EU-Turkey relations: between cooperation and tensions

Tensions over democracy, human rights and migration have led to a rethink of EU-Turkey relations. What is the status of the cooperation?

Without clear and significant progress on EU-related reforms, Parliament cannot envisage resuming accession negotiations with Turkey, MEPs warned on 7 June 2022. MEPs said that in spite of Turkey’s repeated statements that it aims to become an EU member, over the past two years the country has consistently gone back on its commitments in relation to the accession process. However, they did welcome the country’s willingness to act as a mediator in the Russian war against Ukraine.

Although this is far from the only time that the Parliament has raised concerns, the EU and Turkey do enjoy close links in many areas.

From trade to NATO, the EU and Turkey have enjoyed a productive relationship in many domains for decades. However, in recent years relations have turned frosty as concerns mounted over the rule of law and the state of democracy in the country with media outlets being closed and journalists being jailed, as well as Turkey’s military intervention in Syria and its approach to migrations. There are also concerns about Turkey’s illegal activities in Cyprus as well as its incursions into Greek territory.

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In 2022 Turkey initially threatened to veto Sweden and Finland’s application to join Nato before finally agreeing to it after signing a joint security pact with the two countries.

These developments are all the more reason for MEPs to take another look at how the EU and Turkey are working together. Read on for an overview of the state of play on various aspects of EU-Turkey relations.

EU membership: suspension of accession talks?

Turkey has been an associate member of the European Economic Community since 1963 and applied to join in 1987. It was recognised as a candidate for EU membership in 1999, but negotiations didn’t start until 2005. Even after that not much progress was made. Only 16 out of 35 chapters have been opened and only one closed. After The Turkish government’s crackdown following the failed coup d’état on 15 July 2016 negotiations effectively ended and no new chapters have been opened since then.

In November 2016 MEPs adopted a resolution asking for the negotiations to be suspended while political repression continues in Turkey. They repeated their call for suspension in a resolution adopted in July 2017 due to continuing concerns about the human rights situation. Although these resolutions are not binding, they send out an important signal.

MEPs regularly debate the situation in the country. For example, In February 2018 they discussed the human rights in Turkey as well as the country’s military operation in Afrin, Syria. That same month they also adopted a resolution calling on Turkey to lift the state of emergency.

EU-Turkey deal on migration

Since the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, some 3.6 million refugees have entered Turkey and today the country still hosts the largest refugee community in the world.

In March 2016 the EU and Turkey concluded an agreement to tackle the migration crisis, which led to significantly fewer migrants reaching Europe illegally. Read more about the EU’s response to the migration crisis.

Under the agreement all irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands would be returned to Turkey. In exchange the country received EU aid from humanitarian funding of about €6 billion under the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey.
However, in a speech on 28 February 2020, Turkish President Recep Erdoğan threatened to open the border with Greece again as he did not feel the EU had kept its promises. Following the decision, Greece declared a state of emergency and EU leaders agreed to give the country €700 million in financial assistance as well as provide for a substantial increase in funds for migration and border management in the EU’s budget for 2021-2027.

EU-Turkey tensions about Greece and Cyprus

There are also concerns about Turkey's illegal energy exploration and drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and its violating of Greek airspace and Greek and Cypriot territorial waters on various occasions. MEPs condemned Turkey’s actions in the Greek and Cypriot exclusive economic zone and express full solidarity with the two countries in a resolution adopted on 17 September 2020.

Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974, which led to a partitioning of the island. Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus is only recognise by Turkey.

Following the discovery of offshore natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has has used the military to violate the territorial waters and airspace of neighbouring countries and carry out drilling operations.

MEPs criticised the situation in Turkey-occupied Northern Cyprus in a resolution adopted on 26 November 2020, calling for tough sanctions against Turkey as a response to its illegal activities.

Condemnation of military intervention in Syria

In October 2019, Turkey launched a military operation in northern Syria in order to create a buffer zone between the two countries where Syrian refugees living in Turkey could be moved to. This move was condemned by MEPs during a debate on 23 October 2019. On 24 October 2019, they also adopted a resolution in which they called for sanctions against Turkey over its military operation.
Towards closer economic cooperation

In December 2016 the European Commission proposed updating the existing customs union with Turkey and extending bilateral trade relations, but the Council has not yet approved its mandate. Once negotiations have been completed, the agreement would still have to be approved by the Parliament before it could enter into force.

The EU is by far Turkey's largest export market (41.3% in 2020), while Turkey is the EU's sixth largest trade partner.

This article was originally published on 27 April 2017 and is regularly updated. The most recent update took place on 9 June 2022.

Press releases

EU-Turkey: anatomy of a difficult relationship (22 March 2017)
MEPs reject Turkey's pressure, demand common asylum rules (11 March 2020)
MEPs call for de-escalation of migration situation with Turkey (11 March 2020)
MEPs advocate reviewing EU - Turkey relations and suspending EU accession talks (26 April 2017)
Briefings

EU-Turkey relations in light of the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis (2020)
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Future EU-Turkey relations (October 2018)