

April 2018

FEUTURE Online Paper No. 17

It Takes Two to Tango: Political Changes in Europe and their Impact on Turkey's EU Bid

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ABSTRACT

Political changes in the European Union and the EU member states, as much as political changes in Turkey, have an impact on EU-Turkey relations. This paper presents political changes in the EU as one of the drivers of EU-Turkey relations. It discusses whether the European "enlargement fatigue" has been, more specifically, "Turkey fatigue". It looks at the politicisation of Turkey in European electoral debates, including some elections in the past that have shifted the direction of the relations. It then analyses three countries, Germany, France and the Netherlands, that held national elections in 2017, a year with a crowded schedule of elections across EU member states and in Turkey.

While the topic of Turkey disappeared from the French electoral debates in 2017, it figured prominently in the other two elections, perhaps even more than in past elections. And while France is attempting to decouple bilateral relations from Turkey's EU accession framework, this is not the case for the other two countries. As they stand, political changes in Europe eliminate a convergence scenario. This leaves two options as the most likely scenarios for the future of the relations: sporadic conflicts within a cooperation scenario or transactional cooperation centred on bilateral relations with member states.

Keywords: European Union; Turkey; EU-Turkey relations; the Netherlands; Germany; France; government; EU member states; enlargement fatigue; absorption capacity

ÖZET

Türkiye'deki siyasi değişiklikler kadar, Avrupa Birliği ve AB üye ülkelerindeki siyasi değişikliklerin de AB-Türkiye ilişkileri üzerinde etkisi vardır. Bu makalede Avrupa Birliği içindeki siyasi değişiklikler AB-Türkiye ilişkilerinin itici güçlerinden biri olarak sunulmaktadır. AB'nin "genişleme yorgunluğunun", genel bir yorgunluktan ziyade "Türkiye yorgunluğu" olup olmadığı tartışılmaktadır. Geçmişte ilişkilerin yönünü değiştiren bazı seçimler de dahil olmak üzere Avrupa'daki seçimlerde Türkiye başlığının nasıl politikleştiğini incelenmektedir. Devamında ise, 2017'de ulusal seçimlere giden AB üye ülkelerinden Almanya, Fransa ve Hollanda'yı analiz etmektedir.

2017'de Türkiye başlığı Fransa'daki seçim tartışmalarında yer almazken, Almanya ve Hollanda seçimlerinde belirgin bir biçimde yer almıştır. Ayrıca diğer iki ülkenin aksine Fransa, ikili ilişkileri Türkiye'nin AB üyelik çerçevesinden ayrı tutmaya çalışmıştır. Avrupa'daki siyasi değişiklikler tarafların yakınlaştığı bir senaryoyu elemektedir. Bu, ilişkilerin geleceği için iki seçenek oluşturmaktadır: aralıklı olarak çatışmaların yaşandığı bir işbirliği senaryosu veya üye ülkelere olan ikili ilişkilere odaklı transaksyonel işbirliği.



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1. Introduction

Turkey and the EU have been going through one of the toughest periods in the history of their political relations. Turkey's full membership of the European Union (EU) seems to be off the table, the 2015 attempt to revitalise accession negotiations ceased and the European Parliament is repeatedly calling for the freezing of accession negotiations (European Parliament, 2017). On top of that, bilateral conflicts between Turkey and some individual EU member states, such as the Netherlands and Germany, have increased the conflict potential in the EU-Turkey relationship. This is not the first time the EU-Turkey couple has faced a crisis, but it is a rare occasion when both parties are equally dissatisfied with the state of their relationship.

What's next? In terms of the three ideal-type scenarios - namely, convergence, cooperation and conflict, as defined by the FEUTURE project - the convergence scenario implying full membership is unlikely for the time being. This leaves us with the question of whether we are driving straight into a conflict scenario where the EU and Turkey alike would opt for open and sustained confrontation or, on the contrary, whether both actors will be able to compromise on areas of common interest and keep or even increase the current level of cooperation¹.

Its relationship with Turkey is among the numerous crises the EU has been facing, including the British decision to exit the Union in 2016, the migration crisis in 2015 and the rise of Eurosceptic and populist movements, as well as the lingering effects of an economic crisis.² Europe's future response to these issues will set the parameters of Turkey's potential to integrate, fully or partially, with the EU.

The EU's choices regarding if and how to expand and integrate further have had significant impact on its relations with Turkey. Equally important are elections in Europe for two reasons: first, because changes of government may result in a policy review vis-à-vis Turkey; second, Turkey is frequently part of the political debates during electoral campaigns and therefore elections become the instances when the tone and the drivers of the EU-Turkey relations are set.

Based on research findings, this paper will project trends from the 1999-2018 period to the year 2023 and will highlight the elements that could reinforce or reverse those trends. Political changes in Europe suggest that what we currently describe as a state of crisis between the EU and Turkey could become the new normal in the relations.

¹ For a presentation and discussion of FEUTURE's ideal-type scenarios see Nathalie Tocci, *Turkey and the European Union: Scenarios for 2023*, FEUTURE Background Paper, September 2016, http://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/user_upload/FEUTURE_Background_Paper_final.pdf.

² For a detailed discussion on the impact of populism as a driver of EU-Turkey relations, see Morillas, Sökmen and Ünver (2017), *EU-Turkey Relations in the Midst of a Global Storm*, November 2017, <http://www.feuture.eu/>.



2. The European integration process: How does it affect EU-Turkey relations?

A combination of increasing institutional integration and competence transfer from the national to the supranational level on the one hand and the growing number of member states on the other has always determined the construction of the EU. Particularly in the early years of European integration the so-called "deepening" and "widening" constituted mutually reinforcing processes (Umbach, 2009).

In recent years, however, both have started wavering: seven consecutive enlargement rounds have increased heterogeneity among the EU member states and the difficulty of finding consensus. At the same time European integration has reached levels at which not all member states are either politically willing or objectively able to join in with further steps towards integration. Recent trends of renationalisation and Euroscepticism in individual member states - old and new alike - only add to the difficulties in European integration. The decision of the United Kingdom (UK) to exit the EU even introduced the possibility of European disintegration to the academic and political agenda (Eppler et al., 2016; Martill & Staiger, 2018; Tekin, 2016; Webber, 2014). Against this backdrop, a fundamental reform of the Lisbon Treaty is less of an option. Member states managed the various recent crises in European integration by muddling through within the given legal framework.

The impact on the "supply side of enlargement" (Phinnemore & İçener, 2016) and hence on EU-Turkish relations has been threefold: (1) Continuous enlargement rounds have triggered enlargement fatigue and called into question the Union's absorption capacity and its transformative power, which in turn has undermined the EU's credibility vis-à-vis candidate countries and Turkey in particular; (2) Crises in European integration have additionally prompted questions about the scope and form of further enlargements; (3) The overlapping crises, coupled with the Brexit debate, intensified the discussion on whether the EU should proceed with differentiated integration. By differentiated integration we refer to "one group of EU member states [...] not [being] subject to the same Union rules as others" (Tekin & Wessels, 2008: 25). This is opening up space for new forms of engagement between Turkey and the EU.

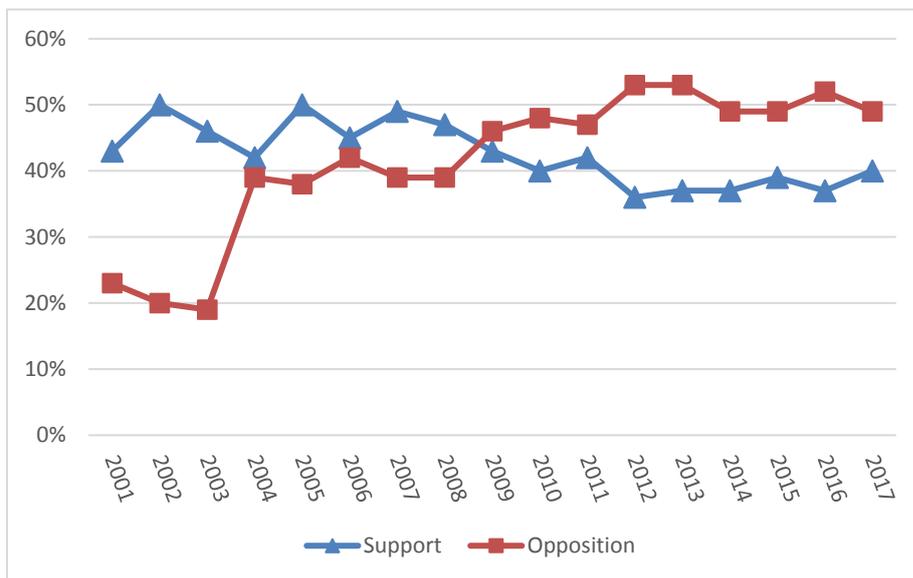
2.1. Enlargement fatigue or Turkey fatigue?

Enlargement fatigue, absorption capacity and transformative power represent soft notions rather than hard facts. Nevertheless, they constitute strong drivers for the EU-Turkey relationship. They have had two structural effects on the EU's enlargement procedure: accession candidates are now qualifying individually rather than en bloc for EU membership (İçener et al., 2010) and the EU focuses more on advancing European integration than enlargement (see Juncker, 2014). The opposition to Turkey within the EU goes beyond enlargement fatigue. Actors opposing Turkey's accession to the EU use the enlargement fatigue argument as a politically correct way of masking their Turkey fatigue.



The 2004/2007 enlargement round coined the term "enlargement fatigue". Basically, this refers to the unwillingness to grant EU membership to any additional country (see Szolucha, 2010). This expresses a general feeling of overload resulting from both the almost doubling in number of member states at the time as well as the prospect of eventually growing even further. While on a political level enlargement counts as one of the EU's most successful policies, it has represented the least popular one among EU citizens in recent years (see Standard Eurobarometers, 2003-2017). Since 2008 opposition has even exceeded support for the EU's further enlargement, oscillating at around 50 percent since 2010 (see Graph 1).

Graph 1: Public opinion on further enlargement



Source: Compiled by the authors based on the Standard Eurobarometer 2001-2017; Spring Report of each year; <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm#p=1&yearFrom=1996&yearTo=2018>.

Enlargement fatigue is only one of various factors determining the EU's lack of appetite for further enlargements (see Schimmelfennig, 2014). Regarding Turkey, the argument countering enlargement was that the country was "too big, too poor and too Muslim". This sentence, which became popular among Turco-sceptics in the early 2000s, summarises three main concerns that might represent particular drivers of EU-Turkey relations. First, enlargement has been discussed in the light of the sustainability of welfare states in Europe and social dumping, best illustrated with the metaphor of the "Polish plumber". Despite multiple analyses identifying the overall positive instead of negative effects of previous enlargements (Barysch, 2006; Kahanec, 2015), right-wing and Eurosceptic politicians are still ready to invest in those fears.³ This is particularly

³ A recent example is a statement by Geert Wilders of the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands claiming that immigrants costs the country 7.2 billion euros a year, see: <https://www.rnw.org/archive/immigrants-cost-netherlands-72-billion-euros-year>.



true when it comes to Turkey, which has a population of almost 80 million people. The Brexit campaign in the UK, for example, propagated the idea that millions of Turkish citizens could settle in the UK if it remained part of the single market (Erlanger, 2016). This move was even more surprising as British support for Turkey's accession was traditionally perceived as a means to support "widening" over "deepening".

Second, EU institutions and member states' governments stress the importance of the EU's "capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration" (European Council, 1993: point 7.A.iii). Although vaguely defined as the aim of the Union to remain "able to function politically, financially and institutionally as it enlarges, and to deepen Europe's common project" (European Council, 2006: 18), the EU's absorption capacity has become a prominent criterion for any further enlargement (see also Emerson et al., 2006).

We can differentiate between the political and economic absorption capacity of the Union. The political one refers, to a great extent, to the impact on decision-making mechanisms. Voting patterns show that previous enlargements have not had a major effect on the decision-making capacity of the EU (Toshkov, 2015: 34). Yet Turkey is a different case. Turkey would represent 13.5 percent of the EU's population, even more if the United Kingdom is no longer part of it. This would not only render Turkey highly influential in the Council of the EU but also in the European Parliament, where Turkish MEPs would constitute, alongside Germany, the largest national group. The impact of Turkey's accession in the power distribution inside the EU became a topic of concern when the EU formalised Turkey's accession prospects.⁴ France was the country where politicians and opinion-makers discussed this issue most prominently.⁵

In terms of the EU's economic and financial absorption capacity, the main concern was on Turkey's effect on the redistribution mechanisms in the EU. Despite the quick recovery from the 2000/2001 crisis, some perceived Turkey as a burden and a risky venture (Quaisser & Woods, 2004: 45-47). The European Commission was vague in its argumentation and stated that "while predictions of the financial impact of Turkey's accession on the EU budget are highly uncertain, it is clear that the impact will be substantial" (European Commission, 2004: 48). Yet other experts argued that the EU transfers would have a significant impact in Turkey (around 4 percent of its GDP) and still remain manageable for the EU budget (Dervis et al., 2004). The Common Agricultural Policy was among the most prominent examples of the allegedly unaffordable cost of Turkey's integration and became a major point of contention in the accession negotiation conditions.⁶ Unsurprisingly, the EU Opening Statement for the Accession Conference with Turkey explicitly considered long

⁴ In 2004 the European Commission argued in a working document that "given its size of population, Turkey as a member would have an important impact on EU institutions, in particular as regards the European Parliament and the Council, similar in scale to the present larger Member States" (European Commission, 2004). While agreeing with this line of argumentation, Richard Baldwin and Mika Widgrén (2004) argued that Turkey would not have enough power to impede the EU from acting when it came to qualified majority decisions.

⁵ The then academic Sylvie Goulard (2004: 102) said, referring to Chirac's support for Turkey's accession prospect, that the "French are always worried about their relative decline in the EU and alas they are speeding up its taking place".

⁶ Turkey would represent about 20 percent of the EU's agricultural area (European Commission, 2014). According to the then Commissioner for Agriculture, Franz Fischler, in the event of Turkey becoming a member it would receive as much funding as the ten countries that joined the EU in 2004 (Grethe, 2004).



transitional periods, derogations, specific arrangements and permanent safeguard clauses for agriculture - among other areas (European Commission, 2005: par. 12).

Debates on absorption capacity had an identity-related dimension which rendered this case exceptional. Turkey would not only represent the second-largest member state but also the only Muslim-majority country in the Union. Turkey has often been presented as Europe's "other" and, in response, Turkey's exclusion added to claims of the EU acting as a "Christian Club" (see Hauge et al., 2016). The identity criterion played an important role when the EU leaders decided not to consider Turkey a candidate country in 1997. It also played a role during the discussions on the EU constitution. The then chairman of the Convention, Giscard d'Estaing, publically denied Turkey's European credentials, provoking a vivid debate both in Turkey and in the EU. Neither the granting of candidate status in 1999 nor the opening of accession negotiations in 2005 settled this issue.

Third, confidence in the EU's "transformative power" (Börzel & Risse 2009) diminished, particularly after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Democratic transformation processes in the new member states had not been fully completed at the time of their accession. The EU's initial strategy aimed for their finalisation within the Union's structure after accession. Given the ongoing struggles in these countries and the EU's lack of an effective post-accession conditionality mechanism the principle changed from "transformation will follow accession" to "accession will only follow transformation" (see also Gateva, 2010).

Turkey experienced a period of strong transformation in the early 2000s with three constitutional reform packages during what was called the "golden age" of Turkey's Europeanisation (Önis, 2009). In recent years, however, the political reform process has slowed down.⁷ Instead of completing the democratisation process the political system in Turkey increasingly backslid in terms of democracy standards. The most recent constitutional reform will transform Turkey into a presidential system that European institutions argue will have a substantial weakening effect on Turkey's democracy (European Parliament, 2016; Venice Commission, 2016).

In addition to these domestic transformation hurdles, the EU's "external integration capacity" (Börzel et al., 2017) vis-à-vis Turkey, i.e. the EU's capacity to prepare Turkey for membership, has diminished over the years. The open-ended nature of Turkey's EU accession process (see European Commission, 2005) undermines the Union's conditionality on Turkey. Already at the start of the accession negotiations there was suspicion, particularly on the Turkish side, that the EU envisaged for Turkey some sort of "second-class membership" (e.g. Ülgen, 2010), which was reinforced with the decision not to open chapters 23 and 24 on matters of rule of law. As such, rather than a full-on fatigue closing all doors to any further enlargement this indicates "fatigue" vis-à-vis Turkey in particular, building on the loss of enthusiasm for enlargement in the EU in general.

⁷ See, for more details: Tekin, Funda and Deniz, Yesil (2018), "Rule of law or accession perspective: which comes first in EU-Turkey relations?", *FEUTURE Online Paper*, <http://www.feuture.eu/>.



2.2. Crises undermining European integration: Drivers or brakes?

The EU has emerged stronger from every crisis it has been through so far (e.g. Emmanouilidis et al., 2011; Jense, 2016). These have had varying effects on EU-Turkey relations. For the purpose of this paper the most relevant ones are: (1) the constitutional crisis of 2005; (2) the global financial crisis starting in 2008 that resulted in a series of crises on the eurozone's periphery; (3) an unstable and defiant neighbourhood, particularly since 2013; and (4) the so-called refugee crises that peaked in 2015.⁸

In 2005 Dutch and French voters both rejected the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in their national referenda (Grosskopf, 2007). Turkey, as part of broader debates on enlargement fatigue and the EU's absorption capacity, was one of the factors. The Constitutional Treaty aimed to abolish the pillar structure of the previous EU treaties and to establish a constitution-like foundation for the Union. However, not everyone perceived this substantial and comprehensive step of "deepening" as a sufficient preparation for further "widening". In France, this had repercussions on the prospects of Turkish EU membership. President Chirac announced plans to submit an eventual Turkish accession to the EU to referendum in France and changed the French constitution accordingly. This move aimed at containing opposition within his party but also at increasing the chances of a yes vote in the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty.⁹

The global and financial crisis and the subsequent crises in the eurozone shifted the EU's focus towards the internal dimension. Although Croatia joined the EU in 2013, enlargement was no longer on the European agenda. During these years, accession negotiations with Turkey were stagnating for various reasons. Cyprus and France blocked negotiations on a number of important chapters, including chapters 23 and 24 on matters of rule of law, and Turkey's domestic reform process had drastically slowed down.

This was not the only effect of this crisis in EU-Turkey relations. Two neighbours of Turkey, Greece and Cyprus, were among the most affected countries by the sovereign debt crisis and nationalist and populist movements in both countries were on the rise. Movements such as the Golden Dawn and ANEL in Greece were spreading anti-Turkish accession messages. Additionally, the crisis hit some of Turkey's best advocates in the EU such as Italy, Portugal and Spain. Rome, Lisbon and Madrid had to concentrate efforts on dealing with the economic crisis and therefore, their impact on European foreign policy and accession strategies was in decline (Soler i Lecha, 2013).

Turkey's leaders also showed repeated signs of disenchantment and frustration with the EU project. The European economic crisis was not the main driver of this, but it amplified pre-existing concerns. The EU was becoming less attractive for Turkish authorities who perceived the EU as an economic power in decline. Even President Gül, one of the most pro-European figures in Turkish politics, expressed his concerns about the future of European integration at the end of 2012: "To

⁸ The UK's decision to exit the Union constitutes an additional crisis. Since this crisis might also effect the overall constitution of European integration in terms of increasing the scope of (external) differentiation, Brexit is dealt with in subchapter 2.3.

⁹ Paradoxically, Chirac's successor, Nicolas Sarkozy, who was known for his vocal opposition to Turkey's membership, led a re-amendment of the French constitution in 2008 so that referenda for further accession were no longer automatic.



our north, Europe is at a crossroads, undergoing a process of creative destruction, with potentially far-reaching ramifications well beyond the confines of the European Union” (Gül, 2012). Additionally, the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the delay in the negotiation process as “unforgivable”. This all cumulated in official considerations of the prospect of Turkey joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, portrayed as an alternative to the EU (see e.g. Szigetvari, 2014).

In spite of the EU’s preoccupation with its internal reforms in the Economic and Monetary Union, the Commission and the Turkish government launched a joint initiative to introduce the so-called “positive agenda”. This aimed at enhancing cooperation and promoting reforms in Turkey in areas of joint interest such as alignment with EU legislation, political reforms and fundamental rights, visas, mobility and migration, trade, energy, counter-terrorism and dialogue on foreign policy (European Commission, 2012). This new framework, however, was unable to trigger any sustainable effects or successes.

The EU had not yet overcome the economic crisis when it was forced to deal with other crises in the neighbourhood. On the one side, the Arab Spring came as a surprise and was followed by the proliferation of conflicts in North Africa and the Levant. On the other side, the destabilisation of its eastern neighbours challenged the EU and even questioned Europe’s security order as established in 1975 with the Helsinki Accords. Russia’s reaction to the Euromaidan uprising in Ukraine (i.e. the annexation of Crimea and the support for pro-Russian forces in the Donbass region) challenged Europe to deal with a more unstable and defiant neighbourhood.¹⁰ What Europeans intended to transform into a ring of stable, prosperous and well-governed friendly countries became a “ring of fire” (Bildt, 2015), with consequences for the EU-Turkey relationship. Brussels and other European capitals started to perceive Turkey as another defiant neighbour, while in return Ankara saw Europe as an unreliable partner in dealing with its security concerns.

One of the effects of the destabilisation in the neighbourhood was the forced displacement of millions of people, mainly from Syria. Many of them found refuge in Turkey. In spring 2015 the irregular crossing around the Aegean multiplied as over a million refugees tried to reach the EU via the Balkan route. This so-called migration crisis affected member states to different degrees. The principles of solidarity among them and the whole coherence of the Schengen Area were at risk. One politician who qualified this situation as an existential risk for the EU was the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte. He stated that “as we all know from the Roman Empire, big empires go down if the borders are not well protected” (Financial Times, 2015), and together with German Chancellor Angela Merkel became one of the most active European leaders in this crisis.

This couple was also a driving force behind the EU-Turkey statement on migration that aimed at stopping or at least containing the arrivals of refugees to Europe (Reiners & Tekin, 2018). This so-called refugee deal or EU-Turkey deal revitalised the EU-Turkey relationship despite Turkey’s democracy being under severe strain. The EU rediscovered Turkey as a “key strategic partner” and

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion on the impact of their shared neighbourhood on EU-Turkey relations, see: Clifford et al., (2017), *Politics and Turkey-EU Relations: Drivers from the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods*, FEUTURE Online Paper No. 11, <http://www.feuture.eu/>.



an accession country at the same time (Merkel, 2015). At the EU-Turkey Summit on 29 November 2015, the EU decided to revitalise accession negotiations by opening additional chapters, to accelerate visa liberalisation with Turkey within the framework of the visa roadmap, and to institutionalise biannual EU-Turkey Summits and regular high-level dialogues (General Secretariat of the Council, 2015). However, this was only of short duration - merely two chapters on economic and monetary policy and financial and budgetary provisions were opened. Visa liberalisation failed because Turkey did not commit to implementing the full set of benchmarks listed in the visa roadmap. Neither the EU-Turkey summits, nor high-level dialogues have been truly institutionalised (see Schröder & Tekin, 2018). In the end, the refugee crisis was a not a veritable driver for EU-Turkey relations.

The EU seems to have a formidable capacity to accumulate crises without really solving any of them and yet being resilient to their effects. This particular situation became an additional burden for Turkey's EU accession. Even if Turkey effectively converged with the EU, it would have found a Europe with less appetite and less self-confidence to embark on such a major challenge. Moreover, Europe projected an image of weakness and desperation which Turkey interpreted as an opportunity for changing the terms of the relationship to its own benefit.

2.3. Differentiation as the new trademark in European integration: What does this mean for Turkey?

In the referendum of 23 June 2016, the British population voted in favour of leaving the EU by a slight majority of 51.89 percent. This shook the European integration project to its core. On 29 March 2017 the new British prime minister, Theresa May, sent the notification letter to the President of the European Council officially triggering the negotiations for the UK's exit from the EU according to Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union. Many in the EU were concerned that Brexit would trigger a domino effect. European disintegration all of a sudden became a likely threat to the Union (see Eppler et al., 2016; Rudloff & Schmiege, 2016).

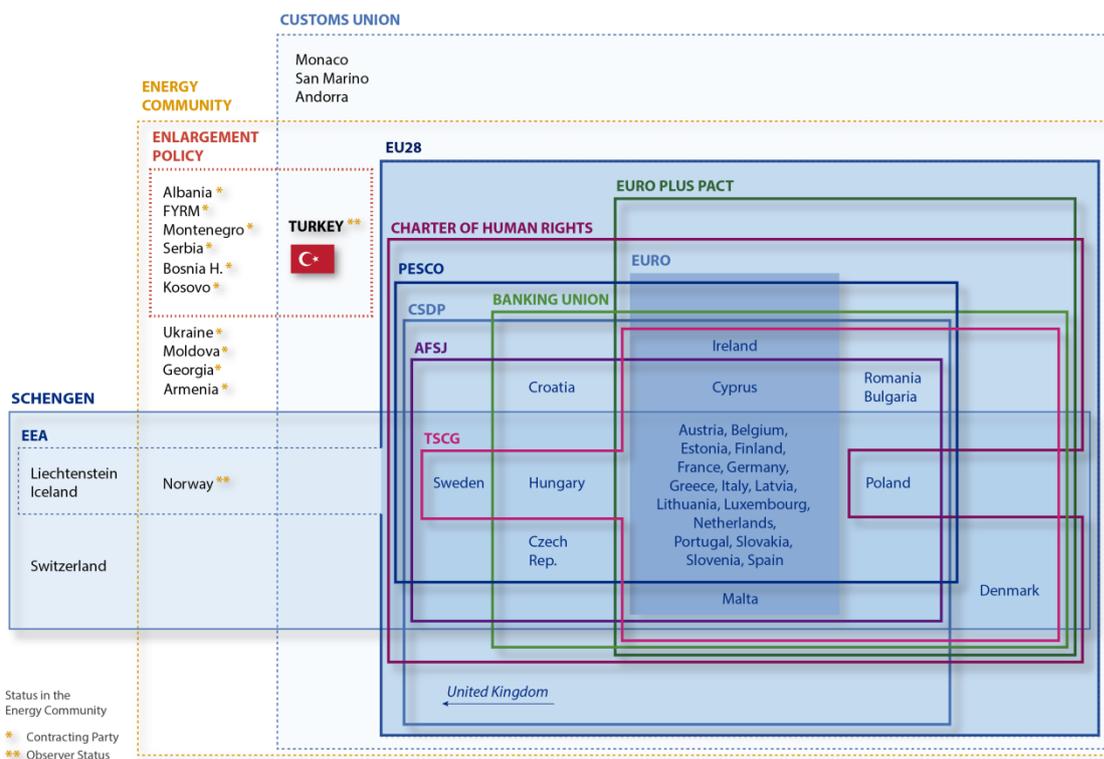
So far, there has been no domino effect. Differentiated integration, however, has become a strategic response to the challenge. Politicians, academics and EU institutions alike increasingly debate differentiation as a tool for promoting European integration. In 2016, the European Council explicitly acknowledged differentiation in European integration as an option for the first time. It stated that "different paths of integration for different Member States [would be] possible, allowing those that want to deepen integration to move ahead, whilst respecting the rights of those which do not want to take such a course" (European Council, 2016: 3). Additionally, political visions for the EU's future increasingly refer to forms of differentiated integration. A relevant example was the call by French President Emmanuel Macron for the readiness to "constantly accommodate the driving ambition of some while allowing others to move ahead at their own speed" in order to "cultivate the desire to push ahead and ensure that Europe's progress benefits everyone" (Macron, 2017). Thus, the principle of a "single set of policies and obligations that



would more or less apply in the same way to all Member States at the same time" (Leruth & Lord, 2015: 755) increasingly resonates in today's EU.

Some mechanisms of differentiated integration are already in place. Opt-outs, like Denmark's decision not to participate in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the common currency, are among the most prominent forms. Some mechanisms allow the integration of non-member states such as the Single Market, the Customs Union and the Schengen Area. The picture of the EU "united in diversity" is hence highly differentiated and affects some of the core policies of European integration, including permanent structured cooperation among 25 member states in defence matters (see Figure 1).¹¹ Turkey is among the countries outside the EU that is most integrated with it, but depending on the different forms of relations offered (e.g. membership versus differentiated integration models) it could also be the least integrated with the EU of the insiders.

FIGURE 1: TURKEY AND THE EU'S DIFFERENTIATED INTEGRATION SCHEMES



Note: While PESCO is included in the chart due to its relevance in EU-Turkey relations, it is different to the other schemes on a legal basis. **Source:** Updated by Oriol Farrés (CIDOB) on the basis of a previous version made by Tekin, F. (2016): *Brexit or No Brexit? Political and Institutional Implications of an EU without the UK*, IAI Working Paper.

¹¹ For another comprehensive overview see Steve Peers, *Trends in differentiation of EU Law lessons for the future*, Brussels, European Parliament, 2015, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/510007/IPOL_IDA\(2015\)510007_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/510007/IPOL_IDA(2015)510007_EN.pdf).



Will Brexit and differentiated integration affect the future of EU-Turkey relations? On the negative side, Turkey is losing a very strong ally at the EU's decision-making table, which could make Turkey more cautious in approaching any model to be tailored for post-Brexit UK-EU relations. On the more positive side, Brexit triggers discussions on how to frame alternative forms of association on a broader level, which is not only of concern to the UK but also other non-member states. These discussions have already received attention from EU-Turkey experts (e.g. Karakas, 2013; Müftüler-Bac, 2017; Saatcioğlu, 2017; Tocci, 2018; Turhan, 2017; Ülgen, 2017). What needs emphasis, though, is that there are fundamental differences between the UK and Turkey, particularly in terms of the state of the rule of law, human rights and freedoms. These and other categorical differences between Turkey and the UK make the EU's application of Brexit-inspired models to Turkey an unlikely prospect.

Turkey is aspiring to - and the EU has promised - full Union membership, but alternative formulas of association have also been discussed. In 2004, when the European Council took the decision to open accession negotiations with Turkey, a group of German politicians officially coined the term "privileged partnership". They were convinced that this would be better and more honest than an "underprivileged membership" (Guttenberg, 2004). This term, however, has never been mentioned in any of the official EU documents and Turkish officials pre-emptively rejected this option. The negotiation framework nevertheless envisages that "if Turkey is not in a position to assume in full all the obligations of membership it must be ensured that Turkey is fully anchored in the European structures through the strongest possible bond" (European Commission, 2005: par. 2).

On a different note, if the UK had voted to remain in the EU, talks on Turkey's membership conditions would have been centred on "internal differentiation", i.e. full membership as initially promised, but at the same time leaving the country outside of the EU's inner core. Brexit has completely different implications for membership talks. Here, "external differentiation", i.e. Turkey not becoming a full member but having a wider scale of cooperation models to choose from, becomes a safer option for both sides. The latter option, which strikingly resembles the "privileged partnership" that was outright rejected by Turkey in the past, could come back to the table as a more acceptable opportunity. Turkey's concern was that "privileged partnership" was a way of denying its European credentials and that it was ultimately discriminating. In light of the current developments in European integration the question becomes relevant of just how "underprivileged" a Turkish membership with permanent safeguard clauses would actually be. The renewed discussion on differentiated integration has indirectly triggered a parallel debate on whether Turkey could find a better place within the EU's variable geometries (see Müftüler-Bac, 2013, 2017; Turhan, 2017). The overall idea would be to move the debate from alternative forms of association to include Turkey in already existing forms of integration that would be acceptable for both.



3. Why do elections matter?

National elections in Europe not only determine the political and economic trajectory of individual member states but have far-reaching implications for the Union as well as its relations with neighbours. In the case of Turkey this has been very evident. Some examples are the red-green coalition in Germany from 1998 to 2005, and the electoral victories of Angela Merkel in Germany in 2005 and Nicolas Sarkozy in France in 2007. Public debates on identity were prominent during the respective elections of Merkel and Sarkozy, and Turkey formed a large part of them. Merkel and Sarkozy's outspoken opposition to Turkey's accession and the political weight of France and Germany in the EU were the reasons why government changes in the two countries impacted the relations to a great extent.¹²

Some European politicians have utilised the debate on Turkey's EU membership for their domestic political interests.¹³ Traditionally, this attitude has been more common among the mainstream and far-right-wing groups in Europe. In reaction to this, the left and centre-left in Europe developed a relatively positive and pro-accession attitude towards Turkey. Yet this attitude was not purely reactionary, but also contextual (Soler i Lecha, 2014). At the time of a widely positive approach of the European left and centre-left towards Turkey - roughly from late 1990s onwards and continuing throughout the first decade of the 2000s - the country was reforming its institutions and still very keen on becoming a member state of the EU. Due to right-wing groups playing the "Turkey card" regarding issues of identity and integration during election campaigns, left-wing groups responded by supporting Turkey. Yet debates on Turkey have more generally come up during electoral campaigns, gradually losing salience after elections.¹⁴

Turkey's constitutional referendum in 2017 coincided with a crowded electoral cycle in Europe. But why do the 2017 elections in the Netherlands, Germany and France matter for EU-Turkey relations? While Germany and France have been the decision-making engines of the EU, they have also been shaping the EU position vis-à-vis Turkey since 1999.¹⁵ The Netherlands, a core EU country and a long-time supporter of Turkey's accession, has had a particular interest in Turkey matters within the EU. Of EU member states, the Netherlands, Germany and France are Turkey's largest trade and security partners and host the largest Turkish community. All three countries' interaction with Turkey during and after the 2017 elections set the broader tone of EU-Turkey relations and is likely to do so from now until 2023.

¹² According to officials in Berlin and Brussels their Turkish counterparts seem even to be aware of this and perceive Germany to represent one important access point within negotiations with the EU (see Reiners & Tekin, 2018).

¹³ Several collaborative projects have analysed and compared national debates on Turkey. Some examples are: Giannakopoulos & Maras, 2005; Aksit, Senyuva & Üstün, 2009; Tocci, 2007 Tocci, 2009 and FEUTURE (2017).

¹⁴ Greece and Cyprus are not in this category, as Turkey has structurally been a political issue due to unresolved territorial disputes.

¹⁵ France and Germany agreed to give Turkey candidate status in 1999, reached a pre-agreement on how to start negotiations in 2004 and both sent negative signals to Turkey from 2006 onwards.

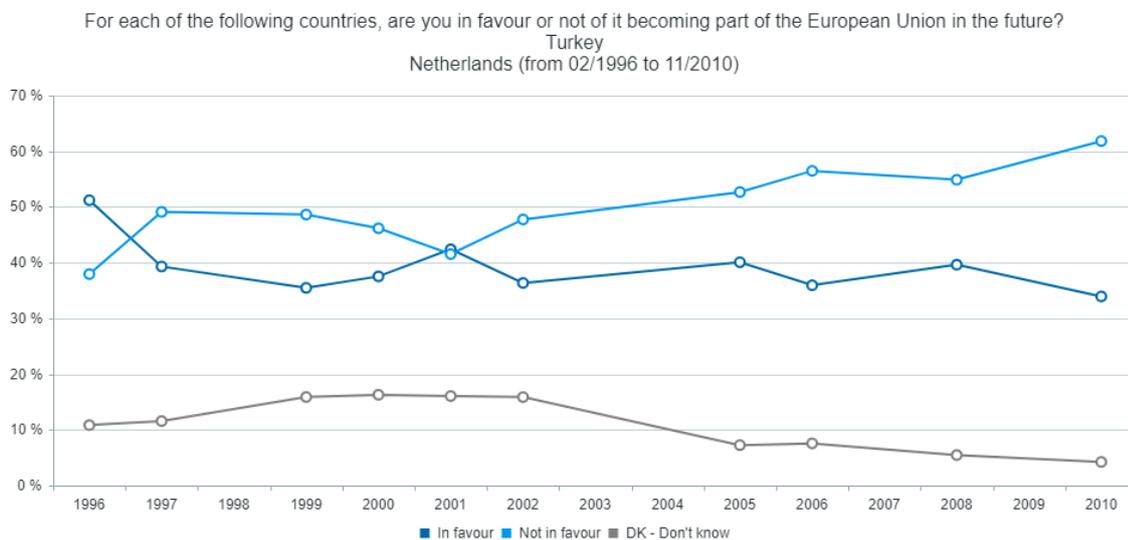


3.1. The Netherlands: Friends will be friends?

The position of the Netherlands towards Turkey's membership has traditionally been "firm but fair", as the country had well-established bilateral relations with Turkey and an Atlanticist foreign policy, all the while being critical of human rights issues in Turkey. This took a very sudden turn in early 2017, when the Netherlands was preparing for general elections in March in the face of rising populist-xenophobic rhetoric and as Turkey was preparing for a constitutional referendum on April 16. In this period, relations hit a low. Multiple factors prepared the ground for this decline in relations, and multiple factors for its containment.

The interest of the Netherlands has not only been at the decision-making level, but also at a societal level. One reason is the presence of a Turkish community in the Netherlands that has been part of Dutch society since the 1960s and is the largest community of foreign origin in the country (CBS, 2018). Dutch society's perception of Turkey has largely been shaped by its perception of the communities from Turkey in the Netherlands. This has had various outcomes, both positive and negative. Back at the time when Turkey was not a topic of controversy in the Netherlands, Turkey's integration into the EU meant, to many, the integration of the Turkish community; on the other hand, internal disputes in Turkey spilling over to the diaspora posed a domestic problem to the country. The magnitude of the latter view eventually dominated the former.

Graph 2. Dutch public opinion on support for Turkey's accession from 1996 to 2010



Source: European Commission Public Opinion, Standard Eurobarometer 1996-2010, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/14/groupKy/71>.

Turkey has increasingly become a domestic issue for the Netherlands over the last decade in parallel with the policy of Erdoğan's party, the AKP, of re-engagement with the Turkish diaspora. In particular, this became a serious source of tension between the two governments when reports



of spying activities by some diaspora members came to light and were interpreted as the “long arm of Ankara” (Reuters, 2016). Similarly, the foundation of DENK in 2015, a party led by two Turkish-Dutch former Labour Party (PvdA) MPs, was seen in Dutch political circles as an attempt by the AKP to extend its influence in the Netherlands.

Right-wing populists, such as Geert Wilders and his PVV (Party for Freedom), and mainstream politicians like Mark Rutte, leader of the VVD (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy), similarly utilised the identification of a large segment in the diaspora with the AKP’s ideology in their electoral campaigns. Rutte’s unexpectedly harsh tone against the Turkish government helped him contain the populist surge in the run-up to the 2017 elections. When asked, many interviewees from the Netherlands stated that various politicians have adapted to this anti-Turkey discourse ever since.¹⁶

The diplomatic crisis between Turkey and the Netherlands during the run-up to the 2017 elections did not only have implications on bilateral relations, but also at European level. Several European governments showed solidarity with their Dutch counterparts, and the crisis had a domino effect as Austria, Germany and Denmark also limited or forbade local rallies by Turkish politicians in that period.

On a side note, Dutch EU officials and politicians have helped shape Turkey-related positions in the EU many times. Commissioners from the Netherlands have been actively involved in Turkey matters.¹⁷ Also, many Turkey rapporteurs in the European Parliament, all in office since the decision to start Turkey’s membership negotiations in 2004, have been from the Netherlands.¹⁸ One interviewee explained this by saying that the Dutch have been the most neutral party on the question of Turkey’s accession.¹⁹ It was under the presidency of the Netherlands in December 2004 that the Council of the EU decided to start accession negotiations, when the then Foreign Minister Ben Bot, a former ambassador to Turkey, was openly supportive of the accession.

Both sides are aware of the mutual loss that would derive from breaking ties. Trade is a key interest in bilateral relations. The Netherlands was the 10th largest market for Turkish exports and 16th for Turkish imports in 2016 (TUIK, 2016a; 2016b) and has been the largest investing country in Turkey over the last 10 years, holding a 15.8 percent share of total foreign direct investment in 2016 (Santander, 2016). While there has been no official rapprochement between the two parties yet, one interviewee in Brussels said that dialogue between state officials actively continued after the crisis through closed-door meetings.

Even though voices proposing to freeze or end Turkey’s accession process were common during the 2017 election campaigns in the Netherlands, Turkey is perceived to be an indispensable partner in the refugee deal. Regardless of the political discourse, Turkey remains a geostrategic

¹⁶ Interviews in the Netherlands, July 2017.

¹⁷ Some examples are: Frits Bolkestein, Commissioner from 1999 to 2004, staunchly opposed to Turkey’s EU membership; Hans van den Broek, Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, is member of the Independent Commission on Turkey; and Frans Timmermans, European Commission First Vice-President.

¹⁸ The position of Turkey rapporteur from 2004 on has belonged to, in consecutive order, Arie Oostlander, Camiel Eurlings, Ria Oomen-Ruijten and Kati Piri.

¹⁹ Interview in the Netherlands, July 2017.



buffer for Europe. The Netherlands was actively involved in implementing the refugee deal during its presidency of the EU Council in 2016 (European Council, 2016b), which shows, for the most pragmatic reasons, that the country is very likely to avoid losing Turkey as a partner.

The discourses of both governments have gradually become less emotionally driven.²⁰ Still, the politicisation of the "Turkey" subject in the Netherlands has increasingly drifted away from its initial Atlanticist and pro-EU line, or even from its usually compromising tone.²¹ While the Netherlands still officially supports Turkey's EU membership on the condition of fulfilling the "Copenhagen Criteria" and applying reform packages, it is difficult to come across any significant support for the continuation of negotiations among Dutch policymakers at the national and EU levels, let alone sincere and substantial support for membership.

Even though the crisis did not cause a definite rupture in the relations, it will have repercussions on the future of bilateral relations. Unless the Turkish government is willing to re-engage with the EU, mending the political ties will not be a priority, provided that trade and investment ties are preserved.

3.2. France: The good cop?

France is not only one of the largest EU countries but also one where Turkey has been very much part of the public and political debate. Moreover, the incumbent president, Emmanuel Macron, is willing to upgrade the role of France in European affairs. However, compared to previous elections, it is remarkable how little Turkey, and more specifically EU-Turkey relations, formed part of the political debate in the 2017 elections. Although domestic politics dominated the campaign, international affairs such as Russia's defiance or the stalemate of the Syria war were discussed more often and candidates attacked each other on those grounds. European integration was also substantially debated but Turkey was no longer part of that conversation.

The debate on Turkey in France is therefore far less intense and far less politicised than in other European countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, which was not the case when Turkey's accession looked possible. In the early 2000s, Turkey was on the lips of French politicians and dozens of books were published, most of these focusing on Turkey's intention to become a member of the EU. France was the epicentre of the European discussion on Turkey as part of broader debates on the enlargement of the EU, on the perceived loss of influence of France in European affairs and on multiculturalism and identity (Billion, 2016). That was a time when the recognition of the Armenian genocide or the Kurdish issue also mobilised a vocal segment of French society and its political class, which advocated putting more pressure on Turkey's EU bid. Turkey was also instrumentalised in intra-party rivalries. Nicolas Sarkozy, for instance, used his opposition to Turkey's EU membership in a fairly successful attempt to undermine the authority of his predecessor, Jacques Chirac, while federating a traditionally atomised French right. Although

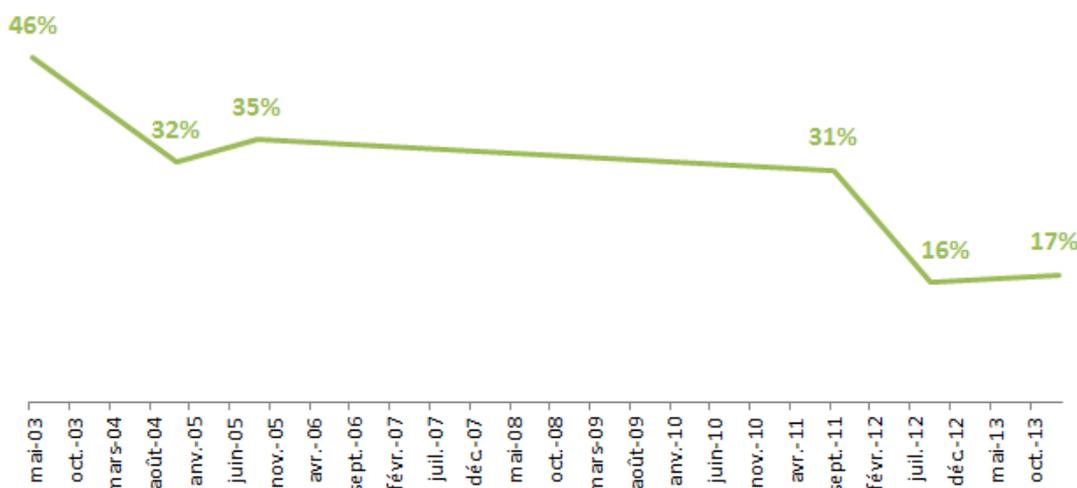
²⁰ The changing tone of Rutte and Erdoğan regarding bilateral relations indicates the mutual desire to normalise relations. See, for example, Rutte's interview for *de Telegraaf* (2018) and Erdoğan's interview for *Hurriyet Daily News* (2017).

²¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands published a statement on 5 February 2018 stating that the Dutch government had decided to officially withdraw from Ankara the Netherlands' ambassador, who has not had access to Turkey since March 2017.



less prominently, Turkey was also raised in the political quarrels over the leadership of the French Socialist Party.

Graph 3. French public opinion on support for Turkey's accession from 2003 to 2013 (percentage in favour of accession)



Source: Ifop (2014), "Les Européens et l'entrée de la Turquie dans l'Union Européenne", January 2014, http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/2475-1-study_file.pdf.

Nobody in Paris now seems interested in fighting their political rivals according to their positions on Turkey. Why? There are three complementary hypotheses. The first is that Turkey's accession is no longer perceived as a realistic scenario and therefore does not need to be discussed.²² Not even Marine Le Pen, a far-right politician, tried to exploit this issue, which differed from the strategies of her counterparts in Germany and the Netherlands. A Turkish diplomat explained this paradox by saying that Marine Le Pen wants France out of the EU and thus cares little about who wants to join.²³ An independent expert, however, argued that this had more to do with the abundance of other topics in the political and social agenda that she could more easily exploit and, perhaps, a degree of respect or even admiration for Erdoğan's way of ruling Turkey.²⁴

The second hypothesis is the willingness of French elites to isolate bilateral relations from political quarrels. The bilateral agenda includes national security issues and booming business relations. Arguably, the fight against terrorism has become a priority for the French government. A French official explained that French decision-makers acknowledge Turkey's cooperation in preventing or intercepting foreign fighters and returnees.²⁵ This became particularly true after France suffered a series of terrorist attacks from 2015 onwards. Several sources confirmed that from that moment on cooperation between French and Turkish counter-terrorist and intelligence sources intensified and that some who shared positions regarding the future of Syria also favoured strong coordination on hard security issues. Turkey's cooperation on managing refugees and securing

²² This idea was mentioned in several interviews with French and Turkish stakeholders in June and July 2017.

²³ Interview conducted in Paris, July 2017.

²⁴ Interview conducted in Paris, July 2017.

²⁵ Interview conducted in Paris, July 2017.



Europe's borders is often mentioned.²⁶ Although France is not directly affected, it is well aware that this is a major concern for many European partners.

The third complementary hypothesis is that debates around the Armenian genocide no longer shape the agenda. This is the result of the French Constitutional Council decision in January 2017 decriminalising the denial of the Armenian genocide as an unnecessary and disproportionate attack on the freedom of speech. Although as a presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron visited the Armenian genocide memorial and already as president vowed to declare an official date to commemorate it, French and Turkish diplomatic circles believe that this issue is no longer irritating France-Turkey relations. A businessman particularly active in developing bilateral relations with Turkey affirmed that "Macron has erased this question" from the agenda.²⁷

How important is Macron's profile in explaining the French stance on EU-Turkey relations? Several informants expressed the belief that Macron was the best possible outcome for Turkey when compared to other candidates in the French elections. One of the rare times he mentioned Turkey as a presidential candidate, Macron stated that Europe's doors should remain open to Turkish democrats (*Le Monde*, 2017). As president, he also stated that he wished to avoid a rupture because Turkey "is an essential partner in many crises we jointly face, specifically the migration challenge and the terrorist threat" (*Euractiv*, 2017). At the same time, he tried to cultivate bilateral relations with Turkey through regular contacts with President Erdoğan.²⁸ One main topic of conversation was the liberation of jailed French journalists in Turkey. By acceding to his demands, the Turkish government sent the message that it saw France as its ally in Europe.

Macron is trying to reinforce France-Turkey relations, but doing so differently to his predecessors, who managed bilateral relations through the European channel. Sarkozy downgraded bilateral relations by vetoing several of Turkey's negotiating chapters on the grounds that they were directly related to EU membership. Hollande, on the contrary, tried to upgrade relations by lifting the French blockade on one of the chapters. Marc Pierini described this decision as "of great symbolic significance" and a "clear reversal of the French stance" (Carnegie Europe, 2013). Previously portrayed as hostile to Turkey, Ankara started to perceive France increasingly positively and relations became more intense in all flanks. The final test was the decision of the French government to allow pro-AKP politicians to campaign in France in favour of a "yes" vote in the constitutional referendum in April 2017. As president, Macron gambled on strengthening bilateral relations with Turkey while openly dismissing any prospects for accession. Turkish authorities seem willing to dissociate their new-found friendship with France from the EU-accession perspective. As such, Macron urged a stop to the hypocrisy of "thinking that a natural progression towards the opening of new chapters is possible" and suggested rethinking new formulas of dialogue during a joint press conference with President Erdoğan (Elysée, 2018). In contrast to

²⁶ Interviews with French and Turkish stakeholders in June and July 2017.

²⁷ Telephone interview, June 2017.

²⁸ Macron went as far as suggesting in an interview with *Le Point* that the job of a French president was not as "cool" as people may think, as an example he said: "I am the one who has to speak every ten days to Erdoğan".



similar statements made by any other European leader in the past, this statement caused no backlash from Turkey.

3.3. Germany: Losing faith?

While it has been relatively easy for Macron to get away with dismissing Turkey’s eligibility for full membership, this has been a sensitive topic in German-Turkish political relations for many years, particularly during electoral periods in Germany. This has long been a sign of how intimate Turkey’s relationship with Germany has been, which has also always had ramifications for Turkey-EU relations. For instance, significant progress in EU-Turkey relations coincided with the era of the red-green coalition government in Germany between 1998 and 2005. Since Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats (CDU) have been forming the government, accession negotiations have stagnated. Merkel, who is not a strong promoter of Turkish membership of the EU, has only half-heartedly played along in complying with existing path-dependencies.

Even though Turkey was an important topic in the election campaign for all parties in the 19th German Bundestag elections on 24 September 2017, it did not belong to the set of issues that would make or break the coalition deal. This, however, did not necessarily imply business as usual in Germany’s policy on Turkey and EU-Turkey relations. The draft coalition treaty of the SPD and CDU/CSU clearly states that this government would oppose closing any chapters in accession negotiations and opening any new ones. Additionally, it would support visa liberalisation and the extension of the Customs Union only if Turkey complied with all of the required commitments (CDU/CSU & SPD, 2018: 150-151). Thus, the demands are voiced more explicitly and in a stricter manner than before. Additionally, the German minister of foreign affairs, Sigmar Gabriel, elaborated on the idea of structuring EU-Turkey relations using the model of the future EU-UK relationship (Zeit, 2017a), bringing back the idea of a “privileged partnership” despite its outright rejection by the Turkish partners.

Economic relations as well as the Turkish diaspora in Germany, among other factors, make Germany-Turkey relations unique. Germany receives almost 20 percent of Turkey’s total exports to the EU and is by far Turkey’s leading trading partner. It is also the second-largest foreign direct investor in Turkey (Auswärtiges Amt, 2017a; TUIK, 2016c). Moreover, about 3 million inhabitants of Germany have a Turkish background, more than half of whom have obtained German citizenship (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017: 62; Auswärtiges Amt, 2017a). Germany is thus home to the largest total number and greatest share of the estimated 5.5 million people with Turkish roots living in western European countries.²⁹ The number of people of Turkish origin that are eligible to vote in Germany is constantly rising: from about 150,000 in 1998 to about 900,000 in 2017.³⁰

At the same time, opposition to Turkish EU membership is growing among the German population and reached 84 percent in September 2017 (Deutschlandtrend, 2017). Germany’s Turkey and EU-

²⁹ This number is followed by the Netherlands (nearly 400,000), Austria (272,000) and Belgium (156,000) (MFA Turkey, 2017; Statistics Netherlands, 2016; Statistik, Austria 2017; Centre Fédéral Migration, 2016: 60).

³⁰ Information on this number varies between 700,000 and 900,000 depending on the sources.



Turkey policy faces a dilemma: corresponding to the general mood of the German people or trying not to alienate Turkey as an economic and strategic partner and upsetting voters with Turkish backgrounds.

German political parties face this dilemma in different ways. For the SPD, Turkish-German votes matter. Support for the Social Democrats is traditionally high among the Turkish diaspora in Germany. The majority of them initially came to Germany with the so-called *Gastarbeiter* programme in the 1960s and are hence organised within trade unions that find their political partner in the SPD. According to a study of 2016 about 70 percent of people of Turkish origin living in Germany generally prefer to vote for the SPD. The CDU/CSU is at the opposite end of this spectrum with only 6 percent support (SVR, 2016: 14).³¹ Hence, to the Christian Democrats, economic and strategic interests are far more pivotal than Turkish-German votes.

The election manifestos of the political parties in Germany generally include references to the EU-Turkey relationship. In 2017 all manifestos explicitly dealt with this issue. While in 2013 at least the FDP and SPD generally supported Turkish accession to the EU, this support had dissolved by 2017. Positions ranged from the outright rejection expressed by the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and CSU to the CDU and Die Linke's qualified rejection, the demands for termination of accession negotiations in order to requalify the relationship (FDP), and continued accession talks in spite of putting the membership perspective on hold (SPD, Bündnis 90/die Grünen).³² This general critical positioning vis-à-vis Turkey became particularly evident in the TV debate between the candidates from the CDU/CSU, Angela Merkel, and SPD, Martin Schulz, in early September 2017. Surprisingly, it was Martin Schulz who clearly stated that his party would suspend accession negotiations with Turkey. Merkel, although generally taking up that idea, chose her words more carefully by highlighting that Germany could not take that decision alone but would need to find support among the other EU member states (see FAZ, 2017).

While Merkel's statement still complied with the general approach of the CDU to play according to the EU rules in terms of *pacta sunt servanda*, Schulz drastically changed the general position of the SPD. Part of the explanation is that both then party leaders were at the height of their election campaigns and had to counteract the AfD, which was also potentially an additional veto player for Turkish EU membership.

After an intensification of German-Turkish relations in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 a vicious spiral of public criticism and political conflict between Germany and Turkey unfolded in summer 2016 and eventually drove the bilateral political relations to a historic all-time low. The rapid worsening took the form of a long sequence of incidents.³³ In the run-up to the

³¹ That being said, a comparison of voting behaviour in the 2013 and 2017 elections highlights a trend of decreasing support for the Social Democrats from 64 percent to 45.3 percent, while votes for the CDU/CSU increased from 9 percent to 12 percent (*Epoch Times*, 2017; *Zeit*, 2017b).

³² See the 2013 and 2017 party manifestos at http://www.bundestagswahl-bw.de/wahlprogramme_bt2013.html and http://www.bundestagswahl-bw.de/wahlprogramme_bt2017.html.

³³ Among others, were the so-called "Böhmermann affair" in March 2016, when the Turkish president's legal action against abusive criticism by a German satirist fuelled the discussion about the state of freedom of speech and press in Germany and Turkey, and the resolution by the German Bundestag of June 2016 that declared the killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 a genocide (Deutscher Bundestag, 2016).



constitutional referendum in Turkey, relations deteriorated following debates on limiting extraterritorial voting and election campaigning in Germany, which caused Erdoğan to compare German politics to the Nazi regime.

The straw that finally broke the camel's back was Turkey's detention of German journalists with Turkish origins, most prominently Deniz Yücel and Mesale Tolu, and a German human rights activist, Peter Steudtner, at the beginning of 2017. This provoked harsh reactions from the German government, which announced a change in Germany's Turkey policy, including the intensification of official travel warnings, reconsideration of German guarantees for corporate investments in Turkey as well as plans to discuss cancellation of IPA funds for Turkey within the European Council (Auswärtiges Amt, 2017b).

The visits of the ministers of foreign affairs of both countries at the end of 2017/beginning of 2018 and attempts to reassure each other of the relevance of their country's bilateral relations (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2018) were signs of a slow rapprochement between Turkey and Germany after the heated phase of election campaigns of 2017.³⁴ In spite of these softer tones, the developments of 2017 impacted the German-Turkish relationship and Germany's position regarding EU-Turkey relations, and both governments could lose faith in one another as well as in the possibility of revitalising Turkey's accession prospects.

4. Moving forward

In terms of the three ideal-type scenarios - convergence, cooperation and conflict - convergence, implying full membership, is unlikely for the time being if only due to the impact of the political drivers analysed in this paper. This leaves us with the question of whether a conflict scenario where the EU and Turkey would confront each other or a scenario where both compromise on areas of common interest and maintain or even increase the current level of cooperation is more likely.

When we look at the past, we can identify several political changes that have driven relations towards episodic conflicts. The politicisation of "Turkey" in European electoral campaigns, particularly in countries where Turkey has become part of the domestic debates, has played a large role in this. Yet none of the crises that emerged in the last two decades has escalated into full-fledged conflict between Turkey and the EU. A certain level of cooperation has always been maintained, mainly due to the intensity of ties in various areas ranging from security to economics.³⁵ EU countries have not endangered cooperation with Turkey, particularly in the fight against terrorism and border control.

³⁴ Deniz Yücel's release from jail was announced in February, a day after Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım met in Berlin to discuss the case, which the German leader said was burdening ties with Turkey. See: Bloomberg, 2018, "German Journalist Freed in Turkey in Signal of Thaw in Relations", 16 February 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-16/german-journalist-freed-in-turkey-in-signal-of-thaw-in-relations>.

³⁵ Subjects that go beyond the content of this paper, such as trade, energy and security relations between the EU and Turkey, drivers of migration and identity are analysed in great detail in other FEUTURE papers. See: <http://www.feuture.eu/>.



The projection of current political trends in Europe to 2023 suggests that Turkey's prospects for membership will still suffer from the EU's enlargement (or Turkey) fatigue and continuous doubts about the EU's capacity to politically and economically absorb Turkey. In his State of the Union Address in 2017, European Commission President Juncker said that the EU "must maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans", followed by the Commission stating that, with accession negotiations already well underway with Montenegro and Serbia, the EU could become larger than 27 members by 2025 (European Commission 2018: 1-2). The enlargement process towards the Western Balkan countries could happen between now and 2023, excluding Turkey. As a senior Turkish diplomat outlined,³⁶ setting a date for enlarging towards Western Balkan countries before these countries even meet the accession conditions versus the open-ended accession negotiations with Turkey and the EU's lack of conditionality is perceived as double standards by Turkey.

Turkey is likely to remain a topic of debate in Europe and of politicised debate in specific member states as well as the European Parliament. The politicisation of Turkey will continue to affect the course of all technical decisions, as it is currently affecting the implementation of the Customs Union upgrade and visa liberalisation. What is necessary for a change in the EU's approach to these issues is an effort by the Turkish government to improve relations, starting at the bilateral level. In the meantime, European elections are also likely to trigger short-term conflicts between Turkey and various member states. All of this will contribute to the EU's declining political conditionality (see Schimmelfennig, 2003). As a result, we can expect intermittent conflicts in EU-Turkey relations, which will nevertheless do no permanent damage to relations. Economic and security interests will contain the effects of those conflicts. Turkey's disappearance from electoral debates, as already happened in the French elections in 2017, would most likely not be an indication of the EU's or member states' willingness to re-engage with Turkey and its membership process, but rather an indication of Turkey's EU membership not being considered an option anymore.

What would intensify the likeliness of a sustained conflict scenario? One possibility would be a less compromising attitude of the EU towards Turkey. This could happen if the EU manages to recover from its crises faster than expected and makes human rights a central tenet of its foreign policy. Ankara could initially react to this by cutting some of its cooperation mechanisms with the EU. Yet even under these circumstances, a conflict scenario where both sides actively try to undermine each other's interests would still be unlikely. Structural needs would force both sides to normalise relations sooner or later.

What could reverse the current trends and the most likely scenario, opening up space for systematic cooperation, or even convergence? If the EU consistently evolved towards crafting a differentiated integration model, this could provide a way out of the current stagnation of the accession negotiations. In this case, as long as the discussion is not about Turkey joining the EU's quasi-federal core, opposition to Turkey's integration within the EU could wane and Turkey could find its place within the EU's variable geometries.

This will not come without a debate on how to operationalise a differentiated integration model. The abolition of the current general conditions for new member states to apply the EU's *acquis communautaire* is a highly unlikely option. The EU might consider establishing some sort of a "Core

³⁶ Ankara, February 2018.



Europe" but, at the same time, not approve of a "l'Europe à la carte" that would allow member states to cherry-pick individual policies. A differentiation model like this would threaten integration instead of facilitating it. This model is not likely to take the form of "privileged partnership" either, as this proposal has constantly been disqualified by successive Turkish governments in the past. This poses two main challenges. The first is to find a model acceptable to both parts and congruent with the EU treaties. One idea that has come up is "associate membership". This suggests annual meetings of the European Council with Turkey, observer status for Turkish MPs in the European Parliament and for government officials in the Council if the agenda relates to relevant policy areas of the associate membership, as well as in the relevant consultative processes of the European Commission and Council working groups. Turkey would also have to acknowledge the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the EU.³⁷ One of the differences between an "associate membership" and a "privileged partnership" is that participating in the "associate membership" model would not exclude a full membership perspective.

The second challenge is to agree on the policy areas qualifying for Turkey's integration within the EU system. There are several policy areas in which mutual interests and forms of cooperation already exist, such as economic integration, foreign and security policy, energy cooperation and justice and home affairs.³⁸ Related to the first challenge, there will be a need to set up new institutional frameworks. As it would not be a full member state, Turkey would not get the right to participate in the EU's legislative and decision-making procedures, but the level of its association would require it to have access to EU institutions.

Currently, similar issues feature prominently in the negotiations on the UK's exit from the EU. The respective solutions for the institutional framework might provide a source of inspiration for an alternative and possible association of Turkey with the EU. In light of these considerations, European politics play a larger role in the development of EU-Turkey relations than is often considered. Some of the major boosts and breaks in the relations have been the result of political changes in Europe: the virtuous circle initiated in 1999 was mainly a result of the German elections, whereas the current vicious cycle of stagnant membership negotiations was mainly triggered by a series of political developments in Germany, France and Cyprus. Yet political changes in Europe are a necessary but insufficient condition to reverse these trends. In order to change the dynamics of the current relationship, which is characterised by a mix of cooperation and conflictual elements, two conditions should be met: a change of political direction in the EU and member states, and a reformist Turkish government. The latter is not likely to happen between now and 2023, and even if there was a change of political direction in Turkey, it is unlikely that the EU will be in the state to use this opportunity. Under these circumstances, the only possibility to move relations forward will be new formulas of engagement with the EU which go beyond the "privileged partnership" rhetoric.

³⁷ See Andrew Duff, "The case for an associate membership of the European Union", *European Politics and Policy*, London School of Economics, 2013, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/03/06/associate-eu-membership/>.

³⁸ For a detailed assessment of the potentials of these policy areas see Meltem Müftüler-Bac, "Turkey's future with the European Union: an alternative model of differentiated integration", *Turkish Studies*, 2017.



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ABOUT FEUTURE

FEUTURE sets out to explore fully different options for further EU-Turkey cooperation in the next decade, including analysis of the challenges and opportunities connected with further integration of Turkey with the EU.

To do so, FEUTURE applies a comprehensive research approach with the following three main objectives:

1. Mapping the dynamics of the EU-Turkey relationship in terms of their underlying historical narratives and thematic key drivers.
2. Testing and substantiating the most likely scenario(s) for the future and assessing the implications (challenges and opportunities) these may have on the EU and Turkey, as well as the neighbourhood and the global scene.
3. Drawing policy recommendations for the EU and Turkey on the basis of a strong evidence-based foundation in the future trajectory of EU-Turkey relations.

FEUTURE is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Wessels, Director of the Centre for Turkey and European Union Studies at the University of Cologne and Dr. Nathalie Tocci, Director of Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome.

The FEUTURE consortium consists of 15 renowned universities and think tanks from the EU, Turkey and the neighbourhood.

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