

NAVIGATING GLOBAL TRANSFORMATIONS: TURKEY-EU RELATIONS UNDER THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY AND THE ASSESSMENT OF GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONING AND NORMATIVE ALIGNMENT

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Abstract: This study rigorously analyzes the trajectory of Turkey's European Union accession process since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) assumed power in 2002. The research posits that this period is characterized by a significant evolution in Turkey-EU relations, driven by shifts in global power dynamics, Turkey's increasingly assertive regional posture, and a growing divergence in strategic priorities with Western partners. This evolution marks a departure from the initial membership-oriented momentum towards a more complex, multi-layered strategic partnership paradigm. This new framework presents both novel avenues for cooperation and the potential for profound cleavages. The analysis employs a robust methodological framework, treating key factors such as the AKP's early reform initiatives, inherent structural challenges within the accession negotiations, global systemic transformations, and Turkey's geopolitical re-orientation as independent variables. It simultaneously scrutinizes the resulting shifts in Turkey's political discourse on EU membership, changes in the level of economic integration, and the dynamics of diplomatic engagement as dependent variables. The overarching aim is to contribute a nuanced, objective academic assessment of the intricate nature of Turkey-EU relations during this era, thereby illuminating potential future trajectories for this critical relationship.

Keywords: Turkey-EU Relations, Justice and Development Party (AKP), Geopolitics, Global Transformations, Normative Alignment

НАВИГИРАНЕ НА ГЛОБАЛНИТЕ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ: ОТНОШЕНИЯТА МЕЖДУ ТУРЦИЯ И ЕС ПРИ ПАРТИЯТА НА СПРАВЕДЛИВОСТТА И РАЗВИТИЕТО И ОЦЕНКА НА ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОТО ПОЗИЦИОНИРАНЕ И НОРМАТИВНОТО СЪОТВЕТСТВИЕ

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Резюме: Това изследване анализира траекторията на процеса на присъединяване на Турция към Европейския съюз след идването на власт на Партията на справедливостта и развитието (ПСР) през 2002 г. Авторът приема, че този период се характеризира със значителна еволюция в отношенията между Турция и ЕС, обусловена от промените в глобалната динамика на силите, засилващата се регионална роля на Турция и постепенното разминаване в стратегическите приоритети със западните партньори. Тази трансформация води от първоначалната ориентация към членство към по-сложна и многопластова парадигма на стратегическо партньорство, която

едновременно открива нови възможности за сътрудничество и носи потенциал за задълбочаване на различията. Анализът се основава на ясна методологична рамка, като разглежда като независими променливи ранните реформи на ПСР, структурните предизвикателства в преговорния процес, глобалните системни трансформации и геополитическата преориентация на Турция. Като зависими променливи се изследват промените в политическия дискурс относно членството в ЕС, степента на икономическа интеграция и динамиката на дипломатическите отношения. Целта е да се предложи балансирана и обективна академична оценка на сложния характер на отношенията между Турция и ЕС и да се очертаят възможните бъдещи сценарии за тяхното развитие.

Ключови думи: *Отношения между Турция и ЕС, Партия на справедливостта и развитието (ПСР), геополитика, глобални трансформации, нормативно съгласуване*

Introduction: The Multifaceted Dynamics of Turkey-EU Relations

This article aims to academically examine the complex and multifaceted evolution of Turkey-European Union (EU) relations since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. Within the context of profound transformations in the global system, geopolitical realignments, and shifting dynamics of normative alignment, the analysis will explore how Turkey's trajectory has diverged from its initial EU membership objective towards a complex, multi-layered strategic partnership paradigm. The study will meticulously analyze the fundamental domestic and foreign policy imperatives that have shaped this transformation, offering analytical conclusions regarding the future contours of Turkey-EU relations.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is how Turkey's EU accession process under AKP governance has evolved in response to shifts in global power dynamics, structural transformations within the international system, and potential recalibrations in Turkey's geopolitical positioning. Furthermore, it investigates which core domestic and foreign policy imperatives have driven this evolution and what analytical implications this process holds for the future trajectory of Turkey-EU relations. The core premise is that while Turkey-EU relations initially gained momentum with a clear membership objective during the AKP era, they have progressively deviated from this ideal, influenced by fluctuations in global power balances, fundamental restructurings in the international system, Turkey's increasing regional assertiveness, and the divergence of strategic priorities with the West, thereby evolving towards a complex, multi-layered strategic partnership paradigm.

The focus of this study extends beyond merely examining Turkey-EU relations within a bilateral framework; it also encompasses the decisive impacts of global transformations and geopolitical realignments. While traditional EU integration approaches often concentrate on the candidate country's internal reforms or the EU's enlargement conditions, this analysis

underscores the necessity of a deeper examination into how global power dynamics and geopolitical positioning have fundamentally altered the course of these relations. This expanded perspective ensures that the article transcends a simple "accession process" evaluation, transforming into a comprehensive "geopolitical interaction" analysis. This highlights the significance of external, macro-level changes that directly influence Turkey's domestic policy choices and the EU's enlargement policies.

Foundations of Turkey-EEC/EU Relations (1959–2002)

Turkey's endeavors towards integration with Europe predate the establishment of the Republic, tracing back to the Westernization and modernization movements during the late Ottoman Empire¹. The modern Republic of Turkey sustained this Western orientation, aiming to achieve the level of contemporary civilizations by closely monitoring developments in the international conjuncture². In line with this objective, Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and applied for association with the European Economic Community (EEC), established in 1958, on July 31, 1959³. This application was famously described by the then Prime Minister Adnan Menderes as “Turkey's first step towards Europe”⁴.

Following the EEC Council of Ministers' acceptance of Turkey's application, negotiations commenced, culminating in the signing of the “Agreement Creating an Association between the Republic of Turkey and the European Economic Community” (the Ankara Agreement) on September 12, 1963⁵. This agreement, which entered into force on December 1, 1964, established the legal foundation for the relationship between Turkey and the EU⁶. Article 28 of the Ankara Agreement explicitly stated Turkey's full membership as the ultimate goal, stipulating that “The entry into force of this Agreement⁷ will give rise to the possibility of

¹ Core.ac.uk, "EU Discourse on Turkey Accession Evolution Academic", 2004, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/46721830.pdf> (accessed on February 02, 2025).

² T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, “History of Türkiye-EU Relations”, 2024, Retrieved from https://www.ab.gov.tr/111_en.html, (accessed on February 02, 2025).

³ Ibid; Yüşen, N., "AK Parti Dönemi Türkiye-AB İlişkileri: Normativizm Perspektifinden Bir Değerlendirme", 2024, Akademi.org.tr, (accessed on February 03, 2025).; Bayraklı, E., "AK Parti Döneminde Türkiye-AB İlişkilerinin Değişen Dinamikleri (2002-2018)", ResearchGate, 2019.

⁴ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, Ibid.

⁵ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, Ibid.; Özer, Y., "Türkiye-AB İlişkilerinde Kırılma Noktası: AK Parti Döneminde Yaşanan Gelişmeler ve Güncel Durum", Marmara University, 2023.; Turhan, E., Wessels, W., Müftüler-Baç, M., "Germany, France, and Turkey: A New Triangle of Powers?", Taylor & Francis Online, 2025.; Yüşen, N., Ibid.

⁶ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, Ibid.

⁷ https://www.mfa.gov.tr/a-strategy-for-developing-relations-between-turkey-and-the-european-union_br_proposals-of-turkey_br_july-17_-1998_br_en.mfa, (accessed on February 05, 2025).

Turkey's accession to the Community”⁸. The Agreement envisioned a three-stage process for Turkey's integration into the EEC: a preparatory, a transitional, and a final period⁹.

The preparatory period concluded with the entry into force of the Additional Protocol on November 13, 1970, in 1973, which set the conditions for the transitional period. This phase foresaw the free movement of industrial and agricultural products, as well as persons. From 1971 onwards, the EEC, within the framework of the Additional Protocol, abolished tariff and quantitative restrictions on its imports from Turkey. In return, Turkey was expected to gradually abolish tariffs for EEC industrial products. This process established a 22-year timetable for the creation of a Customs Union¹⁰. However, from the early 1970s to the second half of the 1980s, Turkey-EU relations experienced an unstable course due to political and economic reasons. Notably, relations were formally suspended following the military coup of September 12, 1980¹¹.

Turkey submitted a full membership application to the EEC in 1987, but this application was rejected in 1989¹². Nevertheless, in 1990, the “Turkey package” was adopted, aiming to strengthen relations through the Customs Union¹³. In 1995, the Turkey-EU Association Council finalized the Customs Union agreement¹⁴. However, the 1997 Luxembourg Summit, which excluded Turkey from the list of candidate countries, caused significant disappointment¹⁵. This exclusion intensified suspicions in Turkey regarding the EU's sincerity¹⁶. Despite this, Turkey was officially granted candidate status at the 1999 Helsinki Summit¹⁷. During this period,

⁸ Özer, Y., Ibid.; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, Ibid.

⁹ T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bilge, S., "The Parameters of Turkey's Foreign Policy Under the AKP Governments", UNISCI, 2010.; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, Ibid.

¹² Müftüler-Baç, M., McLaren, L. M., "European Union Policy Changed Considerably Towards Turkey Between 1997 and 1999", *Journal of European Integration*, 25(1), 17–32, 2003.

¹³ Bilge, S., Ibid.

¹⁴ European External Action Service, "European Union and Turkey", 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/turkey/european-union-and-turkey_en?s=230 (accessed on February 05, 2025).; Bilge, S., Ibid.; Yılmaz, K., "The EU–Turkey Customs Union Fifteen Years Later: Better, Yet not the Best Alternative", *South European Society & Politics*, 16(2), 235–249, 2010.; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, “Katılım Müzakerelerinde Mevcut Durum”, 2024, Retrieved from https://www.ab.gov.tr/katilim-muzakerelerinde-mevcut-durum_65.html, (accessed on February 05, 2025).

¹⁵ European External Action Service, 2024. Ibid.; Bilge, S., Ibid.; Müftüler-Baç, M., McLaren, L. M., Ibid.; Real Instituto Elcano, "The EU's Progress Report on Turkey's Accession: Sluggish Steps Forward", 2009, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-eus-progress-report-on-turkeys-accession-sluggish-steps-forward-ari/> (accessed on February 05, 2025).

¹⁶ Bilge, S., Ibid.

¹⁷ AIES, "Turkey's Accession to the EU: A New Impetus for Reforms?", 2005.; European Commission, "Türkiye 2022 Report", 2022, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/64ba2778-89ca-464c-bd26-2ad03ca0b6e2_en?filename=C_2023_8653_F1_ANNEX_EN_V2_P1_3138269.PDF&prefLang=cs (accessed on February 05, 2025).; European External Action Service, Ibid.; European Parliamentary Research Service, "Future EU-Turkey relations", 2018, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/628290/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)628290_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/628290/EPRS_BRI(2018)628290_EN.pdf) (accessed on February 05, 2025).; Bilge, S., Ibid.; Müftüler-Baç, M., McLaren, L. M., Ibid.;

Turkey undertook significant steps in areas such as democratization, human rights, minority rights, and judicial reform¹⁸.

The deep-rooted history of Turkey-EU relations and the explicit “full membership” objective articulated in the 1963 Ankara Agreement¹⁹ underscore that the trajectory during the AKP era is not merely a simple beginning but rather a transformation of a long-standing process. This profound historical foundation positions the evolution of relations during the AKP period as a fundamental shift in a long-held national orientation, emphasizing that the subsequent “deviation” is not merely a slowdown but a change in the very nature of the relationship.

The military coups experienced in the pre-AKP era (Bilge, 2010; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2024a) and the ascent to power of the religiously educated AKP leadership, perceived as less Western-oriented²⁰, highlight the fundamental tension between Turkey's internal political struggles (military tutelage, secular-religious polarization) and its Western orientation. This suggests that the AKP's initial efforts towards EU alignment were not solely driven by an ideological commitment but rather served as a pragmatic tool for internal political consolidation. In a country with a history of military interventions and a strong secular establishment wary of religious parties, robust public support for EU-compliant reforms allowed the AKP to present itself as a democratic and modernizing force, thereby gaining legitimacy in its conflicts with the old order²¹. This indicates that normative alignment was initially viewed more as a means than an end, laying the groundwork for the subsequent transformation.

Yüşen, N., Ibid.; Öniş, Z., Yılmaz, Ş., "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era", *Turkish Studies*, 10(1), 7–24, 2009.

¹⁸ Bilge, S., Ibid.; Öniş, Z., Yılmaz, Ş., Ibid.; Yüşen, N., Ibid.

¹⁹ Özer, Y., Ibid.; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı. Ibid.

²⁰ Heinrich Böll Foundation, "Turkey-EU Relations: Past, Present and Future", 2017, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2017/05/02/turkey-eu-relations-past-present-and-future> (accessed on February 07, 2025).

²¹ Ideas.repec.org, "The Shifting Drivers of the AKP's EU Policy", 2010, <https://ideas.repec.org/p/erp/kfgxxx/p0014.html> (accessed on February 07, 2025).

Table 1: Key Milestones in Turkey-EU Relations (1959-2025)

Year	Event	Description	Sources*
1959	Association Application	Turkey applied for association with the European Economic Community (EEC).	(Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2017; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2024a; Yüßen, 2024)
1963	Ankara Agreement	An Association Agreement was signed between Turkey and the EEC, explicitly setting full membership as the ultimate goal.	(Özer, 2023; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2024a; Turhan et al., 2025; Yüßen, 2024)
1970/ 1973	Additional Protocol	Transitional period conditions were set, and a 22-year timetable for the Customs Union was envisioned.	(T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2024a)
1980	Military Coup	Relations were formally suspended due to political and economic reasons.	(Bilge, 2010; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2024a)
1987	Full Membership Application	Turkey applied for full membership to the EEC.	(Müftüler-Baç & McLaren, 2003; Real Instituto Elcano, 2009)
1995	Customs Union	The Turkey-EU Association Council completed the Customs Union agreement.	(European External Action Service, 2024; Bilge, 2010; Yılmaz, 2010; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2024b)
1997	Luxembourg Summit	Turkey was not included in the list of candidate countries, leading to tensions in relations.	(European External Action Service, 2024; Bilge, 2010; Müftüler-Baç & McLaren, 2003; Real Instituto Elcano, 2009)
1999	Helsinki Summit	Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate country.	(AIES, 2005; European Commission, 2022; European External Action Service, 2024; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; Bilge, 2010; Müftüler-Baç & McLaren, 2003; Öniş & Yılmaz, 2009; Yüßen, 2024)
2002	AKP Comes to Power	The Justice and Development Party came to power, accelerating the reform process with the aim of EU membership.	(Al Qutbah, 2024; Bayrakli, 2019; Bilkent University, n.d.; European Parliament, 2023; Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2017; Ideas.repec.org, 2010; Duran, 2013; MIT Economics, 2015; SETAV, 2023; Wilson Center, 2017)
2004	Decision on Negotiations	The European Council decided that accession negotiations with Turkey could begin in October 2005.	(AIES, 2005; European Commission, 2022; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2008; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; Özer, 2023; Wilson Center, 2017)
2005	Accession Negotiations Begin	Turkey's EU accession negotiations officially commenced.	(Al Qutbah, 2024; Aspenia Online, 2025; Bayrakli, 2019; European Commission, 2022; European External Action Service, 2024; European Parliament, 2022; European Papers, 2017; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2008; European

			Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; FEUTURE Project, 2018; Bilge, 2010; Özer, 2023; Öniş & Yılmaz, 2009; T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2024b; Turhan et al., 2025; Wilson Center, 2017)
2006	Negotiations Stalled	8 chapters were frozen due to Turkey's refusal to apply the Additional Protocol to Cyprus.	(Al Qutbah, 2024; European Commission, 2022; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2008; Wilson Center, 2017)
2016	EU-Turkey Refugee Statement	Signed to curb irregular migration and provide support for Syrian refugees.	(CAJTS, 2024; D-nb.info, 2022; European Commission, 2016; European Parliament, 2022; European Papers, 2017; Eurekalert, 2023; Bilge, 2010; Ismayilzada, 2022; Rumelili & Strömbom, 2016; Swarthmore College, 2017; Taylor & Francis Online, 2021; Şanlıer, 2024)
2018	Accession Negotiations De Facto Frozen	Accession negotiations effectively came to a standstill due to democratic backsliding and rule of law concerns.	(Aspenia Online, 2025; Bayrakli, 2019; European Parliament, 2022; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; European Papers, 2017; FEUTURE Project, 2018; GIS Reports Online, 2023)

Source*: This table was produced by the authors, drawing from a variety of sources in order to compile a comprehensive body of knowledge relevant to its subject.

Table 1 provides a chronological overview of the long and often turbulent trajectory of Turkey-EU relations from 1959 to the present. It highlights foundational steps such as the Ankara Agreement in 1963, which explicitly set full membership as the ultimate goal²². However, the table also illustrates periods of strain, exemplified by domestic political events like the 1980 military coup²³ and the EU's own hesitations in its enlargement policy, such as Turkey's exclusion from the candidate list at the 1997 Luxembourg Summit²⁴. The AKP's ascent to power in 2002 initiated a new phase of accelerated reforms, leading to the formal commencement of accession negotiations in 2005²⁵. Yet, this momentum was short-lived, with the freezing of 8 chapters in 2006 due to the Cyprus issue²⁶ and the de facto freezing of negotiations from 2018 onwards, primarily due to democratic backsliding²⁷. This clearly indicates a shift away from the full membership objective towards a more transactional

²² Özer, Y., Ibid.; T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, Ibid.

²³ Bilge, S., Ibid.; T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, Ibid.

²⁴ European External Action Service, Ibid.; Müftüler-Baç, M., McLaren, L. M., Ibid.

²⁵ Al Qutbah, S., "Looking at Turkish Foreign Policy Under the AKP Rule", Trends Research & Advisory, 2024.; Wilson Center, "The Shifting Drivers of the AKP's EU Policy", 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-shifting-drivers-the-akps-eu-policy> (accessed on February 07, 2025).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0247_EN.html (accessed on February 07, 2025).; Aspenia Online, "EU and Turkey: A Relationship in Search of New Pillars", 2025.

relationship, as evidenced by crisis-driven collaborations like the 2016 EU-Turkey Refugee Statement²⁸.

The Initial Phase of Relations During the AKP Era: Reform and Accession Momentum (2002–2007)

Upon its single-party victory in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) adopted EU membership as a cornerstone of its foreign policy agenda²⁹. This objective served as a crucial pillar of the party's political program, which the AKP strategically leveraged to advance democratic reforms, bolster Turkey's economic and international standing, and consolidate its own political power³⁰. Notably, given the AKP's religiously oriented background, the EU accession process functioned as a vital “buffer”, enabling the party to overcome the distrust of secular segments and to position itself as “democratic reformers” rather than “Islamist zealots”³¹.

The AKP's initial reform agenda was remarkably comprehensive. The party enacted legislative changes aimed at improving human rights, establishing a zero-tolerance policy against torture, expanding freedoms of expression and the press, strengthening freedoms of association and assembly, broadening cultural rights, reinforcing gender equality, and consolidating democracy³². These reforms were accelerated through the enactment of six additional legislative harmonization packages between 2002 and 2006³³. These concerted efforts laid the groundwork for the European Council's decision in 2004 to commence accession negotiations with Turkey in October 2005³⁴.

The formal commencement of Turkey's EU accession negotiations on October 3, 2005, was a direct consequence of these reform efforts³⁵. Concurrently, the “Negotiating Framework Document,” outlining the procedures and principles of the negotiations, was adopted³⁶. The

²⁸ European Commission, "Fourth Report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement", 2016, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0792> (accessed on February 07, 2025).; Ismayilzada, T., "The European Union's Cooperation With Third Countries: Turkey And Libya", *Jurnal Kajian Pemerintah*, 8(2), 65–75, 2022.

²⁹ Al Qutbah, S., *Ibid*; Wilson Center, *Ibid*.

³⁰ *Ibid*.; European Parliament, *Ibid*.

³¹ Ideas.repec.org, *Ibid*.; Wilson Center, *Ibid*.

³² AIES, *Ibid*.; CAJTS, "Analyzing the Copenhagen Criteria and Reforms in the Context of Turkey's Aspiration for EU Membership", 2024, <https://cajts.ablaikhan.kz/index.php/j1/article/download/453/295> (accessed on February 07, 2025).; European Parliamentary Research Service, *Ibid*.; Wilson Center, *Ibid*.

³³ Wilson Center, *Ibid*.

³⁴ AIES, *Ibid*.; European Commission, "Türkiye 2022 Report", *Ibid*.; Özer, Y.; Wilson Center, *Ibid*.

³⁵ Al Qutbah, S., *Ibid*.; European Commission, "Türkiye 2022 Report", *Ibid*.; European External Action Service, "European Union and Turkey", *Ibid*.; Wilson Center, *Ibid*.

³⁶ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, “Katılım Müzakerelerinde Mevcut Durum”, 2024, Retrieved from https://www.ab.gov.tr/katilim-muzakerelerinde-mevcut-durum_65.html, (accessed on February 05, 2025).

initial phase of negotiations, known as screening meetings, took place between 2005 and 2006, with Chapter 25 (Science and Research) being opened and provisionally closed on the very first day³⁷.

This period also coincided with a significant phase of economic growth and productivity enhancement for the Turkish economy³⁸. The Customs Union and the EU accession process bolstered Turkey's competitiveness in the global economy and attracted substantial foreign direct investment (FDI)³⁹. Notably, approximately half of the per capita GDP growth between 2002 and 2006 was attributable to an increase in total factor productivity (TFP)⁴⁰.

Upon the AKP's assumption of power, Turkey was grappling with the severe repercussions of the 2000-2001 economic crises⁴¹. These crises compelled Turkey to undertake comprehensive economic reforms and spurred the Turkish populace to seek political change and a stronger commitment to EU membership⁴². Public support for EU membership surged from 65% in 2002 to 67% in 2003 and further to 71% in 2004, driven by the AKP's reform efforts⁴³. This high level of public support proved to be a critical factor in the AKP's ability to advance its reform agenda. This popular backing provided the party with the political capital necessary to overcome the entrenched secular-military opposition, indicating that public opinion played a more significant role than anticipated in the early Europeanization process⁴⁴.

The AKP's foreign policy objectives also served as a significant driving force behind its EU strategy. The party aimed to expand Turkey's role as a regional leader and a pivotal international actor, viewing EU membership as a supportive element for these ambitions⁴⁵. This period, often referred to as a "golden era"⁴⁶, was characterized by a convergence of mutual interests between the party's internal political consolidation needs (weakening military tutelage,

³⁷ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, "Katılım Müzakerelerinde Mevcut Durum", Ibid.; European Commission, "Türkiye 2022 Report", Ibid.

³⁸ MIT Economics, "The Ups and Downs of Turkish Growth, 2002-2015", 2015, <https://economics.mit.edu/sites/default/files/publications/The%20Ups%20and%20Downs%20of%20Turkish%20Growth%2C%202002-2015%20-%20P.pdf> (accessed on February 07, 2025).

³⁹ MIT Economics, Ibid.; Yılmaz, K., Ibid.; SWP Berlin, "Turkey's Economic Ties with the EU: Implications for the Future", 2024, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024C40/> (accessed on February 07, 2025); Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁴⁰ MIT Economics, Ibid.

⁴¹ Dergipark, "Impact of 2008 Financial Crisis on Turkey's Foreign Policy and EU Relations Academic", 2016, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/255958> (accessed on February 07, 2025); Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ideas.repec.org, Ibid.; Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁴⁵ Al Qutbah, S., Ibid.; MERIP, "The AKP's Foreign Policy as Populist Governance", 2018, <https://merip.org/2018/12/the-akps-foreign-policy-as-populist-governance/> (accessed on February 07, 2025); Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁴⁶ Al Qutbah, S., Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye" Ibid.

appealing to pro-EU voters) and the EU's perception of Turkey as a promising candidate embracing democratic values⁴⁷. This synergy catalyzed rapid progress. The EU accession process appears to have been instrumental for the AKP, serving as a tool to solidify its legitimacy and undermine domestic rivals⁴⁸. This implies that the EU relationship contributed to the improvement of Turkey's institutional structure and rapid economic growth, thereby creating a beneficial cycle for both parties⁴⁹. The AKP's pro-EU stance was rooted more in pragmatism than ideology, leveraging external conditionality for internal political gains. This instrumentalization laid the groundwork for a potential shift in adherence to EU norms, contingent on their continued domestic political utility.

Transformation and Divergence: From Membership Objective to Strategic Partnership (2007–2025)

Shortly after the commencement of accession negotiations in 2005, the AKP's commitment to the EU membership objective began to wane⁵⁰. During this period, significant internal shifts occurred within the party, as then-Prime Minister and later President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan systematically purged internal rivals and began to reverse earlier reforms through constitutional amendments, coupled with allegations of nepotism and corruption⁵¹. This process marked a departure from the party's initial “reformist” image⁵².

These domestic policy changes manifested in an increasing tendency towards the Islamization of society and the promotion of neo-Ottoman propaganda through educational and social engineering programs⁵³. Restrictions on judicial independence, freedom of expression, press freedom, and civil society progressively intensified⁵⁴. Particularly with the transition to a

⁴⁷ Al Qutbah, S., Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye" Ibid.; Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ideas.repec.org, Ibid.

⁴⁹ MIT Economics, Ibid.

⁵⁰ Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁵¹ Bilkent University, "Turkey EU Accession Prospects Future Academic", n.d., <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/items/dbb8a392-f653-41a9-a1fd-b38c5a854988> (accessed on February 09, 2025).; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye" Ibid.; Özkan, A., "The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 with the promise of reforms to further democratic consolidation in Turkey", Taylor & Francis Online, 2023.

⁵² Bilkent University, Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye" Ibid.

⁵³ European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye" Ibid.; Özkan, A., Ibid.; Duran, B., "Understanding the AK Party's Identity Politics: A Civilizational Discourse and Its Limitations", *Insight Turkey*, 15(1), 91–109, 2013.

⁵⁴ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report", 2020, https://www.ab.gov.tr/siteimages/trkiye_raporustrateji_belgesi_2020/turkey_report_30.10.2020.pdf (accessed on February 09, 2025).; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye" Ibid.; CAJTS, "Analyzing the Copenhagen Criteria and Reforms in the Context of Turkey's Aspiration for EU Membership", 2024,

presidential system in 2018, the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judiciary weakened, checks and balances became insufficient, and democratic accountability was largely confined to elections⁵⁵. This institutional transformation deepened Turkey's divergence from fundamental EU democratic norms.

The diminishing support for Turkey among EU member states, statements indicating the open-ended nature of negotiations, and the freezing of 8 chapters due to the Cyprus issue in 2006, contributed to a rise in Euroscepticism among Turks⁵⁶. The EU's internal "enlargement fatigue"⁵⁷ and the perception of "double standards" towards Turkey⁵⁸ further deepened suspicions in Turkey regarding the EU's sincerity⁵⁹. This situation, in turn, undermined confidence in the feasibility of reforms⁶⁰.

Orientalist narratives portraying Turkey as an "outsider" and concepts such as "privileged partnership" or "absorption capacity" exacerbated the structural impediments to full membership. This discourse led to Turkey being perceived as a "cultural and political challenge" to European unity, reflecting an exclusionary European identity that prioritized ethno-religious homogeneity over pluralism⁶¹.

The 2008 global financial crisis exacerbated economic challenges in many EU member states, consequently impacting the EU's enlargement capacity. This crisis compelled Turkey to diversify its export, import, and financial flows⁶². In the post-crisis period, Turkey's economic dependence on the EU diminished, while the number of countries to which it exported significantly increased from 69 in 2003 to 108 in 2022⁶³. This economic imperative provided a

<https://cajts.ablaikhan.kz/index.php/j1/article/download/453/295> (accessed on February 07, 2025).; European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/653662/EXPO_IDA\(2022\)653662_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/653662/EXPO_IDA(2022)653662_EN.pdf) (accessed on February 09, 2025).; Real Instituto Elcano, "The EU's Progress Report on Turkey's Accession: Stalling Reform", 2008, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-eus-progress-report-on-turkeys-accession-stalling-reform-ari/> (accessed on February 09, 2025).

⁵⁵ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report", Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.; European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership". Ibid.

⁵⁶ Al Qutbah, S., Ibid.; European Commission, "Türkiye 2022 Report", Ibid.; Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁵⁷ Dergipark, "AB Genişleme Politikası Türkiye'ye Yönelik Evrimi Akademik", n.d., <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/146008> (accessed on February 09, 2025).; GIS Reports Online, "Turkey-EU relations: A transactional future", 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/turkey-eu-transactional/>, (accessed on February 09, 2025).

⁵⁸ Rumelili, B., Strömbom, L., "How Turks and Europeans perceived each other in cultural and identity terms throughout history", *Open Research Europe*, 3(120), 2024.; Bilge, S., Ibid.; Yüşen, N., Ibid.

⁵⁹ Bilge, S., Ibid.; Yüşen, N., Ibid.

⁶⁰ Bilge, S., Ibid.

⁶¹ Bilge, S., Ibid.

⁶² Dergipark, "Impact of 2008 Financial Crisis on Turkey's Foreign Policy and EU Relations Academic", Ibid.; Dergipark, "Impact of 2008 Financial Crisis on Turkey's Exports to the EU", 2013, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/302953> (accessed on February 09, 2025).

⁶³ SWP Berlin, Ibid.

driving force for Turkey's pivot towards non-Western actors, complementing the pull factors of regional ambitions and ideological shifts.

Turkey's foreign policy has witnessed a discernible "axis shift" away from the West (EU and USA) towards Eurasia⁶⁴, accompanied by increasing regional assertiveness⁶⁵. This indicates an evolution in the AKP's foreign policy framework from "liberal internationalism" (2002–2007) to "civilizational expansionism" (2008–2014), and subsequently to "nationalist expansionism" coupled with "anti-Westernism"⁶⁶. This transformation reflects a deeper ideological recalibration within the AKP, transitioning from pragmatic Europeanization⁶⁷ to a more assertive, populist, and increasingly anti-Western stance⁶⁸. This shift has been further exacerbated by the EU's perceived "double standards"⁶⁹ and "enlargement fatigue"⁷⁰.

The intensification of great power competition within the global system has prompted "middle powers" like Turkey⁷¹ to seek advantages⁷². The "geopoliticization" of the EU's enlargement policy since the late 2010s, while initially revitalizing discussions concerning the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova, has largely excluded Turkey from these deliberations. This suggests that the EU has deliberately "othered" Turkey⁷³ based on perceived security threats and foreign policy divergences⁷⁴. This points to a deeper, identity-based dimension of exclusion. If enlargement is now driven by geopolitical and security concerns, Turkey's

⁶⁴ Akkoyunlu, K., "The Five Phases of Turkey's Foreign Policy Under the AKP", *Social Research*, 88(2), 243–268, 2021.; Erşen, E., Köstem, S. (Eds.), "Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order" (1st ed.), Routledge, 2019.; Middle East Institute, "The Rise of Eurasianism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Can Turkey Change its Pro-Western Orientation?", 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rise-eurasianism-turkish-foreign-policy-can-turkey-change-its-pro-western-orientation> (accessed on February 15, 2025).; Huang, Q., Gönenç, D., Ergenç, C., Ünlüsoy, S., "Introduction to the Special Issue "Turkey, Asia, and the EU in a Changing Global Order"", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 2024.

⁶⁵ European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", *Ibid.*; *Mediterra Journal*, "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Mediterranean: An Analytical Overview", 2025, <https://www.mediterrajournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/TURKISH-FOREIGN-POLICY-IN-THE-MEDITERRANEAN-AN-ANALYTICAL-OVERVIEW.pdf> (accessed on February 15, 2025).; MERIP, *Ibid.*; Bilge, S., *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Çetin, E., "AKP'nin Popülist Dış Politikası", *İstanPol*, 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683849.2025.2497850?src=exp-la> (accessed on February 15, 2025).; MERIP, *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ideas.repec.org*, *Ibid.*; *Wilson Center*, *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye". *Ibid.*; Middle East Institute, *Ibid.*; SWP Berlin, *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Bilge, S., *Ibid.*; Yüşen, N., *Ibid.*; Rumelili, B., Strömbom, L., "How Turks and Europeans perceived each other in cultural and identity terms throughout history", *Open Research Europe*, 3(120), 2016.

⁷⁰ Dergipark, "AB Genişleme Politikası Türkiye'ye Yönelik Evrimi Akademik", *Ibid.*; GIS Reports Online, *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Akkoyunlu, K., *Ibid.*; Congressional Research Service, "Turkey (Türkiye): Major Issues and U.S. Relations", (CRS Product No. R44000), 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44000> (accessed on February 15, 2025).

⁷² Congressional Research Service, *Ibid.*; GIS Reports Online, *Ibid.*

⁷³ SWP Berlin, "EU-Turkey Relations: Between Confrontation and Rebuilding Trust", 2020, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C62/>, (accessed on February 15, 2025).; Rumelili, B., Strömbom, L., *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", *Ibid.*; Rumelili, B., Strömbom, L., *Ibid.*

exclusion, despite its strategic importance, can be interpreted as a reflection of Eurocentric biases and a tendency to view Turkey as a "threat to European security and stability"⁷⁵.

Key Dimensions of Turkey-EU Relations: Analysis and Assessment

Normative Alignment and the Rule of Law

The annual progress reports (referred to as "Progress Report" until 2016, and subsequently "Country Report") prepared by the European Commission serve as unilateral documents assessing Turkey's compliance with the Copenhagen criteria⁷⁶. These reports consistently indicate "serious backsliding" in areas such as democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights⁷⁷. These consistent expressions of regression signal a systematic erosion of the normative alignment that underpinned the early accession process. This represents not merely a slowdown but an active reversal, rendering the "full membership" objective increasingly unsustainable from the EU's perspective.

- **Democracy and Separation of Powers:** With the transition to a presidential system in 2018, significant deficiencies in the functioning of Turkey's democratic institutions and a concentration of power at the presidential level have persisted. The Turkish Parliament's oversight capacity over the executive has weakened, and political polarization has hindered constructive dialogue. Recommendations from the Council of Europe's Venice Commission regarding the presidential system have largely remained unaddressed⁷⁸. This situation indicates that the institutional architecture of the Turkish state has become fundamentally incompatible with EU democratic norms, posing a deeper, systemic impediment to accession beyond specific legal reforms. The EU's concerns extend beyond individual human rights violations to focus on the very structure of the state.

⁷⁵ SWP Berlin, "EU-Turkey Relations: Between Confrontation and Rebuilding Trust", Ibid.; Rumelili, B., Strömbom, L., Ibid.; Bilge, S., Ibid.

⁷⁶ European External Action Service, "European Union and Turkey", Ibid.; İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi, "AB Türkiye İlerleme Raporu 2020 Akademik Analiz", 2020, <http://ilefdergisi.ankara.edu.tr/en/download/article-file/2079727> (accessed on February 15, 2025).; T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı. (n.d.). TR-EU Financial Co-operation. Retrieved from https://www.ab.gov.tr/tr-eu-financial-co-operation_5_en.html (accessed on February 17, 2025).

⁷⁷ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report". Ibid.; European External Action Service, "Key findings of the 2023 Report on Türkiye", 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/key-findings-2023-report-t%C3%BCrkiye_en (accessed on February 15, 2025).; European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.

⁷⁸ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report". Ibid.; European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.

- **Judicial Independence:** "Serious backsliding" in the judicial system has continued, with systemic concerns regarding the independence of the judiciary persisting. The structure and selection processes of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors have not been reformed to strengthen its independence. Dismissals within the judiciary, often conducted without adherence to due process, have led to concerns about self-censorship and intimidation within the legal profession⁷⁹.
- **Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms:** The deterioration of human rights and fundamental freedoms has continued. Many measures introduced during the state of emergency have remained in force, exerting profound and devastating effects. Restrictions on freedoms of expression, the press, association, and assembly have persisted⁸⁰. Concerns have also been raised regarding Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and discrimination against minority groups, particularly Alevis and Roma⁸¹. Turkey's ranking in press freedom indices has consistently declined⁸².
- **Fight Against Corruption:** Corruption remains widespread and a significant concern. The absence of a comprehensive anti-corruption strategy and action plan indicates a lack of political will to decisively combat corruption⁸³. Progress has not been made on limiting the immunity of members of parliament or on legislation concerning election campaign financing⁸⁴.

⁷⁹ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report". Ibid.; European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.

⁸⁰ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report". Ibid.; European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.; European Parliamentary Research Service, "Future EU-Turkey relations", Ibid.; Real Instituto Elcano, Ibid.; CAJTS, Ibid.

⁸¹ CAJTS, Ibid.; European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report". Ibid.; Real Instituto Elcano, Ibid.

⁸² İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi, Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.

⁸³ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report". Ibid.; European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.

⁸⁴ Real Instituto Elcano, Ibid.

Table 2: Evolution of EU Progress Reports' Assessments of Turkey (2005–2023)

Year	Report Name	General Assessment (Political Criteria)	Prominent Concerns/Areas of Regression	Sources**
2005	Progress Report	Sufficient progress noted for the start of negotiations.	Human rights, judicial reform, military influence on politics.	(European Parliamentary Research Service, 2008; Wilson Center, 2017)
2008	Progress Report	Limited progress, serious concerns persisted.	Freedom of expression, judicial independence, military interference in political life, corruption, minority rights.	(Real Instituto Elcano, 2008)
2016	Country Report	Progress in reducing irregular migration flows, but democratic backsliding commenced.	Rule of law, fundamental rights, freedom of expression, pressure on civil society.	(European Commission, 2016; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, n.d.)
2020	Country Report	Serious backsliding continued, EU concerns unaddressed.	Democratic standards, rule of law, fundamental rights, judicial independence, corruption, press freedom (154th out of 180 countries).	(European Commission, 2020; İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi, 2020)
2022	Country Report	Democratic backsliding continued, structural deficiencies persisted.	Serious deficiencies in democratic institutions, structural flaws in the presidential system, judicial independence, pressure on civil society, situation in the Southeast.	(European Commission, 2022; European Parliament, 2023)
2023	Country Report	Worrying and sustained backsliding, no concrete steps taken.	Democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights, judicial independence (non-compliance with ECtHR rulings), corruption, human rights situation, uneven electoral playing field.	(Anadolu Ajansı, 2023; European External Action Service, 2023; IKV, 2023)

Source**: This table was produced by the authors, drawing from a variety of sources in order to compile a comprehensive body of knowledge relevant to its subject

Table 2 vividly illustrates the evolving assessments of Turkey in the EU Progress/Country Reports. The process began with "sufficient progress" noted in 2005 for the start of negotiations⁸⁵. However, this trajectory shifted to "limited progress" by 2008⁸⁶, and notably, from 2016 onwards, the reports consistently highlighted "democratic backsliding"⁸⁷. The 2020 and 2022 reports underscored the continuation of "serious backsliding" in areas such as the rule of law, fundamental rights, and judicial independence⁸⁸. The 2023 report, in particular,

⁸⁵ European Parliamentary Research Service, "The EU's Progress Report on Turkey's Accession: Stalling Reform", 2008, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2008/408992/EPRS_BRI\(2008\)408992_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2008/408992/EPRS_BRI(2008)408992_EN.pdf) (accessed on February 15, 2025).; Wilson Center, Ibid.

⁸⁶ Real Instituto Elcano, Ibid.

⁸⁷ European Parliamentary Research Service, "Future EU-Turkey relations", Ibid.; European Commission, "Fourth Report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement", Ibid.

⁸⁸ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report", Ibid.; European Commission, "Türkiye 2022 Report", Ibid.

emphasized "worrying and sustained backsliding"⁸⁹, clearly indicating Turkey's increasing divergence from the Copenhagen political criteria and its failure to meet fundamental EU normative expectations. This table demonstrates how the EU's normative conditionality towards Turkey has eroded over time, leading to an impasse in relations based on political criteria.

Economic Integration and Trade Dynamics

The Customs Union (1995) has played a pivotal role in integrating Turkish industries into European supply chains and significantly increasing bilateral trade volumes⁹⁰. This agreement enhanced competitive pressure on the Turkish manufacturing industry, fostering long-term productivity improvements and contributing to the transformation of the Turkish economy through the implementation of a competition policy. The EU remains by far Turkey's largest trading partner, serving as the primary destination for Turkish exports and the most significant source of imports and investments. Furthermore, Turkey holds the position of the EU's 5th largest trading partner⁹¹.

During the initial period of AKP rule (2002–2007), the EU accession process and the Customs Union bolstered Turkey's competitiveness in the global economy and attracted substantial foreign direct investment. However, following the 2008 global financial crisis, Turkey's exports to the EU were adversely affected, necessitating Turkey to diversify its trade to mitigate economic vulnerabilities and explore new markets⁹². Consequently, the number of countries to which Turkey extensively exported increased from 69 in 2003 to 108 in 2022. This indicates that despite political friction and democratic backsliding, economic integration through the Customs Union remains a powerful binding force and an area of mutual interest⁹³. This creates a "decoupling" effect, where economic ties persist and even deepen despite the deterioration of political and normative alignment. Economic interdependence exhibits significant inertia, even amidst strained political relations.

The asymmetrical structure of the Customs Union has been a persistent source of structural complaint for Turkey. The fact that the EU has concluded Free Trade Agreements

⁸⁹ Anadolu Ajansı, "AB Komisyonu 2023 Türkiye Raporunu Açıkladı", 2023.; European External Action Service, "Key findings of the 2023 Report on Türkiye", Ibid.; IKV, "IKV Monthly Newsletter - December 2023", 2023, https://www.ikv.org.tr/images/files/ikv_monthly_103_december.pdf (accessed on February 15, 2025).

⁹⁰ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı. Katılım Müzakerelerinde Mevcut Durum, Ibid.

⁹¹ Yılmaz, K., Ibid.; SWP Berlin, "Turkey's Economic Ties with the EU: Implications for the Future", Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.; European Commission, "Türkiye-EU High-Level Trade Dialogue", 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_1704 (accessed on February 20, 2025).

⁹² Dergipark, "Impact of 2008 Financial Crisis on Turkey's Exports to the EU", Ibid.; Dergipark, "Impact of 2008 Financial Crisis on Turkey's Foreign Policy and EU Relations Academic", Ibid.

⁹³ SWP Berlin, "Turkey's Economic Ties with the EU: Implications for the Future", Ibid.

(FTAs) with third countries without Turkey's involvement or its ability to negotiate equivalent agreements has created a structural disadvantage for Turkey. This asymmetry, coupled with Turkey's efforts to diversify its exports, highlights Turkey's strategic imperative to reduce its economic vulnerability and potentially renegotiate the terms of the Customs Union⁹⁴. This implies that while economic ties remain robust, the terms of the relationship are a source of friction and a potential area for future strategic shifts.

Table 3: Turkey's Foreign Trade with the EU and Other Regions (Selected Years, AKP Era)

Year	Turkey Total Foreign Trade Volume (Billion \$)	EU's Share in Turkey's Trade (Average %)	Coverage Ratio (%)	Sources***
2003	116	~50	68.1	(Dergipark, 2013; SWP Berlin, 2024)
2007	277	~50	61.3	(Dergipark, 2013)
2013	403.4	Declining Share	60.3	(Dergipark, 2013)
2022	-	41.3 (Exports)	-	(SWP Berlin, 2024)

Source***: This table was produced by the authors, drawing from a variety of sources in order to compile a comprehensive body of knowledge relevant to its subject.

Table 3 illustrates the growth in Turkey's total foreign trade volume and the evolution of the EU's share in this trade during the AKP era. The total foreign trade volume increased from \$116 billion in 2003 to \$277 billion in 2007, reaching \$403.4 billion in 2013. During this period, the EU's share in Turkey's trade remained around an average of 50%, but it showed a declining trend from 2013 onwards. By 2022, 41.3% of Turkey's exports were still directed to the EU. The decrease in the coverage ratio (exports covering imports) from 68.1% in 2003 to 61.3% in 2007, and its stabilization at 60.3% in 2013, indicates that while the Customs Union deepened economic integration, Turkey faced certain challenges in its foreign trade balance. These figures demonstrate that despite political tensions, the EU remains Turkey's most significant economic partner. However, Turkey's efforts to expand its trade partners due to global crises and strategic diversification are also evident.

Diplomatic Engagement and Crisis Management Strategies

In Turkey-EU relations, particularly after the stagnation of accession negotiations, High-Level Dialogue (HLD) mechanisms have served a crucial function⁹⁵. These mechanisms have

⁹⁴ Yılmaz, K., Ibid.

⁹⁵ European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.; Sanayi.gov.tr, "Bilim ve Araştırmada İlk Yüksek Düzeyli Diyalog", 2022, <https://www.sanayi.gov.tr/medya/haber/bilim-ve-arastirmada-ilk-yuksekk-duzeyli-diyalog>, (accessed on February 20, 2025).; T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği

been structured around various thematic areas, including Political Dialogue, Energy, Transport, Climate, Migration and Security, Science and Research, Agriculture, and Health. These dialogues have contributed to uncovering the broad potential for cooperation in areas of mutual interest⁹⁶. The European Council has regularly addressed Turkey in its agenda in recent years, making swift decisions, particularly in the context of the migration crisis, military operations in Syria, and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. This indicates a shift in the relationship from a comprehensive accession framework to an ad-hoc, crisis-oriented, and transactional mode of engagement⁹⁷. This implies that even with formal accession negotiations stalled, both sides acknowledge the necessity of maintaining channels to manage pressing issues. Cooperation, in this context, often stems from immediate needs rather than a long-term shared vision of full integration⁹⁸.

- **2016 EU-Turkey Refugee Statement:** This statement successfully reduced irregular migration flows during the 2015 refugee crisis⁹⁹. The agreement stipulated the return of all irregular migrants entering Greece from Turkey to Turkey, in exchange for the resettlement of one Syrian refugee from Turkey to the EU for every person returned. Additionally, the EU pledged to accelerate the visa liberalization roadmap and allocate €6 billion to Turkey to manage the refugee crisis. However, this statement faced significant criticism regarding human rights and international. The agreement was criticized for turning migrants into a

Başkanlığı. (n.d.). TR-EU Financial Co-operation., Ibid.; Daily Sabah, "Türkiye, EU hold 3rd high-level dialogue on migration & security", 2025, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-eu-hold-3rd-high-level-dialogue-on-migration-security> (accessed on June 6, 2025).

⁹⁶ Sanayi.gov.tr, Ibid.

⁹⁷ European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.; GIS Reports Online, Ibid.

⁹⁸ European Parliamentary Research Service, The European Council as a key driver of EU-Turkey relations, 2021, Retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/694203/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)694203_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/694203/EPRS_BRI(2021)694203_EN.pdf), (accessed on February 20, 2025).

⁹⁹ D-nb.info, "The European Union's Cooperation With Third Countries: Turkey And Libya", 2022, <https://d-nb.info/1271150239/34> (accessed on February 20, 2025).; European Commission, "Fourth Report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement", Ibid.; European Papers, "The EU-Turkey Agreement: A Controversial Attempt at Patching up a Major Problem", 2017, <https://www.europeanpapers.eu/en/europeanforum/eu-turkey-agreement-controversial-attempt-patching-up-major-problem>, (accessed on February 20, 2025).; Eurekalert, "EU-Turkey deal did not curb irregular migration but produced a surge in lives lost at sea in Central Mediterranean", 2023, <https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/1087753>, (accessed on February 20, 2025).; Swarthmore College, "The EU-Turkey Refugee Deal: A Failure of Protection", 2017, <https://works.swarthmore.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=swarthmoreirjournal>, (accessed on February 20, 2025); Taylor & Francis Online, "The EU's Effectiveness in Building Societal Resilience in Crisis Contexts: The Case of Forced Displacement in the Eastern Mediterranean", 2021, Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2021.1918109>, (accessed on February 20, 2025).

"bargaining chip in international relations"¹⁰⁰ and for the EU's "burden-shifting" of humanitarian responsibilities onto Turkey. This indicates that while the agreement achieved short-term EU objectives, it compromised normative principles and contributed to a "crisis of trust"¹⁰¹ by reinforcing the perception of "unfair treatment" in Turkey¹⁰².

- **Eastern Mediterranean Dispute:** Tensions intensified with the discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the region, exacerbated by Turkey's "Blue Homeland" doctrine¹⁰³ and unilateral drilling activities. The EU called for respect for the sovereign rights of its member states, Greece and Cyprus, while also emphasizing the need to maintain dialogue with Turkey¹⁰⁴. While some EU countries, such as France, adopted a harder stance, Germany advocated for a dialogue-based approach. This crisis even raised the possibility of military conflict between NATO allies Greece and Turkey¹⁰⁵.
- **Syria and Libya Crises:** Turkey's military interventions in Syria and Libya, while causing tensions with the EU, also presented opportunities for cooperation, particularly in areas where strategic interests converged, such as the maritime jurisdiction agreement in Libya. The EU underscored the importance of cooperation with Turkey for ensuring stability in these regions. Turkey's intervention in Libya was perceived as part of its broader pursuit to secure its geopolitical interests in the Eastern Mediterranean¹⁰⁶.

Table 4: Turkey-EU High-Level Dialogues and Crisis Management Examples (AKP Era)

Date	Dialogue/Event Type	Key Issues/Crisis	Outcome/Significance	Sources*****
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¹⁰⁰ Şanlıer, G., "The Financial Instruments of the European Union, Specifically the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT), Have Been Significant Tools in Shaping Turkey's Migration Policies", *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 8(1), 65–75, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Akgül Açıkmeşe, S., "The Future of Turkey-EU Relations: Sinem Akgül Açıkmeşe", *Global Panorama*, 2023.

¹⁰² GIS Reports Online, Ibid.

¹⁰³ *Mediterra Journal*, Ibid.; Khoma, N., "Neo-Ottomanism as the Basis of Turkey's Middle East Policy", *Історико-політичні проблеми сучасного світу: Збірник наукових статей*, 42, 99, 2020.; SWP Berlin, "EU-Turkey Relations: Between Confrontation and Rebuilding Trust", Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ *Mediterra Journal*, Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ SCIRP, "The Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute is an ongoing and complex conflict involving competing claims to maritime boundaries and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) by several countries in the region", 2024, <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=142040> (accessed on February 20, 2025); Turhan, E., Wessels, W., Müftüler-Baç, M., Ibid.; European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.; SWP Berlin, Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ LSE, "Turkey's engagement with Libya and the geopolitics of the eastern Mediterranean", 2022, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/2022-SU-SuslerTurkeyLibya-01a.pdf> (accessed on February 20, 2025).

2005 October	Accession Negotiations Commencement	Accession process, 35 chapters.	Negotiations officially began, Chapter 25 opened and closed.	(European Commission, 2022; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2024c)
2015 December	First EU-Turkey Summit	Migration, counter- terrorism.	Joint Action Plan activated, decision to enhance dialogue channels.	(European Commission, 2022; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021)
2016 March	EU-Turkey Refugee Statement	Irregular migration, refugee crisis.	Irregular crossings decreased, but faced human rights criticisms, promises unfulfilled.	(D-nb.info, 2022; European Commission, 2016; European Papers, 2017; Eurekalert, 2023; Ismayilzada, 2022; Swarthmore College, 2017; Taylor & Francis Online, 2021; Şanlıer, 2024)
2016 January	High-Level Political Dialogue	Political relations.	Decision to enhance dialogue channels.	(T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, n.d.)
2016 January	High-Level Energy Dialogue	Energy cooperation.	Potential for cooperation in energy emphasized.	(T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, n.d.)
2016 April	High-Level Economic Dialogue	Economic relations.	Aimed to enhance economic cooperation.	(T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, n.d.)
2019 November	EU Sanctions Framework	Illegal drilling activities in Eastern Mediterranean.	Framework for targeted measures against Turkey adopted.	(European Commission, 2022)
2021 March	European Council Conclusions	Relations with Turkey.	Desire to launch a "positive agenda," phased and proportionate cooperation.	(European Commission, 2022; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021)
2021 September	High-Level Climate Dialogue	Climate change.	A new dialogue mechanism was launched.	(European Commission, 2022; İklim.gov.tr, 2024; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, n.d.)
2021 October	High-Level Migration and Security Dialogue	Migration and security.	Dialogue continued.	(European Commission, 2022; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, n.d.)
2022 November	High-Level Science, Research, Technology and Innovation Dialogue	Science and research.	A new dialogue mechanism was launched.	(European Commission, 2022; Sanayi.gov.tr, 2022; T.C. Dışışleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, n.d.)

Source****: This table was produced by the authors, drawing from a variety of sources in order to compile a comprehensive body of knowledge relevant to its subject.

Table 4 illustrates the evolution of diplomatic interactions and crisis management strategies in Turkey-EU relations during the AKP era. Following the commencement of accession negotiations in 2005¹⁰⁷, the period from 2015 onwards saw a greater focus on "High-Level Dialogues" and summits, primarily centered on crisis management and areas of mutual interest. The 2016 EU-Turkey Refugee Statement¹⁰⁸, while successful in reducing irregular migration, faced severe human rights and international law criticisms and reinforced the perception of migrants being used as a "bargaining chip"¹⁰⁹. The EU's adoption of a sanctions framework in 2019 due to drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean reflects the tensions in relations and the EU's stance against unilateral actions. Conversely, the expressed desire to launch a "positive agenda" in 2021 and the establishment of new dialogue mechanisms in areas such as climate, migration, security, and science¹¹⁰ indicate that pragmatic cooperation continues and even expands, despite the diminished focus on full membership. This table clearly demonstrates that the relationship has evolved into a "conflictual cooperation" model¹¹¹, characterized by crisis management and the prioritization of shared interests.

Conclusion

During the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era, Turkey-EU relations have undergone a significant evolution, shifting from an initial strong commitment to full membership towards a complex, multi-layered, and transactional strategic partnership paradigm. This transformation has been shaped by the intricate interplay of both domestic political dynamics and structural changes within the international system.

In its early years in power (2002–2007), the AKP strategically utilized the EU membership objective as a pragmatic tool to consolidate its domestic political legitimacy, curtail military tutelage, and accelerate economic reforms. The comprehensive legal reforms undertaken during this period, coupled with high public support for EU membership, paved the way for the commencement of accession negotiations, marking a "golden era" in relations. This

¹⁰⁷ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, "Türkiye-AB Yüksek Düzeyli Diyalog Toplantıları", 2024, Retrieved from https://www.ab.gov.tr/turkiye-ab-yuksek-duzeyli-diyalog-toplantilari_51725.html, (accessed on February 20, 2025).; European Commission, "Türkiye 2022 Report", Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ European Commission, "Fourth Report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement", Ibid.; D-nb.info, Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ European Papers, "The EU-Turkey Agreement: A Controversial Attempt at Patching up a Major Problem", Ibid.; Şanlıer, G., Ibid.

¹¹⁰ İklim.gov.tr, "AB -Türkiye İklim Değişikliği Hibe Programı (AB-TR CCGP) için son başvuru 16 Aralık", 2024, <https://iklim.gov.tr/ab--turkiye-iklim-degisikligi-hibe-programi-ab-tr-ccgp-haber-433>, (accessed on February 20, 2025).; European Commission, "Fourth Report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement", Ibid.; Sanayi.gov.tr, Ibid.

¹¹¹ European Parliament, "EU-Turkey relations: A complex and challenging partnership", Ibid.

synergy, driven by the EU's perception of Turkey as a promising candidate embracing democratic values, facilitated rapid progress¹¹².

However, a notable divergence in relations became apparent after 2007. Turkey experienced a significant regression in democratic standards, the rule of law, and fundamental rights, with the transition to a presidential system weakening the separation of powers and intensifying concerns regarding judicial independence¹¹³. The EU's annual progress reports consistently documented this regression, indicating a systematic erosion of normative alignment¹¹⁴. This situation, combined with the EU's discourse of "enlargement fatigue" and the perception of "double standards"¹¹⁵, deepened distrust in Turkey regarding the EU's sincerity. The "geopoliticization" of the EU's enlargement policy since the late 2010s, which largely excluded Turkey from renewed discussions, further accentuated the identity-based dimension of exclusion¹¹⁶.

Shifts in global power dynamics also played a critical role in this evolution. The 2008 global financial crisis diminished the EU's economic attractiveness and compelled Turkey to diversify its economic and political relationships¹¹⁷. This led to Turkey's foreign policy shifting away from the West towards Eurasia and other regional actors, driven by a pursuit of "strategic autonomy" and "regional assertiveness"¹¹⁸. Turkey's foreign policy choices, such as the "Blue Homeland" doctrine¹¹⁹ and military interventions in Syria and Libya, generated tensions with the EU in regions like the Eastern Mediterranean¹²⁰.

Despite these political and normative frictions, economic integration and trade ties have remained robust. The Customs Union has been instrumental in integrating Turkey into EU supply chains and increasing trade volumes, with the EU remaining Turkey's largest trading partner¹²¹. However, the asymmetrical nature of the Customs Union has been a structural

¹¹² Al Qutbah, S., Ibid.; Wilson Center, Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.

¹¹³ European Commission, "Turkey 2020 Report", Ibid.; European Parliament, "Motion for a European Parliament Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Türkiye", Ibid.

¹¹⁴ European External Action Service, Ibid.; T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, "No: 312, Avrupa Birliği Komisyonu 2022 Türkiye Raporu Hk.", 2022.

¹¹⁵ Bilge, S., Ibid.; Rumelili, B., Strömbom, L., Ibid.; Yüşen, N., Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Bilge, S., Ibid.; Rumelili, B., Strömbom, L., Ibid.; SWP Berlin, Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Dergipark, "Impact of 2008 Financial Crisis on Turkey's Foreign Policy and EU Relations Academic", Ibid.; Dergipark, "Impact of 2008 Financial Crisis on Turkey's Exports to the EU", Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Erşen, E., Köstem, S. (Eds.), Ibid.; Akkoyunlu, K., Ibid.; Middle East Institute, Ibid.; Huang, Q., Gönenç, D., Ergenç, C., Ünlüsoy, S., Ibid.

¹¹⁹ SWP Berlin, "EU-Turkey Relations: Between Confrontation and Rebuilding Trust", Ibid.

¹²⁰ LSE, Ibid.

¹²¹ SWP Berlin, "Turkey's Economic Ties with the EU: Implications for the Future", Ibid.

grievance for Turkey, highlighting the need for potential renegotiation of future economic relations¹²².

Diplomatic engagement, particularly after the stagnation of accession negotiations, has been maintained through "High-Level Dialogues" and crisis management mechanisms. While the 2016 EU-Turkey Refugee Statement successfully reduced irregular migration, it faced human rights criticisms and reinforced the perception of migrants being used as a "bargaining chip"¹²³. This indicates that the relationship has transformed from a comprehensive integration objective to an ad-hoc, crisis-oriented, and transactional mode of engagement¹²⁴.

In conclusion, Turkey-EU relations during the AKP era can be characterized by a paradigm of "conflictual cooperation"¹²⁵. Despite profound divergences in fundamental values and normative alignment, and amidst geopolitical rivalries, essential cooperation persists in areas of mutual interest such as economic interdependence, migration management, and counter-terrorism. Although Turkey's full membership perspective is de facto frozen, both parties are cognizant of the significant costs associated with a complete rupture of this complex relationship¹²⁶. Future relations are expected to progress within a pragmatic and multi-layered strategic partnership framework, characterized by deepening cooperation in specific areas and ongoing divergences in others, rather than a pursuit of full membership¹²⁷. This aligns with the EU's increasing tendency to view Turkey as a "key strategic partner" rather than solely an accession candidate¹²⁸.

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¹²² Yılmaz, K., Ibid.

¹²³ European Papers, Ibid.; Şanlıer, G., Ibid.

¹²⁴ GIS Reports Online, Ibid.

¹²⁵ FEUTURE Project, "Synthesis Paper: A Dynamic Association Framework amidst Conflictual Cooperation", 2018, https://feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/monteus/user_upload/FEUTURE_Synthesis_Paper.pdf, (accessed on February 25, 2025).

¹²⁶ Aspenia Online, Ibid.; GIS Reports Online, Ibid.

¹²⁷ FEUTURE Project, Ibid.

¹²⁸ European External Action Service, "European Union and Turkey", Ibid.

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