues to be a key partner of the EU on matters relating to **migration**, especially following the start of the Syrian crisis, and the challenges posed by the flow of migrants from Turkey into the EU. [In March 2016](#), the EU and Turkey reached an agreement aimed at stemming the flow of irregular migration via Turkey into the EU. Since the signing of the **EU-Turkey Statement of 2016**, Turkey has sustained its efforts to host refugees, and currently hosts the [largest refugee population](#) in the

world – close to 4 million, an **estimated 3.6 million of whom are Syrian refugees**. Within this framework, the [EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#) became operational in 2016 to provide assistance. The full operational budget of €6 billion [was committed](#) by the EU by the end of 2019 and contracted by the end of 2020, with more than €4 billion disbursed. More recently, the June 2021 European Council [agreed to allocate](#) €3 billion in additional EU assistance to refugees in Turkey **for 2021 to 2023**.

Negotiations for Turkey's accession to the EU, which started in 2005, have effectively come to a **standstill**. Despite its repeated commitment to the objective of accession, Turkish government [has not delivered](#) the corresponding measures and reforms. This situation has remained unchanged since the last time the European Council conclusions mentioned Turkey's accession to the EU, in June 2019, when they reiterated the Council's position from 2018. [In March 2021](#), the Statement of the Members of the Council highlighted the EU's strategic interest in the development of a '**cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey**'. The European Council last met in June 2021, and the [conclusions](#) of the meeting restated the EU's strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in the eastern Mediterranean and continued cooperation on matters relating to migration, and as such, in engaging with Turkey in a '**phased, proportionate and reversible manner**'. Dialogue on issues concerning the obligation to respect democracy, the rule of law and women's rights will remain at the centre of EU-Turkey relations.

Overall, EU-Turkey relations have grown out of a relationship based on the concept of accession, to an increasing distance between the two sides' political agendas, and the need to **build mutual understanding** so as to foster peace and security in the international arena. Currently, as will be detailed throughout this briefing, the building of stable EU-Turkey relations seems to be [largely dependent](#) on **progress on respect for international law and a rules based international order**, with a focus on fundamental rights, and in the building of peace and security in the eastern Mediterranean – in particular in the **comprehensive resolution** of the Cyprus issue. In order to provide an understanding to the current state of play in EU-Turkey relations and offer a backdrop to the developments that have led the EU to **refashion its relationship with the country**, this briefing provides an overview of the evolving role of the Commission in EU-Turkey relations, a background to the European Council's approach to Turkey as a candidate country and as a strategic partner of the EU, insight into the positions adopted by the European Parliament on the subject over time.

2. Role of the European Commission

EU enlargement

The enlargement process involves established [criteria and rigorous conditionalities](#) that each candidate or potential candidate country, must meet in order to become an EU member. The [current enlargement agenda](#) covers six western Balkans countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), plus **Turkey**. Within this framework, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union ([TFEU](#)) stipulates that 'the Union shall carry out economic, financial and technical cooperation measures, including assistance, in particular financial assistance', and provides the legal basis for the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA).⁴

Under IPA I, for the [2007-2013 period](#), Turkey was allocated **€4.4 billion**, providing aid in five components: transition assistance and institution-building, cross-border cooperation; regional development, human resource development and rural development. The Commission's **2013 progress report** on Turkey, found that the accession process remained the 'most suitable framework for promoting EU-related reforms in Turkey', noting that reform efforts had been made, despite a political climate marked by polarisation, and that 'further significant progress should continue on judiciary and fundamental rights and justice. The allocation under IPA II [for the 2014-2020 period](#) **totalled €3.5 billion** to support political reforms, economic, social and territorial

development, progressive alignment with the EU acquis and strengthening of regional integration and territorial cooperation.

At the end of the IPA II period, the **2020 country report** by the European Commission on Turkey underlined the [lack of progress and deterioration](#) in the country's policies in the areas of respect for democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights and independence of the judiciary. Moreover, it noted that dialogue between the EU and Turkey for the period of IPA II had been **hampered by tensions** in the **eastern Mediterranean**. In light of this, and of the General Affairs Council position of June 2019, the report by the Commission stated that Turkey's accession negotiations had '[effectively come to a standstill](#)' and that pre-accession assistance would be reduced. For 2020, Turkey was allocated **€168.2 million** under the IPA. [IPA III](#) has been presented as taking a policy-driven approach, focusing on the rule of law and respect for fundamental values, strengthening of democratic institutions and public administration reform.

It is [widely recognised that](#), for decades, a membership perspective and EU accession negotiations provided the **greatest opportunity to expand cooperation**, and were one of Turkey's most prioritised and consistent foreign policy goals. However, as reflected in the progressive reduction in pre-accession assistance allocated to Turkey and in the Commission's reports, efforts to this end have decreased owing to the growing gap between the internal agendas and foreign policies of the two sides. For some experts, however, it is still through the accession process that the EU is able to use conditionality to steer Turkey towards its standards or sanction the country for deviation; this, even as **accession talks have effectively been frozen since 2018**, despite neither side wanting to formally end negotiations. [For others](#), EU-Turkey relations have changed course since 2016, and should now **move completely away from accession** to a more 'pragmatic' approach, focusing on issues of mutual interest, which would in turn re-energise EU-Turkey relations.

Customs union

EU-Turkey trade relations are based on the [Association Agreement](#) of 1963 and on the [Customs Union Agreement](#) that entered into force in December 1995. The latter was the [EU's first substantial customs union with a non-EU country](#), covering **industrial goods**.⁵ The agreement provides for a common external tariff for the products covered and envisages the alignment of Turkey with EU law in areas such as customs legislation, the removal of technical barriers to trade, laws on protecting intellectual, industrial and commercial property, and competition rules. Since its entry into force, the value of bilateral trade between the EU and Turkey **has increased more than fourfold**.

In 2016, the Commission proposed to [modernise the customs union](#) with Turkey, finding that with the evolution of the economic environment and significant growth in EU-Turkey trade, the customs union was becoming less equipped to deal with **modern day challenges**. Respect for democracy and human and fundamental rights was to be an essential part of the modernisation of the agreement. However, in 2016 EU-Turkey relations took a downturn, following the deterioration of democratic principles in Turkey in the wake of a failed military coup. The proposal for the modernisation of the customs union **was halted** by the General Affairs Council in [June 2018](#).

Over the past few years, although Turkey has [remained well integrated](#) with the EU market in terms of both trade and investment links, the EU's relative share in Turkey's foreign trade **has declined**, amidst a growing list of deviations from Turkey's obligations under the EU-Turkey customs union. Turkey has introduced **new tariff increases** on certain products of non-EU origin circulating freely within the customs union, and forced pharmaceuticals companies to move their production to Turkey. With [problems starting to accumulate](#) in recent years, the Commission has insisted on Turkey's compliance with the agreed customs union rules and the non-discriminatory implementation of the [Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement](#) toward all Member States, including the Republic of Cyprus.⁶ The most recent report by the Commission on [trade and investment barriers](#) (December 2019) notes that 'the Commission continued to make use of all means available to raise these concerns'.

In [March 2021](#), the European Council concluded that provided Turkey sustained de-escalation in the eastern Mediterranean, and 'subject to the conditionalities set', the Commission could start work on the modernisation of the customs union. The European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, following the meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, stressed the need to address difficulties in the implementation of the customs union agreement. [In June 2021](#), von der Leyen confirmed the **ongoing technical work** in Council on the modernisation of the customs union, but [stressed](#) that 'the road ahead was still long'.

Experts argue that, [in the medium term](#), repairing the contractual weaknesses of the customs union could provide an **important positive impulse** to improve the bilateral economic relationship between the EU and Turkey. Modernisation of the customs union would be a '[win-win issue](#)', as although the economic gains on the Turkish side might be higher than on the EU's side, the accompanying modernisation of Turkey's economy would prove beneficial to the EU. [Furthermore](#), if the current problems facing the customs union are not addressed, the risk is economic collapse in Turkey, which could in turn trigger a worsening of current EU-Turkey relations, with unforeseeable effects for both sides.

It has [been suggested](#) that EU could further explore using the customs union as **economic leverage**: keeping the current unsatisfactory status quo or completely suspending the customs union would mean that Turkey could experience further negative economic challenges and have an incentive to change its policy towards the EU. However, a number of experts argue that the debate on Turkey's economic integration into the EU should go beyond considerations of modernisation or suspension of the union, and include the option of replacing the current customs union with a **modern preferential trade agreement**, similar to the types of agreement the EU has with countries such as Canada, Japan or the UK – as this would require less effort towards political integration and allow Turkey to retain a larger degree of autonomy regarding its trade policy.

EU Facility for Refugees

Turkey's geographic position makes it a prominent **reception and transit country** for refugees and migrants. With large numbers of people arriving in Turkey, mainly on account of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, the country is now hosting approximately 4 million refugees, the highest number in the world. This includes 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees, and 330 000 registered refugees and asylum seekers mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia. In response to the call from EU Member States for significant additional funding to support refugees in Turkey, the Commission established the [EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#) (FRT). The facility became operational in February 2016 and **coordinates the mobilisation of the allocated budget of €6 billion**. The first tranche of the budget served to fund projects that run until mid-2021 and the second tranche to fund projects that will run until mid-2025. The main focus areas of the FRT are humanitarian assistance, education, health, municipal infrastructure, and socio-economic support. The full operational budget of €6 billion has been committed and contracted, and over €4 billion disbursed.

The EU has commended Turkey's outstanding efforts in hosting refugees and, in addition to the €6 billion originally committed, the EU mobilised an [additional €485 million](#) from the 2020 budget to ensure the continuation of the flagship projects.⁷ According to a Commission [factsheet](#) updated in January 2021, the **results achieved by the FRT include** the following:

- 1.8 million refugees receive support for basic daily needs.
- 750 000 refugee children are supported to attend school.
- 2.6 million ante-natal consultations have been delivered.
- 170 000 education staff have been trained.
- 365 new schools are being built.
- 90 000 children benefit from back-up and catch-up classes.
- 13 million primary health care consultations have been delivered.

- 4 million vaccination doses have been delivered to refugee infants and pregnant women.
- 177 migrant health centres are under way.
- 3 400 health workers have been employed.

In the context of the **current health crisis**, and within the framework of the facility for refugees, the [Commission launched](#) awareness raising activities for the refugee population, who are among the most vulnerable. An agreement was reached with the Turkish government to mobilise savings and contingencies under the FRT to support the national Covid-19 response. The EU has also lined up [an additional](#) €585 million in **humanitarian bridge funding** to follow the FRT, in order to continue some key protection and health projects and ensure the continuation of flagship programmes. The European Council of 24-25 June 2021 meanwhile [agreed to allocate](#) €3 billion in additional EU assistance to refugees in Turkey **for the 2021-2023 period**.

The [Commission's 2020 report on Turkey](#) states that, overall, the March 2016 EU-Turkey statement has **continued to deliver results**. However, the Commission's [fifth annual report](#) on the FTR, published in May 2021, notes that although Turkey has reiterated its commitment to the effective implementation of the statement, in February 2020 the Turkish government announced it would **cease controlling its land and sea borders** with the EU and open the passage for migrants wishing to cross. This led to the establishment of an informal camp along the land border with Greece, which ended up hosting close to 25 000 migrants and refugees. Starting on 30 March 2020, the Turkish authorities organised transport for migrants and refugees away from the border area with Greece and closed the borders with Greece and Bulgaria except for commercial traffic, owing to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – however, the Turkish government [has indicated](#) its intention to open the borders once the health crisis is over.

[Answering](#) parliamentary questions, the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement stated in November 2020 that 'the vast majority of Facility funding goes directly to refugees through implementing partners including international financial institutions, Member States' agencies and international non-governmental organisations; no funds from the Facility are paid directly to the Turkish Treasury' and that 'while acknowledging the increased migratory burden and risks Turkey is facing on its territory and the substantial efforts it has made in hosting four million migrants and refugees, the EU Council rejected Turkey's use of **migratory pressure** for political purposes on 6 March 2020'.

The success of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement and of the FRT has been [heavily contested](#) on account of numerous **issues regarding human rights** from the outset. It [has been pointed out](#) that while Turkey is technically a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and of the 1967 Refugee Protocol, the country maintains geographic exclusions and largely considers its refugee policies in a **domestic rather than international legal framework**. This means, for example, that [only those displaced](#) from Europe can be considered refugees. The [strategic mid-term evaluation of the FRT](#) for the 2016-2019/2020 period, prepared by the Commission and consisting of the views of external experts, found, for example, that since late 2019, non-Syrian refugees do not qualify for free health care after a year in the country (with some exceptions for the most vulnerable). As tackling these exclusions in a sensitive and politically acceptable way is a major challenge for Turkey, this is an area where the EU should provide further support.

Generally, there seems to be a consensus that whether through continuation of the FRT or another EU support mechanism for refugees in Turkey [more must be done](#) to **tackle existing local integration gaps** in light of the circumstances exacerbated by the pandemic, while also addressing the concerns raised regarding the main modalities and speed of financial assistance, also improving local ownership and involvement. Going forward, [according to some experts](#), Turkey needs to address the needs of **three distinct populations of refugees** it currently hosts and the EU needs to decide how it will support Turkey in each case: (i) Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey;

(ii) non-Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey; and (iii) Syrians in areas of northern Syria under Turkish military control.

Moreover, some experts point out that although the deal did reduce arrivals in the EU, it established **a transactional element in the EU-Turkey partnership**, which not only went beyond the norms and values advocated by the EU, but also created an [imbalanced dependency](#), with the EU becoming heavily reliant on Turkish border controls. In their view, the EU's refugee deal with Turkey has contributed to an [impasse](#) in the other processes managed by the Commission: in the membership process, outrage over the deterioration in the rule of law in Turkey has fuelled protests against the 2016 refugee deal; concerns about the rule of law and fundamental rights – parameters of the accession process – have also prevented the EU from deepening the customs union; but fears that Ankara will break off cooperation on refugees and security policy are keeping the EU from making a definite decision regarding Turkey's accession.

3. European Council's approach to EU-Turkey relations

As shown in the analysis [published by EPRS](#) in June 2021, between 2015 and 2018 the debates in Council referring to Turkey focused on migration. A shift occurred in 2018, coinciding with a decrease in the number of refugees arriving at the EU's borders and growing tensions in the **eastern Mediterranean**, and between [December 2018 and June 2021](#) migration has largely been addressed jointly with the situation in Turkey's geographical region.⁸ In contrast with the European Council's conclusions of [October 2015](#), which stated that Turkey's accession negotiations should be reenergised, in [June 2018](#) European Council conclusions stated that Turkey had 'been moving further away from the European Union' and that as such **accession negotiations had come to a standstill**, with no further chapters being considered for opening or closing and no further work towards the modernisation of the customs union foreseen. The conclusions of June 2018 were reiterated in [June 2019](#), when the Council also expressed concerns about the 'worrying backsliding of the rule of law and fundamental rights in Turkey'. **Since 2019, the accession negotiations have been largely absent** from the European Council's debate on Turkey, and the topic [was only indirectly raised](#) when EU leaders were searching for means to resolve the migration conundrum, and to address the tense situation in the eastern Mediterranean.

Throughout 2020, Turkey's [unauthorised deployment](#) of drilling and exploratory vessels in the maritime zones of the Republic of Cyprus and Turkey's dispute with Greece over maritime boundaries in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean **remained a major irritant**. At its special meeting in [October 2020](#), the European Council **welcomed the confidence building steps** by Greece and Turkey and the announcement that both countries would resume their direct exploratory talks aiming at the delimitation of the continental shelf and EEZs. However, the European Council **also condemned** the violations of the rights of the Republic of Cyprus and invited Turkey to accept the invitation by Cyprus to engage in dialogue. Providing Turkey's efforts to stop illegal activities vis-à-vis Greece and Cyprus were sustained, the European Council agreed to launch a **positive EU-Turkey agenda**, with a specific emphasis on the modernisation of the customs union and trade facilitation, people to people contacts, high-level dialogues, and continued cooperation on migration issues in line with the 2016 EU-Turkey statement. Nevertheless, the conclusions **recalled and re-affirmed** that in the event of renewed unilateral actions or provocations in breach of international law, the EU could resort to sanctions, using 'all instruments and options at its disposal ... to defend its interests and those of its Member States'.

The [December 2020](#) European Council noted that, regrettably, Turkey had engaged in unilateral actions and provocations and escalated its rhetoric against the EU, EU Member States and EU leaders. The offer of a positive EU-Turkey agenda remained on the table if Turkey would show **readiness to promote a genuine partnership with the Union**. The situation began to change towards the end of 2020, when Turkey [broadly welcomed](#) the December European Council conclusions and started sending signals on the importance it attached to its relationship with the EU and its Member States. In March 2021 the European Council welcomed the [discontinuation of](#)

[illegal drilling activities](#), the resumption of bilateral talks between Greece and Turkey and the forthcoming talks on the Cyprus problem under the auspices of the United Nations. Provided de-escalation was sustained, the European Council stated that the EU would be 'ready to engage with Turkey in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner' to enhance cooperation.

Initial steps [towards normalisation](#) of relations with Greece were taken between the end of 2020 and over the first semester of 2021 in the form of several rounds of ministerial-level talks focusing on a wide range of issues, including on the delimitation of maritime zones, followed by a meeting between the Prime Minister of Greece and the President of Turkey on the side-lines of the [2021 NATO summit](#). With respect to Cyprus, an informal [5+1 format](#) meeting 'failed to achieve progress' over lack of 'common ground', however. As of March 2021, conflictual deployments of Turkish vessels [had ceased](#) and messages of reengagement were continuing. [In June 2021](#), the European Council took note of the **start of work at a technical level** towards a mandate for the modernisation of the EU-Turkey customs union and of preparatory work for high level dialogues with Turkey on issues of mutual interest, such as migration, public health, climate, counter-terrorism and regional issues. However, given the lack of progress made in the talks between the Republic of Cyprus and Turkey, the EU leaders [did not give a green light](#) to the deepening of EU-Turkey cooperation when they met in June 2021.

For [some experts](#), there is a disconnect in European Council discussions between the EU's official approach – the norms-based accession framework – and the one reflected in Council conclusions, the latter driven primarily by [geopolitics and economics](#), and the need to work with Turkey to ease the migratory and refugee pressure on the EU. This makes the European Council's decisions towards Turkey mainly transactional and less focused on the rule of law and fundamental rights. On the pursuit of an **EU-Turkey positive agenda**, [experts question](#) how the EU will implement its principle of conditionality given Ankara's position of resisting interference in Turkey's internal affairs. Furthermore, on the eastern Mediterranean front, the non-resolution of the Cyprus [issue is seen as](#) something that will **continue to hinder advances** in EU-Turkey relations, even if the current status quo is one where the conflict appears to be coming to a resolution. In this, the general understanding is that renewed and enhanced cooperation between the EU and Turkey is [largely dependent](#) on Turkey showing cooperation on seeking a resolution to the Cyprus problem.

4. Position of the European Parliament

The European Parliament values cooperation between the EU and Turkey, as Turkey is one of the EU's closest neighbours, a trading partner, a NATO ally and a candidate for EU membership. In [recent years, ties have become strained](#), however: Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have expressed concern at the continuing erosion of democracy and fundamental rights in Turkey, the violations of EU Member States' rights, and also Ankara's threat to renege on the 2016 migration pact signed with the EU. As a result, a refashioning of EU-Turkey relations can be observed in the various resolutions adopted by Parliament over the past three legislative cycles.

[In March 2012](#), the European Parliament adopted by 517 votes to 66, with 63 abstentions, a resolution on the [Commission's 2011 progress report on Turkey](#). Parliament stressed the interdependence between the EU, its Member States and Turkey and **called for EU-Turkey cooperation** on shared foreign and neighbourhood policy priorities in the area of energy to be stepped up. It noted, however, that the interdependence between the EU and Turkey would only produce positive results if framed in a **context of mutual commitment**, strategic dialogue and effective cooperation. Parliament also raised concerns about fundamental rights and the building of good neighbourly relations, not least with regard to the Cyprus issue. The resolution strongly opposed Turkey's refusal to fulfil its obligation of non-discriminatory implementation of the Addition Protocol to the EU-Turkey Association Agreement towards all Member States. Turkey was also called upon to implement the customs union in full and remove technical barriers to trade.

[In April 2016](#), at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, Parliament adopted by 375 votes to 133, with 87 abstentions, a resolution on the [Commission's 2015 report on Turkey](#). Parliament, once again,

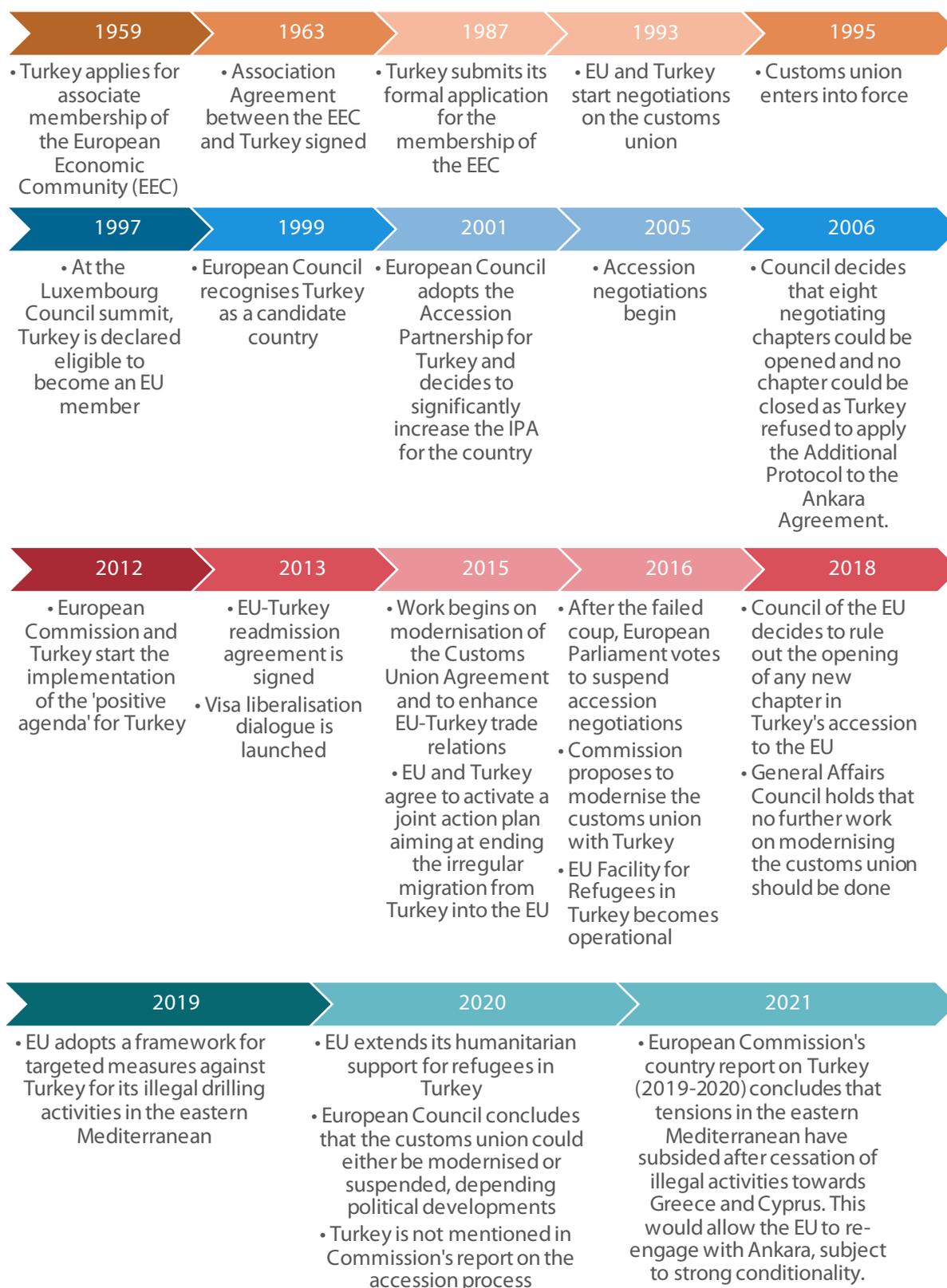
expressed concerns over the **backsliding** on respect for democracy and the rule of law inside Turkey. Turkey's humanitarian contribution in hosting the largest refugee population in the world was acknowledged, and the resolution called on Member States and the **EU to increase funds** to UN agencies and partner non-governmental organisations in Turkey. Parliament welcomed the progress in the talks on the reunification of Cyprus, and once again called on Turkey to fulfil its obligation of full, non-discriminatory implementation of the Additional Protocol with regard to all Member States, including the Republic of Cyprus. Later that year, in November 2016, Parliament adopted a resolution calling for the formal suspension of the accession negotiations with Turkey, advocating in favour of the [suspension of accession funds](#).

[Most recently, in May 2021](#), the European Parliament adopted, by 480 votes to 64, with 150 abstentions, a resolution on the [2019-2020 Commission report on Turkey](#). In this resolution, Parliament noted with concern the **growing distance between the EU and Turkey** in terms of values and standards and stated that unilateral actions in the eastern Mediterranean and provocative statements against the EU and its Member States had brought EU-Turkey relations to a **historical low**. In a press release, Parliament called for serious reflection on the state of the EU's relations with Turkey and for the drawing up of a comprehensive, unified and coherent strategy among all EU institutions and Member States, inviting Turkey **to engage in constructive dialogue** on issues of foreign policy and fundamental rights. It was the Parliament's position that the EU should continue to pursue dialogue with Turkey, but that should Turkey's de-escalation in the eastern Mediterranean not be continued, the EU should use all the instruments and options at its disposal, **including targeted [sanctions](#) as a last resort**.

5. Conclusion

EU-Turkey relations have developed from a background of a relationship based on the idea of accession, to an increasing distance between the political agendas of Ankara and the EU, and the need to build mutual understanding in order to foster peace and security in the international arena (Figure 1). Currently, the establishment of stable EU-Turkey relations is [largely dependent](#) on progress on respect for international law and a rules-based international order, with a focus on fundamental rights, and on the building of peace and security in the eastern Mediterranean – in particular in the comprehensive resolution of the Cyprus issue. [In April 2021](#), the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, visited Ankara, aiming to promote a dialogue of understanding with Turkey and to convey the European Council's conditional offer for cooperation. The message was successfully delivered, despite being overshadowed by news of Turkey's [withdrawal](#) from the [Istanbul Convention](#) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, and by an incident of protocol ('[sofagate](#)'). The withdrawal from the convention, specifically, [sent a strong negative signal](#) on Turkey's interest in complying with the conditionalities set by the EU for the advancement of a 'positive agenda'.

Figure 1 – Chronology of EU-Turkey relations



Source: Compiled by the author.⁹

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ENDNOTES

¹ The eastern Mediterranean is also a region of [critical importance for the United States](#) of America: Greece and Cyprus mark the external border of the EU, and Greece and Turkey the border of NATO.

² Maritime disputes between Greece and Turkey encompass disputes of sovereignty about, for example, the delimitation of fishing rights and seabed resource exploitation. In the 1990s, Greece ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), under which it claimed the right to extend its territorial waters in the Aegean Sea from 6 to 12 nautical miles. Turkey viewed Greece's actions as an act of war and has not signed the UNCLOS.

³ Turkey was the EU's [fifth largest](#) trading partner in 2019.

⁴ The IPA is one of the EU's external financing instruments (EFIs), the main mechanisms through which the EU funds its actions on the global stage. For further assessment of the performance of the EFIs in Turkey, please see [EU external financing instruments and the post-2020 architecture](#), European implementation assessment, EPRS, European Parliament, 2018.

⁵ The Customs Union Agreement covers all industrial goods, but does not address agriculture (except for processed agricultural products), services or public procurement. Bilateral trade concessions apply to agricultural, coal and steel products.

⁶ Turkey does not recognise the Republic of Cyprus and does not allow Cypriot ships to enter its ports or Cypriot aircraft its airspace. Accordingly, it also refuses to allow the customs union to apply to the Republic of Cyprus.

⁷ The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), which provides cash assistance to refugees in partnership with the Turkish Red Crescent (Kizilay), and the Conditional Cash Transfers for Education (CCTE), which provide support for families whose children attend school regularly.

⁸ One exception occurred in [March 2020](#), when EU leaders focused exclusively on the increase in irregular arrivals resulting from Turkey's decision to open its border.

⁹ The author would like to thank Tessa Jager, EPRS trainee, for the assistance provided in the compilation of the dates featured in this figure.

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