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Challenges in Türkiye's Relations With the European Union

Introduction

Türkiye's relations with the European Union are unique, characterised by pragmatism and dependence on the stronger partner. In parallel, Türkiye attempts to emphasise its position and international importance. In the 21st century, due to a clear re-evaluation of Türkiye's strategy, the relations can be examined in two distinct phases. In the early years of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, Türkiye's accession to the European Union was one of the central objectives of its foreign policy. Türkiye's activities within the international system were subordinated to this objective, accompanied by a series of domestic reforms. However, following the events of the Arab Spring and the challenges arising from them, along with the growing authoritarian tendencies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, European Union membership ceased to be a priority for Türkiye. Anti-Western rhetoric became increasingly evident, and divergent interests between the two sides emerged across multiple areas. Türkiye no longer approached its dialogue with the European Union as a petitioner. A potential opportunity for a "new beginning" in their relations emerged with the revisionist policy of the Russian Federation and President Donald Trump's transactional approach toward Europe.

The article examines the key challenges in Türkiye's relations with the European Union based on the following assumptions. Firstly, Türkiye's economic and trade ties with the European Union determine its dependence on its Western partner, a dynamic which has become particularly evident during the prolonged currency crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, anti-Western rhetoric and the formulation of new demands toward the European Union have become tools used the Turkish authorities to exert political and economic pressure on the organisation and to strengthen President Erdoğan's image, mainly among the conservative electorate. Thirdly, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 confirmed the importance of mutual relations between Türkiye and the EU. The new geopolitical context created a platform for renewed dialogue and potential cooperation between the two parties. Moreover, its enhanced Türkiye's position in its talks with the European Union, positioning it as a potential partner in shaping Europe's emerging security and defence policy.



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Türkiye's relations with the European Union in 2002–2013

Türkiye's relations with the European Union in the 21st century can be divided into two distinct periods. The first was marked by a strong Western orientation in Türkiye's foreign policy, with a clear commitment to achieving membership in the European Union. State authorities aligned numerous domestic initiatives with this objective focusing on fulfilling the accession requirements. The second period – signalled initially by the escalation of the armed conflict in Syria and the introduction of the first authoritarian reforms – has been marked by a pronounced re-evaluation of Türkiye's earlier foreign policy direction. Türkiye's engagement in the Middle East became a priority during this period. Initially, guided by the principles of neo-imperialism, this policy aimed to establish Türkiye as a regional power. Over time, however, influenced by broader geopolitical developments, it evolved into an effort to restore county's former status and sphere of influence.

Referring to the first stage of Türkiye's relations with the European Union, it should be noted that EU membership was intended as means of strengthening Türkiye's international position and deepening its existing political ties with Western institutions. Equally important was the goal of strengthening economic relations, especially trade links, with the European Union. During this period, Türkiye's foreign policy was clearly pro-Western in orientation. In addition to pursuing European Union membership – formally applied for in April 1987 (Bacik, Aras, 2004, p. 58), Türkiye's Western alignment was also reflected in its strategic partnership with the United States and its membership in the North Atlantic Alliance.

Thanks to the reforms implemented during the early years of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, Türkiye entered nearly a decade of social and political stability, accompanied by economic growth and infrastructural development (Matusiak, 2015, p. 5). These reforms were a direct response to the Accession Partnership Document issued by the European Commission in November 2000, which outlined the strategies, objectives, and conditions that Türkiye was required to meet prior to joining the European Union. As a result, fundamental revisions were made to Türkiye's legal codes and significant amendments were introduced to the Constitution through the eight reform packages (Özbudun, 2007, pp. 179–196). These reforms led to the abolition of the death penalty, the expansion of freedom of speech, assembly, and association, and the legalisation of education and broadcasting in languages other than Turkish, including Kurdish. They also improved the legal status of women, curtailed the military's influence within the political system, and guaranteed democratic rights for the Kurdish minority, and tightened regulations concerning the smuggling of illegal immigrants (Özbudun, 2007, pp. 179–196).

These reforms resulted in significant improvements in the status and scope of rights granted to various social groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and associations. Based on these reforms, in December 2004, the European Council decided to open negotiations with Türkiye, which officially commenced on 3 October 2005 (Szymański, 2005; *Konkluzje Prezydencji...*, 2004, p. 7)². In the following

² By that time, Türkiye had been required to meet two conditions. The first concerned the signing of a protocol extending the existing Customs Union between the European Community and Türkiye

years, Türkiye adopted the principle of primacy of international treaties and conventions ratified by the state over domestic legislation. Nevertheless, the reform process subsequently lost its momentum. Despite the evident deceleration in accession negotiations, further legislative amendments were introduced, including revisions to the Law on Foundations and a softening of the wording of Article 301 of the Constitution, which had criminalised “insulting Turkishness.” On 12 September 2010, a package of constitutional amendments pertaining to the judiciary and the military was approved by referendum.

Türkiye's pro-Western foreign policy orientation was confirmed not only through a series of reforms but also by statements made by leading politicians. According to former Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, Türkiye's accession to the European Union would represent the completion of Europe's unification process (*Message...*, 2005). In his official addresses, he emphasised that Türkiye and the European Union were bound by a shared community of strategic, political, economic, and social interests (*Message...*, 2005). At the same time, he declared: „The state will do everything possible to meet the criteria for EU membership” (*Message...*, 2005). He emphasised that “Türkiye is a country with a proud history and great potential for the future. Stable democracy and economic reforms have enabled Türkiye to bring stability and foster development in the regions. It is a loyal ally in upholding security and a partner in promoting democratic values and economic progress” (*Address...*, 2005). According to Gül, Türkiye was to serve as a positive force in addressing global challenges (*Address...*, 2006).

According to Ahmet Davutoğlu, the chief architect of Türkiye's foreign policy, the debate surrounding the Republic of Türkiye's accession to the European Union should also be regarded as a discussion on the future of Europe itself (*Türkiye*, 2012). The political, economic, and socio-cultural development of both entities, he argued, is mutually dependent (*Türkiye...*, 2012). Other leading Turkish politicians expressed similar views, maintaining that „full membership is Türkiye's sole objective; no alternative can be accepted.” As Egemen Bağış, Minister for European Union Affairs, stated at a press conference, “We hope that the Union will soon emerge from its state of mental eclipse” (*Türkiye...*, 2012).

Successful reforms and the rising standard of living translated into substantial public support among Turks for their country's accession to the European Union. This support was reinforced by the perception that the reforms offered Türkiye the prospect of integrating with the West while preserving its religious and cultural distinctiveness. In 2005, as many as 71% of Turks expressed support for the Republic of Türkiye's membership in the organisation (Tonge, 2005).

to include the ten new Member States of the European Union (among them Cyprus). The second involved the entry into force of six legal acts, in particular the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure. At the same time, within the Negotiating Framework, the European Union included a provision stipulating that the accession process was to remain open-ended and that its final outcome was not predetermined. Negotiations could be suspended under two circumstances: firstly, in the event of clear violations of human rights in Türkiye; and secondly, if a proposal to do so, submitted either by the European Commission or by one-third of the Member States, were to receive the support of a majority of the European Union's members.

Türkiye's relations with the European Union in 2014–2025

However, as the AKP and its leader – Prime Minister and later President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – consolidated their power, Türkiye began to adopt an increasingly assertive stance towards the European Union. This shift was particularly evident in the emphasis on articulating a distinct model of statehood and civilisational identity. Such an approach undermined Türkiye's earlier efforts to pursue reforms driven by EU conditionality (Matusiak, 2015, p. 5). Subsequent reports and statements issued by the European Union highlighted numerous shortcomings and stressed the need for further adjustment reforms.

The most significant concerns identified shortcomings in the areas of civil liberties, freedom of conscience and religious pluralism, corruption, insufficient separation of the military from politics, inadequate oversight of political party finances, various forms of discrimination, violations of human rights, irregularities in the conduct of the 2014 presidential campaign and elections, and limited respect for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, especially Kurds, as well as restrictions on the freedom of assembly. The Turkish government was also urged to respect the rights of Greek in Cyprus, recognise the Republic of Cyprus, and resolve its territorial disputes with Greece (Smoleń, 2020, pp. 130–133). In summary, over a decade of negotiations between Türkiye and the European Union, by September 2015 talks had been concluded in only one of the thirty-five negotiation chapters –science and research – while fourteen chapters had been opened (Osiewicz, 2015, pp. 202–208).

Despite the aforementioned issues, the European Union refrained from adopting a more confrontational stance towards Türkiye, largely due to Ankara's crucial role in the migration crisis and the broader geopolitical instability unfolding in the Middle East. It is estimated that between January and mid-September 2015, over 350,000 immigrants arrived in the European Union (Potyrała, 2015, p. 37). From mid-September to the end of the year, as many as 650,000. Throughout 2015, more than 1.040 million people illegally entered the European Union from the Middle East and North Africa region (Smoleń, 2018). According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, by mid-September 2015 approximately 290,000 immigrants had arrived in Greece from Türkiye (Refugee). The scale of migration displayed high dynamics: in July, roughly 52,000 migrants arrived in Greece, and in August 107,000, and in the first two weeks of September alone some 53,000 people crossed the eastern Mediterranean route and reached Greek territory (Jarosiewicz, Strachota, 2015). The exceptionally dynamic and substantial influx of refugees into Greece resulted from a revision of Türkiye's migration policy. From the beginning of 2015, the country's leadership began informally to restrict the open-door policy towards refugees (Jarosiewicz, Strachota, 2015)³. Among most notable changes were the introduction of conditions linking the admission of immigrants to the availability of places in refugee camps, the provision of increased support for non-governmental organisations assisting the civilian popula-

³ The so-called open-door policy towards refugees was based on the admission of migrants and the provision of extensive assistance to them. Initially, refugees were granted the status of "guests" in the Republic of Türkiye. From 2014 onwards, however, they were placed under the regime of "temporary protection," which guaranteed them, among other things, free access to healthcare, education, and employment in specified sectors.

tion in Syria, and the unofficial consent to the uncontrolled transit of migrants through Turkish territory en route to the European Union (Akçakale, 2015). The migratory pressure subsided only after the European Union concluded an agreement with Türkiye, signed on 18 March 2016.

It was agreed that in exchange for accepting one immigrant from Greece, Türkiye would return one refugee from Syria to the European Union. The organization was to cover the costs of the exchange (Frymark, 2016). It was assumed that after curbing illegal migration to the European Union, a voluntary refugee relocation program from the territory of the Republic of Türkiye to the EU would be launched. Visa policy was also to be liberalized, as a result of which short-term visas for Turks were to be abolished by the end of June 2016 required for entry into the Schengen Area. The European Union committed to paying Türkiye the first tranche of financial aid by the end of March 2016. The country is to receive another three billion euros by the end of 2018 (Frymark, 2016). Also important for Türkiye were the provisions that provided for the opening of one accession chapter concerning budgetary matters by the end of June 2016. The agreement also announced the acceleration of preparations for the opening of subsequent areas of negotiations on the Republic of Türkiye's accession to the European Union (PAP, 2016).

In the subsequent years, the European Union criticised Türkiye for its ongoing violations of the rule of law and civil liberties, as well as for the progressive erosion of the country's constitutional system. It condemned Türkiye's repressive measures against the Kurds, particularly in the context of the Olive Branch and Peace Spring operations, which provoked tensions in states hosting sizable Kurdish diasporas. The EU also disapproved of Türkiye's military and political cooperation with Russia, as well as its collaboration with Iran in shaping new spheres of influence in the Middle East. Moreover, Türkiye's military involvement in Syria, Iraq, and Libya were regarded as unilateral.

Criticism from Western institutions failed to bring about any changes in Türkiye's policy. On the contrary, it served as a catalyst for the ruling AKP to further consolidate its electorate and to foster anti-Western sentiment within the country. Regardless of the European Union's stance, in May 2019 the Turkish authorities sent a drilling vessel to the waters of Cyprus to commence the exploration of natural gas deposits in the Mediterranean seabed. In July 2019, a second vessel began operations in the same area. In September 2021, President Erdoğan announced the acquisition of another missile defence system from the Russian Federation (AZI, 2021). Owing to Türkiye's participation in the Turkish Stream project, it became possible to transport natural gas from Russia to some Southern European countries (Smolení, 2019, pp. 101–119). This development rendered the European Union increasingly dependent on Russian energy supplies, undermined its internal cohesion and energy solidarity, and significantly hindered progress towards a common energy policy. When considered within a broader geopolitical context, the construction of the gas pipeline can be seen as having strengthened the influence of both Türkiye and Russia in the Balkans – at the expense of Western interests.

Recognising that restrained criticism of the Turkish authorities' actions was failing to yield the desired results, the European Union gradually adopted a more assertive stance towards its former partner. In 2018, the European Council acknowledged that negotiations with Türkiye had reached an impasse, effectively preventing the opening

of new accession chapters and the closure of those already under discussion. A year later, the European Parliament urged on the European Commission and Member States to formally suspend accession talks with Türkiye, citing, among other factors, the deteriorating state of the rule of law and freedom of expression in the country (*Rezolucja Parlamentu Europejskiego...*, 2022).

In response to Türkiye's activities in the Mediterranean, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy declared that the operation „constitutes a further unacceptable escalation that violates the sovereignty of Cyprus” (asty/akw/adso, 2019). At the same time, the European Union announced that it would reduce its level of engagement and financial assistance to Türkiye, and suspend negotiations on an air traffic agreement between the two parties (asty/mtom, 2019). During a meeting in July 2020 between Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, the accession negotiations were not raised, with discussions focusing solely on current bilateral issues (Wasilewski, 2020). The EU also rejected several proposals put forward by the Turkish authorities to revise the terms of the Customs Union.

It should be noted that successive annual reports by the European Commission assessing Türkiye's progress in meeting the accession criteria remained consistently critical. The fundamental problems in Türkiye's relations with the European Union have continued to revolve around persistent failure to uphold democracy and human rights, the concentration of the political power in the presidency, the refusal to comply with the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, the lack of progress in judicial reform, the marginalisation of the opposition, and ongoing disregard for minority rights (Reports). In the area of foreign policy, alongside earlier concerns, new criticism have emerged regarding Türkiye's refusal to join the sanctions regime against the Russian Federation, its obstruction of the Republic of Cyprus cooperation with NATO, and its departure from the UN and EU-endorsed formula for the federalisation of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the Republic of Cyprus within a single state (Michalski, 2024).

The European Union has also expressed concern regarding the state of Turkish economy. While acknowledging Türkiye's capacity to withstand competitive pressures and its continued integration with the EU market as key strength, the EU has highlighted the unpredictability and lack of transparency of its market mechanisms as persistent challenges. It has further emphasised the vulnerability of the Turkish economy to crises, attributing much of this fragility to government interference. EU officials have warned that the central bank remains under strict political control. With reference to the Customs Union between the EU and Türkiye, in force since 1995, the EU has noted that Türkiye continues to impose trade barriers restricting the free movement of goods, while also failing to liberalise its visa regime (Michalski, 2024).

Paradoxically, despite numerous reservations, the EU member states voted in favour of opening a new chapter in relations with Türkiye, notwithstanding the „frozen” state of the accession process. On 29 November 2023, Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, together with the European Commission, presented a joint communication on behalf of the European Council on the state of political, economic, and trade relations between Türkiye and the EU. The

document expressed a renewed willingness to strengthen relations with Türkiye. To this end, it recommended, among other things, the resumption of high-level dialogues on economic, energy, and transport cooperation – suspended in 2019, as well as the reactivation of Association Council meetings at ministerial level. EU officials also advocated for regular dialogue with Türkiye on foreign and regional policy. Economically, the Commission and the High Representative proposed reopening negotiations on the modernisation of the Customs Union, contingent upon Türkiye's cessation of practices circumventing EU trade restrictions imposed on Russia. The statement likewise included recommendations on the management of migration flows.

Despite the persistence of anti-Western rhetoric in the statements of certain political leaders, the Turkish authorities have also pursued a pragmatic policy of rapprochement with the European Union, as evidenced by their actions – particularly on the international stage. A notable example is Türkiye's response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Paradoxically, this event compelled Ankara to adopt a more balanced stance towards its long-standing partner, while simultaneously creating an opportunity to re-engage in dialogue and cooperation with the European Union on the basis of shared strategic interests. The escalating brutality of the conflict and the atrocities committed by Russian forces against the civilian population prompted Türkiye to adopt a more critical rhetoric towards Moscow and undertake tangible measures in support of Ukraine. These actions contributed to restoring the cohesion of the North Atlantic Alliance – previously weakened by Türkiye's cooperation with Russia – and improving Türkiye's standing among European Union member states.

In line with the adopted strategy, the Turkish authorities initiated and hosted talks between the Ukrainian and Russian delegations on 10 March (Strachota, 2022) and 29 March 2022 (PAPa, 2022). As no agreement was reached in the ensuing weeks, President Erdoğan sought to facilitate further meetings between the parties, including negotiations at the highest presidential level. Owing to the complex and sensitive nature of the discussions, at the end of May 2022 Erdoğan expressed his willingness to organise talks in Istanbul in a broader format, with the participation of Ukraine, Russia, and the United Nations. He also declared Türkiye's readiness to take part in any potential monitoring mechanism should an agreement be concluded (*Erdogan* o..., 2022). A significant political gesture signalling Türkiye's support for Ukraine was the closure of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian ships. In early June 2022, Türkiye engaged in talks between Ukraine, the United Nations, and Russia aimed at reaching an agreement to resume maritime exports of agricultural products, including grain, from the port of Odessa. In addition, Türkiye contributed both military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine.

From the perspective of the European Union's interests, Türkiye's declaration of its readiness to assume greater responsibility for Europe's security is of paramount importance. This stance was reaffirmed by President Erdoğan at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in April 2025 (PAP/TJ, 2025). The credibility of this commitment is further underscored by the strengthening of defence cooperation between Türkiye and the United Kingdom. The agreement concluded at the beginning of August 2025 establishes a number of bilateral obligations, with intelligence cooperation, arms trade, and joint military exercises identified as key areas of collaboration (Potera, 2025).

Prospects for Türkiye's relations with the European Union

Despite the numerous challenges in Türkiye's relations with the European Union, the most plausible scenario appears to be one of gradual rapprochement between the two parties. In recent years, notwithstanding the persistence of fundamental contradictions, the EU has once again emerged as a desirable partner for Türkiye, mainly due to economic, trade, and geopolitical considerations.

Economic and trade relations should be regarded as a key dimension of Türkiye's engagement with the European Union. Given the scale of the interconnections, they largely determine Türkiye's economic dependence on its Western partner. This was clearly demonstrated during the recent economic crisis in Türkiye, triggered in part by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of the global health crisis, the country experienced a significant outflow of foreign investment, a substantial proportion of which originated from the European Union. The sharp decline in tourism revenues – long considered a cornerstone of Türkiye's service sector – proved particularly damaging. Between April and June 2020, Türkiye's GDP contracted by 10% (Potera, 2021, p. 7). Meanwhile, concerns about balance-of-payments stability intensified, and the Turkish lira depreciated markedly: in January 2020, the average exchange rate stood 5.92 lira to the dollar, rising to 6.82 by April of the same year (Potera, 2021, pp. 8–9).

The foregoing statistics confirm that the sustained presence of foreign investors has long served as a key driver of Türkiye's economic development. Moreover, their engagement also attests to the relative stability and credibility of the Turkish state. Following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the dynamic inflow of foreign capital enabled the financing of extensive infrastructure, construction, and energy projects across the country. It also facilitated the import of consumer goods, which contributed to an improvement in the standard of living of Turkish citizens. However, the widening gap between imports and exports made a steady and growing inflow of foreign currency indispensable (Potera, 2021, pp. 8–9). In ensuing years, this became increasingly difficult to sustain due to President Erdoğan's authoritarian reforms, the failed coup of 2016 – strongly criticised by the Western international community – and the escalating tensions with the United States.

Another key issue for Türkiye is the revision of the long-standing provisions of the Customs Union Agreement concluded with the European Union many years ago. Statistics confirm significant imbalances in trade between the two partners, particularly in the relatively limited range of products exported to the EU and the pressing need to diversify them. In 2024, bilateral trade between the two entities amounted to more than EUR 210 billion (*Turcja*, 2025). That same year, Türkiye ranked as the EU's fifth largest trading partner, accounting for 4.2% of its total trade (*Turcja*, 2025). The EU is Türkiye's principal partner in both imports and exports: in 2024, nearly 41% of Turkish exports were directed to the European Union, while 32.1% of all imported goods originated from the EU (*Turcja*, 2025). Importantly, Türkiye also imports patents and advanced technological solutions from the EU (Smoleń, 2020, p. 268).

The further expansion of Türkiye's trade with the European Union is constrained by a range of non-tariff and para-tariff measures introduced by the EU, including quality standards for goods and services, public procurement regulations, and rules

of origin (Zajaczkowski, 2011, p. 83). Consequently, Türkiye's export structure remains dominated by products with relatively low level of technological sophistication, so-called low technology goods (Zajaczkowski, 2011, p. 82; Narbone, Skuratowicz, 2008, p. 48). For Türkiye, revising the existing Customs Union Agreement with the European Union remains a strategic priority. Ankara argues that the existing agreement not only fails to encompass the services sector but also does not grant Türkiye the right to free trade with third countries with which the EU has not concluded free trade agreements. Another long-standing objective for Türkiye is visa liberalisation, which has remained unfulfilled since 2013. The abolition of visas requirements would facilitate the free movement of labour and deepen trade relations (Zajaczkowski, 2011, p. 82; Narbone, Skuratowicz, 2008, p. 48). To date, Türkiye has met 66 of the 72 benchmarks set out in the 2013 Visa Liberalisation Roadmap.

Fully aware of its extensive economic and trade ties with the West, the Turkish government has sought to improve the country's international image. It aims to present Türkiye as an economically stable country, capable of weathering crises and honouring its commitments. Particular emphasis has been placed on the competitiveness of the Turkish economy and its strong integration with the EU market. Moreover, efforts have been made to depart from the previously contentious monetary policy which, despite high inflation, had been characterised by a strategy of lowering rather than raising interest rates.

Given the Türkiye's cooperation with the Russian Federation has seriously undermined its geopolitical credibility as a reliable ally of the West, a discernible evolution has taken place in its security policy. Türkiye's strategic orientation – alongside its continued prioritisation of economic relations with the European Union – stems from growing concerns about its national security and interests, as well as from its interpretation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine within the broader context of the enduring global confrontation between East and West. In this framework, the North Atlantic Alliance is perceived as the principal guarantor of Türkiye's security, while the European Union serves as its key economic partner.

It should be emphasised that the current geopolitical circumstances enable Türkiye to engage in dialogue with the European Union from a position of greater strength. This enhanced standing is shaped, on the one hand, by the imperial and increasingly confrontational policy of the Russian Federation towards Europe, and on the other, by Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election. In light of Washington's increasingly transactional approach to relations with Europe and the erosion of unconditional security guarantees for the Old Continent, Türkiye has emerged as a natural partner for Europe in pursuing a common security and defence policy (Lachert, 2025). Possessing the second largest army within NATO, Türkiye is well positioned to fill the emerging security vacuum and assume a more active role in ensuring Europe's defence (PAP/TJ, 2025). This stance was reaffirmed during the talks held in March 2025 between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, and EU leaders Ursula von der Leyen and Antonio Costa. In their dialogue with the European Union, Turkish representatives emphasised the potential to mitigate the risks posed by President Trump's unpredictable policies, while simultaneously highlighting Türkiye's strategic importance for European security – particularly in the stabilisation of Ukraine and the Black Sea region (Wasilewski, 2025).

By contributing to Europe's security, Türkiye seeks to establish strategic and multi-faceted relations with the European Union. Firstly, Ankara expects the formal resumption of the accession process. Secondly, it aspires to become a full member of the future European security architecture – that is, to participate in decision-making processes and to hold the status of a founding member within the emerging structure or community. Thirdly, Türkiye calls for deepened cooperation in the defence and armaments sector (Wasilewski, 2025). In Ankara's view, Turkish defence companies should not be excluded from EU programmes supporting the arms industry or from joint procurement initiatives among Member States. Fourthly, the renegotiation of the Customs Union Agreement and the achievement of visa liberalisation remain strategic priorities for Türkiye.

It should be assumed that Türkiye's expectations are unlikely to be met. The level of mutual mistrust and the depth of political and structural differences between the parties remain significant. In addition, issues of cultural and religious identity continue to hold considerable weight within the European Union. However, under the current geopolitical circumstances, challenging as they are for Europe, Türkiye remains a highly desirable, albeit complex, partner. For this reason, in exchange for Ankara's security support, the EU is likely to consider limited adjustments to the provisions of the Customs Union Agreement, as well as a partial liberalisation of the visa regime with Türkiye. It is also plausible that individual EU Member States will conclude multi-million-pound defence and trade agreements with Ankara. For pragmatic reasons, the European Union is expected to address human rights concerns and the repression of political opposition only marginally. At the same time, a degree of rapprochement between Türkiye and the European Union may occur within the broader framework of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Analysing Türkiye's strategy to date suggests that, in order to extract further concessions from the European Union, Ankara will continue pursuing a policy of strategic balancing (Smoleń, 2023, pp. 99–122). This approach is expected to manifest itself through tactical cooperation with actors that challenge the existing balance of power within the international system. In this context, particular attention should be paid to Türkiye's relations with the Russian Federation, China, and Iran, as well as with selected regional powers of the Global South (Pietras, 2024, pp. 27–60).

Summary

Türkiye's relations with the European Union are characterized by pragmatism and dependence on a stronger partner. At the same time, it emphasized its own interests and pursued an assertive foreign policy. In the first years of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, Türkiye's accession to the European Union was a priority. This goal was subordinated to Türkiye's activity in the international system and domestically. The events of the so-called Arab Spring and the intensification of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian actions should be considered a turning point. From then on, EU accession ceased to be a priority for Türkiye. Anti-Western rhetoric became noticeable, and divergent interests between the partners became apparent on many levels. Türkiye ceased to act as a supplicant in talks with the European Union. The European Union's annual critical reports – highlighting, among other issues, human rights violations, the marginalisation of

the political opposition, the concentration of power in the presidency, economic opacity, and discrepancies in foreign policy – did little to break the impasse in bilateral relations.

Despite the numerous challenges that continue to characterise relations between the two entities, the European Union remains a highly desirable partner for Türkiye. The country maintains strong economic and trade ties with the Union. In the aftermath of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, a new framework for cooperation has begun to emerge, shaped by the security vacuum in Europe and compounded by the uncertainty surrounding Donald Trump's transactional approach to transatlantic security guarantees. Possessing the second-largest army within NATO, Türkiye is now positioned to cooperate with EU Member States in shaping a new security architecture for the European continent. However, such cooperation is unlikely to translate into Türkiye's formal integration into the Union; rather, it is expected to take the form of deepened military and economic collaboration. In this evolving context, the European Union is likely to accord less prominence to issues related to the rule of law, as geopolitical considerations increasingly take precedence.

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Summary

This publication examines the key challenges in Türkiye's relations with the European Union. To this end, it explores the specific character of these relations, dividing the analysis into two distinct periods: 2002–2013 and 2014–2025. This chronological framework makes it possible to trace the evolution of mutual relations and to identify their principal determinants. The study also seeks to outline potential prospects for the future of Türkiye–EU relations. The article is based on several core assumptions. Firstly, Türkiye's extensive economic and trade ties with the European Union have created a structural dependence on its Western partner – an interdependence that became particularly evident during the prolonged currency crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the adoption of anti-Western rhetoric and the articulation of new demands towards the European Union have served as instruments of political and economic leverage for the Turkish authorities, while simultaneously reinforcing President Erdoğan's

image, particularly among the conservative electorate. Thirdly, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 reaffirmed the strategic importance of relations between Türkiye and the European Union. The ensuing geopolitical realities provided a renewed platform for dialogue and potential cooperation, while also strengthening Türkiye's position in discussions with the Union as a prospective partner in shaping Europe's emerging security and defence architecture.

Key words: Türkiye, European Union, re-evaluation of relations, challenges

Wyzwania w relacjach Turcji z Unią Europejską

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem publikacji jest analiza wyzwań w relacjach Turcji z Unią Europejską. W tym celu ukazana została specyfika owych relacji z podziałem na lata: 2002–2013 i 2014–2025. Przyjęty przedział czasowy pozwolił ukazać przewartościowanie w stosunkach obu podmiotów oraz wskazać ich uwarunkowania. Podjęto się również próby określenia perspektyw relacji Turcji z Unią Europejską. W artykule przyjęto następujące założenia. Po pierwsze, powiązania gospodarcze i handlowe Turcji z Unią Europejską determinują jej zależność od zachodniego partnera. Uwidoczyła się ona zwłaszcza w obliczu wieloletniego kryzysu walutowego oraz pandemii COVID-19. Po drugie, antyzachodnia retoryka, a także wysuwanie wobec Unii Europejskiej nowych żądań, stały się dla władz Turcji instrumentem „nacisku” na organizację w wymiarze politycznym i ekonomicznym oraz umacniania wizerunku prezydenta Erdoğana głównie wśród konserwatywnego elektoratu. Po trzecie, agresja Rosji na Ukrainę w 2022 roku potwierdziła znaczenie wzajemnych relacji dla obu podmiotów. Nowe uwarunkowania geopolityczne stworzyły płaszczyznę do ponownego dialogu i niewykluczone, że i współpracy pomiędzy nimi. Dodatkowo umocniły pozycję Turcji w rozmowach z Unią Europejską jako potencjalnego partnera w tworzeniu nowej polityki bezpieczeństwa i obrony Europy.

Slowa klucze: Turcja, Unia Europejska, przewartościowanie relacji, wyzwań

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