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*Erhan İçener\**

## **Surviving a Coma? Türkiye-EU Relations in Times of Crises (2005–2022)**

### **Abstract**

Türkiye's EU membership negotiation process has been comatose since its early years. Now, in 2022, the seventeenth year of negotiations, the final destination of Türkiye's EU journey is still far from certain. And recent debates on Türkiye–EU relations focus on *whether* Türkiye should be an EU member rather than *why* or *when*. There has been increasing criticism directed at each other and waning interest in Türkiye's EU integration while the EU and Türkiye have faced major crises in the last two decades. This article aims to analyse key factors and issues influencing Türkiye's EU accession process on the road to the current stalemate since the beginning of accession negotiations in 2005: (a) the Europeanisation of the Cyprus issue (the role of EU Member States and conditionality), (b) de-Europeanisation in Türkiye (the role of conditionality), (c) the return of geopolitics (the role of security considerations and contextual changes), and (d) the July 15<sup>th</sup> failed coup attempt (the role of conditionality and contextual changes). It finally explores the EU's commitment to enlargement and debates on its alternatives (the role of Member States, and EU institutions and narratives).

**Keywords:** Türkiye, Turkey, European Union, Enlargement, Cyprus

### **Introduction**

Türkiye's EU membership negotiation process has been comatose since its early years. Türkiye–EU relations and European integration *per se* have faced several crises since Türkiye began accession negotiations in

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2005. Those of note are the Cyprus-issue-related crises in the enlargement process and the Eastern Mediterranean, the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, the Syrian refugee crisis, the July 15<sup>th</sup> failed coup attempt in Türkiye, “backsliding” regarding Türkiye’s alignment with Copenhagen political criteria, Covid-19, and the rise of far-right/populism in European politics. Indeed, these were existential crises. All have impacted Türkiye–EU relations and the EU’s enlargement policy to a certain extent. As of June 2022, 16 of the 35 negotiating chapters have been opened and only one chapter has, provisionally, been closed. In 2018, the Council of the European Union (2018, point 35) noted that Türkiye has been “moving away” from the EU; hence, accession negotiations “effectively come to a standstill” and “no further chapters can be considered for opening or closing”. The EU has since reiterated this position. As a response, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018) accused the EU of not being “fair and honest” with Türkiye and stated that the EU’s allegations are “hypocritical and inconsistent”. Thus, the dominant mood between the parties is one of mutual distrust, and Türkiye’s prospects of joining the EU are gloomy. The final destination of Türkiye’s EU journey, seventeen years after its beginning, is still far from certain.

Türkiye is a unique case with its history and experience in the EU enlargement process. The EU mostly singled out Türkiye as a +1 country among the 12 other candidates in the eastern enlargement narrative. Although a merit-based approach is the norm in the ongoing enlargement process and discourse, the EU again singles out Türkiye as a +1 country among the 6 other Western Balkan countries. Countries that were part of the eastern enlargement round joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Croatia, which had begun accession negotiations on the same night as Türkiye, joined the EU in 2013. And it will not be surprising to see the other Western Balkan countries joining the EU before Türkiye. The recent debates on Türkiye–EU relations focus on *whether* Türkiye should be an EU member rather than *why* and *when*. There has been increasing criticism directed at each other and waning interest in Türkiye’s integration with the EU. Both Türkiye and the EU bear responsibility for reaching the current impasse. However, Türkiye officially remains part of the EU accession process, and neither side has pulled the plug.

This paper focuses on Türkiye–EU relations beginning with accession negotiations in October 2005. It bases its analysis on the variables influencing applicants’ progress on the way to membership (İçener, 2009; İçener, Phinnemore and Papadimitriou, 2010; Phinnemore and İçener, 2016). And it looks at the key factors shaping Türkiye’s EU negotiation process on the road to the current stalemate, namely: (a) the Europeanisation

of the Cyprus issue [the role of EU Member States and conditionality], (b) de-Europeanisation in Türkiye (the role of conditionality), (c) the return of geopolitics (the role of security considerations and contextual changes), and (d) the July 15<sup>th</sup> failed coup attempt (the role of conditionality and contextual changes). It finally explores the EU's commitment to enlargement and debates on its alternatives (the role of Member States, and EU institutions and narratives).

The years 2004 and 2005 witnessed very lively debates on Türkiye's eligibility for EU membership, alternatives to Türkiye's EU membership and the potential wording/content of the negotiation framework for Türkiye. These debates and the experienced difficulty in reaching a consensus on the negotiation framework for Türkiye on the night of October 3, 2005, signalled that EU accession negotiations for Türkiye would not be problem-free. Considering what Türkiye needs to do to transform itself into an EU Member State and the opposition to Türkiye's EU membership and enlargement in certain EU Member States, one expects Türkiye's accession negotiations to be protracted and politically problematic both in Türkiye and the EU. That said, there was also a limited hope for progress based on what Türkiye had achieved between 1999 and 2004 in order to meet the Copenhagen political criteria (Müftüler-Baç, 2005). These hopes were raised by assuming that conditionality is crucial for progress in accession negotiations and that Türkiye is committed to joining the EU. But the increasing "nationalization" of enlargement policy (Hillion, 2010), with Member States' established veto power and growing interest in using the enlargement process to solve their bilateral problems with negotiating countries, further politicised accession negotiations. Accordingly, the use of the carrot of membership to solve international conflicts between an EU Member State and a negotiating country preceded the EU's classical and natural requirement to harmonise with the EU *acquis* to progress towards membership. In the case of Türkiye's negotiation process, it was the consequences of the EU's acceptance of the Greek-Cypriot-led Republic of Cyprus as an EU member without a solution as regards the island that put Türkiye–EU relations into a coma (İçener, 2018).

### **The Europeanisation of the Cyprus Issue**

Since the Cypriot accession to the EU in 2004, Türkiye has been in a position that does not recognise one of the members of the Union that it is trying to join. And that EU member has a right to veto Türkiye's progress in the negotiations and membership. The EU's attempt to play

a catalyst role in solving the Cyprus problem by offering EU membership to Cyprus did not work. On the contrary, Cyprus's EU membership without a solution further complicated the dynamics of Türkiye's EU accession process and the Cyprus talks. Since their application for EU membership in 1990, the Greek Cypriot side aimed to Europeanise the Cyprus problem. And the EU Member State of Greece supported this policy. Türkiye and the Turkish Cypriot side underlined that the Cyprus issue is a problem that needs to be negotiated and solved under the aegis of the UN. However, the Helsinki European Council's declaration stating that settlement on the Cyprus issue would not be a precondition for the accession of the Republic of Cyprus (Council of the European Union, 1999, point 9(b)) made it a *de facto* condition for Türkiye's EU membership process. This conditionality was formally experienced in practice since the Greek-Cypriot-led Republic of Cyprus joined the EU on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004 despite the Greek Cypriot rejection of the EU-backed UN-brokered Annan plan. With their accession to the EU, Greek Cypriots gained leverage to use against Türkiye and officially made the EU a party to the conflict.

The impact of the Cyprus issue was felt just after the beginning of negotiations with the EU's response to Türkiye's non-compliance with the obligation to implement the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement to open its ports and airports to Cyprus. The European Council, in December 2006, decided that no decisions would take place on opening eight chapters, and no chapters would be closed in negotiations until Türkiye fulfils its commitments related to the Additional Protocol (Council of the European Union, 2006, pp. 7–8). The European Council considered the areas covered by these eight chapters related to Türkiye's non-compliance with the Additional Protocol.<sup>1</sup> And linking the closure of negotiations with compliance with Türkiye's commitments related to the Additional Protocol in practice means that Türkiye cannot join the EU until the settlement of the Cyprus issue. In December 2009, the Cypriot government decided to block six more chapters.<sup>2</sup> This group of chapters is of particular importance as negotiations in these chapters are crucial for the Europeanisation of Türkiye (Chapter 23 on judiciary and fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> These chapters are: Chapter 1: the free movement of goods, Chapter 3: the right of establishment and freedom to provide service, Chapter 9: financial services, Chapter 11: agriculture and rural development, Chapter 13: fisheries, Chapter 14: transport policy, Chapter 29: customs union, and Chapter 30: external relations.

<sup>2</sup> These chapters are: Chapter 2: the freedom of movement for workers, Chapter 15: energy, Chapter 23: judiciary and fundamental rights, Chapter 24: justice, freedom, and security, Chapter 26: education and culture, and Chapter 31: foreign, security and defence Policy.

rights and Chapter 24 on justice, freedom, and security) and cooperation to deal with common challenges for the EU and Türkiye (Chapter 15 on energy, and Chapter 31 on foreign, security and defence policy). The research on CEEC enlargement shows that when there is no credible accession perspective and conditionality, the candidate countries are less likely to keep reform momentum for Europeanisation (Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier, 2008; Börzel et al., 2015). Therefore, blocking so many key chapters in accession negotiations cancels out the role of conditionality in Türkiye's accession negotiations.

Another Cyprus-related issue impacting Türkiye's accession negotiations has been the discovery of hydrocarbons offshore of the island of Cyprus. The discovery caused tensions over maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean. It also added a new dimension to disputes between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot sides; Greece and Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Qatar, Lebanon, Libya, and international oil/energy companies are also part of the issue. The EU membership process was a missed opportunity for a peaceful settling of the conflict in Cyprus. But sharing hydrocarbons could act as a catalyst to solve the Cyprus issue and create a common peaceful future in the Eastern Mediterranean (Gürel, Mullen, 2014; Olgun, 2019). However, the unilateralism of the Greek Cypriot side to prove their sovereignty over the island and maritime zones, and the consequent challenge of the Turkish Cypriot side to such unilateral actions with the support of Türkiye dashed such hopes. The EU has been criticising Türkiye regarding its drilling activities and political moves concerning the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean. As Türkiye did not shy away from its drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, the EU agreed to suspend the meetings of the Association Council and high-level dialogue with Türkiye in July 2019 (Council of the European Union, 2019, point 4). The EU stood "in full solidarity" with the Greek-Cypriot-led Republic of Cyprus and Greece and condemned Türkiye for its "illegal activities" and "violation of international law" (Council of the European Union, 2020). Solidarity is an EU value. But as noted, the EU became part of the international conflict by accepting a divided Cyprus as an EU member. This policy increased the asymmetrical relationship between the Greek and Turkish-Cypriot sides (İçener, 2018) and between the EU and Türkiye.

All sides, naturally, are trying to defend their national interests. The Greek Cypriots and Greece, as EU members, use Türkiye's accession process to strengthen their positions and maximise their interests in their bilateral problems with Türkiye and the Turkish Cypriots. Their veto power offers them this opportunity. Türkiye evaluates the EU's

approach as “biased” and “illegal” and expects the EU to act as “an honest broker” (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). As long as the Cyprus issue and the Greek-Turkish bilateral problems continue, the EU’s and Türkiye’s expectations of each other seem unrealistic. The cost of all this is the diminishing prospect of Türkiye’s EU membership. And the lack of a credible and realistic membership perspective results in alienation and frustration among Turkish political actors and public opinion. What Türkiye and the Turkish Cypriot side have been experiencing regarding the Cyprus issue despite their active support to the EU-backed Annan Plan is a bitter disappointment and strengthens the arguments of Eurosceptic actors in Türkiye. Repeating the same positions over the years caused a feeling of “exhaustion” as former Turkish Cypriot Minister of Foreign Affairs and the negotiator for the Cyprus problem Kudret Özersay (2012) argued concerning the Cyprus talks. Indeed, the Europeanisation of the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean contributed to this feeling of exhaustion in the long-lasting Cyprus talks and Türkiye’s journey to EU membership. Subsequently, Türkiye has hardened its position on the Cyprus issue, and EU membership requirements are no longer a priority for Turkish domestic policy and foreign policy choices.

### **De-Europeanisation in Türkiye**

The negotiation framework for Türkiye states that the negotiations will be guided by Türkiye’s progress particularly in the Copenhagen criteria, its commitment to good neighbourly relations and determination to solve any border disputes, support for the solution of the Cyprus problem and normalisation of bilateral relations with all EU Member States (Council of the European Union, 2005, point 6). As shown above, the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean with the Greek Cypriots and Greece blocked negotiations. Hence, the role of the Copenhagen criteria and conditionality in guiding the progress of Türkiye’s negotiation process became rather obsolete. Türkiye’s accession process lost its carrot and stick mechanism. During domestic and international crises, the AK Party was left to its own devices to speed up or slow down the reform process or Türkiye’s Europeanisation. Öniş (2015) classifies the AK Party rule into three sub-periods: (a) 2002–2007: the party’s golden age (b) 2007–2011: a period of stagnation and (c) 2011 – present: a period of decline. And he observes “a real change of mindset” – a shift towards “conservative globalism via the Asian route” with “an overriding emphasis on rapid economic development in the context of a rather minimalistic understanding of democratic rights and institutions” (Öniş, 2015, p. 24). In recent years,

Turkey’s “quest for strategic autonomy” in foreign policy has followed this mindset change by loosening ties with its western partners and getting closer to authoritarian, non-western powers (Kutlay, Öniş, 2021).

There has been a visible loss of momentum and backsliding in the AK Party’s record in meeting the democratic standards of the EU since the beginning of accession negotiations. Indeed, domestic troubles such as the closure case about the party in the Constitutional Court, the military’s e-coup attempt against the party, the Gezi Park protests, and the internal political fight with the Gülen movement – later officially named the Fethullahist Terror Organization, FETO, by the Turkish authorities – made the AK Party and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan enter into a struggle for survival. Thus, the AK Party showed statist tendencies to consolidate its power as opposed to its earlier zeal for the democratisation of Türkiye. The observers of Turkish politics termed the backsliding in the democratic nature of Türkiye as an “authoritarian turn” (Çınar, 2018), an “illiberal turn” (Bechev, 2014), and a “drift toward competitive authoritarianism” (Özbudun, 2015). Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber (2016, p. 5) argue that Türkiye has been experiencing a process of “de-Europeanisation” since 2005, “a loss or weakening of the EU/Europe as a normative/political context and as a reference point in domestic settings and national public debates”. Significant points of criticism are Erdoğan’s reactions to the Gezi Park protests, his majoritarian understanding of democracy, issues regarding freedom of the press, an imposition of a ban on social media sites like Twitter and YouTube, issues concerning separation of powers, problems in the rule of law, and a failure to deliver the promise of a new civilian and democratic constitution. Indeed, the AK Party and Erdoğan’s struggle for survival became an actual question of survival due to a coup attempt on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The AK Party further developed nationalist and statist discourse and policies in the post-July 15<sup>th</sup> period in partnership with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). The governing alliance of the AK Party and the MHP portrayed the constitutional move to a Turkish-style presidential system under the strong leadership of Erdoğan as a necessity to deal with internal and external threats to the Turkish state and democracy. These developments were initially evaluated as a form of stagnation and, later, a retreat in the Europeanisation of Türkiye.

In its 2021 Türkiye report, the European Commission (2021) identified “deficiencies” in the functioning of democratic institutions and the presidential system in Türkiye. Key issues that the European Commission criticised were: the centralisation of power, the lack of effective separation of powers, the weakening of local democracy, backsliding



in the judicial system since 2016 with an emphasis on the lack of the judiciary's independence, the deterioration of human and fundamental rights, the judiciary's loyalty to international and European standards, the accountability and transparency of public institutions, and Türkiye's low alignment with the EU's common foreign, security and defence policies or its priorities. Türkiye rejected the European Commission's assessment on the political criteria, the judiciary, and fundamental rights arguing that they are "unjust", "unfounded", and "disproportionate", "disregarding the challenges faced by Turkey and the threats posed by terrorist organisations" and "not taking into consideration the specific conditions of Turkey" (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). During its early years in power, the AK Party, with its commitment to meet the Copenhagen political criteria, was a potent challenger to the national security understanding that acted as a stumbling block to democratisation and reforms in Türkiye. However, following the Gezi Park protests, the July 15<sup>th</sup> coup attempt, and international security risks associated with terrorist activities and conflicts in the Middle East, this time, the AK Party deployed arguments securitising the EU's expectations about membership requirements. The AK Party's perception of a lack of EU support and understanding towards Türkiye when facing domestic and international crises threatening its survival is one factor that alienates Türkiye from its European journey. Clearly, Türkiye not only lost its motivation for Europeanisation without a credible enlargement process, but also returned to the national security syndrome of the 1990s "framing the need for Turkey to be a 'strong unitary nation state' as a *fait accompli* of Turkey's geography" (Bilgin, 2007, p. 753), and seeing the reforms needed to meet EU membership criteria clashing with Türkiye's national interests and security.

The lessons learnt from eastern enlargement, especially the rule of law crises in Hungary and Poland, led the EU to strongly emphasise issues concerning the judiciary and fundamental rights (Soyaltin-Colella, 2022). That is why the EU's revised enlargement strategy prioritises these issues for the Western Balkan countries and Türkiye. If the negotiations were opened in Chapter 23 on the judiciary and fundamental rights and Chapter 24 on justice, freedom, and security, the EU would have effective mechanisms to encourage and accelerate reforms in these areas. However, this is not possible due to the veto of the Republic of Cyprus. This position leads Türkiye, rightly or wrongly, to question the sincerity of the EU in its constant criticisms of the judiciary, the rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights. And Eurosceptic actors in Türkiye use the EU's handling of Türkiye to promote anti-Western/European public opinion when it faces domestic

and international crises with increasing securitisation of all contested issues between Türkiye and the EU.

## **The Return of Geopolitics**

Türkiye's accession negotiations have been problematic due to the Cyprus issue and Türkiye's problems concerning EU membership conditionality. Despite the European Parliament's recommendation to suspend accession negotiations with Türkiye, the accession process and the prospect of Türkiye's EU membership are still alive (European Parliament, 2019). Türkiye–EU relations are in a state of suspended animation, but the EU truly keeps Türkiye on continued life support in times of crisis. Here, security considerations and geopolitics play a key role in keeping channels of dialogue and influence open. This rationale behind the EU's approach toward Türkiye can be traced back to the Commission's Opinion on Türkiye's application for membership in 1989. In its Opinion, the Commission emphasised the EU's interests in "pursuing its cooperation" and "intensifying its relations" with Türkiye by referring to its "strategically important geopolitical position" (European Commission, 1989, point 12). The EU sees a strategic interest in keeping Türkiye associated with itself and not losing it even if Türkiye moves away from the EU or when there is no political will to progress on either side. One example was the EU's Positive Agenda initiative launched in May 2012. The Commission stated that "building on joint achievements and joint strategic interests", the Positive Agenda aimed to "bring fresh dynamics and new momentum", "find the way back to re-energised European–Turkish dynamism" and to put the accession process "back on track after a period of stagnation" (European Commission, 2012). Clearly, the Commission tried to find an innovative way to continue the alignment process on eight unopened or blocked chapters.<sup>3</sup> Another important example of security considerations to give impetus to Türkiye's accession process is the refugee crisis. The European Council, in October 2015, recognised the need to "re-energise" Türkiye's accession process to ensure its cooperation for tackling the refugee crisis (Council of the European Union, 2015a, point 2a). The first EU–Türkiye Summit was held in November 2015. In a letter to the then Turkish Prime Minister

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<sup>3</sup> These eight chapters are: Chapter 3: the right of establishment and freedom to provide services, Chapter 6: company law, Chapter 10: information society and media, Chapter 18: statistics, Chapter 23: judiciary and fundamental rights, Chapter 24: justice, freedom, and security, Chapter 28: consumer and health protection, and Chapter 32: financial control.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, Commission President Jean Claude Juncker (2015) stated that this summit would be “putting new and fresh energy into the accession process”.

In the tenth year of negotiations, the rise of international terrorism and the refugee crisis, originating from areas bordering Türkiye, led the EU to engage with Türkiye to get its support to deal with threats to the EU. Moreover, these security considerations gave the accession process and Türkiye–EU relations the kiss of life. The EU agreed to hold regular high-level summits with Türkiye to discuss cooperation issues such as foreign and security policy, counter-terrorism, trade, economy, and energy. It pledged to open Chapter 17 on economic and monetary policy. The European Commission committed itself to work for preparations to open negotiations on five chapters: Chapter 15 on energy, Chapter 23 on the judiciary and fundamental rights, Chapter 24 on justice, freedom, and security, Chapter 26 on education and culture, and Chapter 31 on foreign, security and defence policy. A statement following the EU–Türkiye summit in November 2015 noted this preparatory work and indicated the EU’s readiness to open further chapters in the first quarter of 2016 (Council of the European Union 2015b, point 4). The EU declared its intention to lift visa requirements for Turkish citizens by October 2016 when Türkiye met the criteria for visa liberalisation. Chapter 17 on economic and monetary policy and Chapter 33 on financial and budgetary provisions were opened in December 2015 and June 2016, respectively. Despite the problems in Türkiye–EU relations, security considerations and the need to cooperate with Türkiye to deal with challenges stemming from the Middle East led the EU to agree on a refugee deal and activated the accession process. However, this honeymoon period did not last long.

### **The July 15<sup>th</sup> Failed Coup Attempt**

On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Türkiye experienced a failed coup attempt. Türkiye is no stranger to military coups, but considering the evolution of democracy in Türkiye and following the substantial reforms on civil-military relations required to meet the Copenhagen political criteria, there was a general feeling that the period of coups was over. The events of July 15<sup>th</sup> proved that that feeling had been rather naïve. That said, the same experience and emotions led the Turkish people to be out on the streets to defend the elected government (Çağlıyan İçener, 2016). Certainly, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 was a turning point in the recent history of Türkiye–EU relations (İçener, 2016). One profound impact is the rise of anti-Westernism and Euroscepticism in Türkiye following the failed coup attempt. This rise

is mainly related to the EU's weak gesture of solidarity with the elected Turkish government. Political declarations of support to the elected government were not followed by high-level visits from EU institutions and Member States to Türkiye. And more importantly, certain EU countries provided a haven for the coup plotters and the people investigated by the Turkish judiciary for their role in the coup attempt.

To fight against the coup plotters, Türkiye, as expected, adopted emergency measures. And in a short period, the EU's focus turned to the Turkish government's post-coup policies. The Turkish people prevented the coup and protected the democratic regime on the night of July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016. But in the eyes of the EU, Türkiye was still a candidate country that needed to act in line with membership criteria. The quality of the regime was as critical as its nature. Therefore, all statements of coup condemnation coming from the EU institutions and key figures were followed by the calls to return to the rule of law, respect democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, the right to a fair trial, and the separation of powers (Council of the European Union, 2016; European Parliament, 2016; EU Monitor, 2016). As noted above, for the Turkish government, the issue at stake was its survival and Türkiye's independence. Subsequently, the Turkish government dismissed the EU's criticisms over backsliding and deficiencies in Turkish democracy for not considering the realities of Türkiye. The lack of membership perspective resulted in the loss of the EU as a normative reference point for Türkiye. Türkiye's independent foreign policy clashing with the EU's foreign policy priorities exacerbated this situation. Türkiye's further de-Europeanisation eliminated the hopes for re-energising accession negotiations and opening more chapters. The relations between Türkiye and the EU evolved from the context of integration via membership to cooperation via partnership.

### **Commitment to Enlargement and Debates on Its Alternatives**

Since the eastern enlargement, enlargement policy is not a priority on the EU's agenda. The EU's enlargement fatigue and reservations about its integration capacity are constantly highlighted. There is also the crisis haunting the policy of enlargement and European integration itself; the rise of populism and the far-right. The impact of eastern enlargement on the EU and potential Turkish membership played a crucial role in discussions to shape the referendums on the Constitutional Treaty, the Lisbon Treaty, and Brexit. The Eurozone crisis, the Syrian refugee crisis, and finally, the impact of the COVID-19 empowered nationalist and Eurosceptic arguments.

Anti-immigrant and Islamophobic feelings influenced public opinion. All of these informed the preferences of EU Member States. Hence, we see a more reserved approach to EU enlargement from the Member States.

Considering the rise of China and Russia, there is more emphasis and interest in geopolitical considerations in the EU's foreign and security policy and its enlargement policy at the institutional level in recent years. Both President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi underlined the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of Western Balkans during the discussions on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (European Commission, 2020a). Petrovic and Tzifakis (2021) argued that this institutional geopolitical thinking did not deliver actual results as the EU Member States do not share the same enthusiasm for enlargement and use the accession process for their national interests. The preferences of France, Greece, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Bulgaria on the Western Balkan countries can be given as examples. Evidently, there is no consensus among the EU Member States on the EU's commitment to the accession of Western Balkan countries, let alone Türkiye. In the case of Türkiye's accession process, in addition to the positions of Cyprus and Greece, France's position should be noted. France declared, in 2007, that they vetoed the opening of accession negotiations in five chapters with Türkiye.<sup>4</sup> It later lifted its veto in two of these five chapters.<sup>5</sup> France also opposed opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in June 2018 and October 2019 (Peel and Hopkins, 2019). It highlighted the importance of the EU's integration capacity and also triggered the debate on a reformed, more demanding, and rigorous approach to EU enlargement.

In the revised methodology of enlargement announced in 2020, the European Commission (2020b; 2020c) only targets the Western Balkans and underlines the central role of the rule of law and fundamentals of functioning of democratic institutions. The documents aiming to enhance the accession process and methodology of enlargement do not even mention Türkiye. And the EU has no political will to open Chapters 23 and 24 that can induce Türkiye to accelerate reforms in the rule of law and fundamental rights. In the current context, when accession

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<sup>4</sup> The five chapters are: Chapter 11: agriculture and rural development; Chapter 17: economic and monetary policy, Chapter 22: regional policy and coordination of structural instruments; Chapter 33: financial and budgetary provisions, and Chapter 34: institutions.

<sup>5</sup> These two chapters are: Chapter 17: economic and monetary policy (opened in December 2015), and Chapter 33: financial and budgetary provisions (opened in June 2016).

negotiations are not active, EU leaders deal with the issues of the rule of law and fundamental rights as part of the *dialogue* between the EU and Türkiye (European Commission, 2021, 119).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, since 2016, the European Commission’s progress reports on Türkiye start with the same sentence describing the current context of the relationship: “Turkey remains a key *partner* for the European Union” (European Commission, 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020d; 2021).<sup>7</sup> The EU – Türkiye Statement of November 2015 highlighted the need for strategic cooperation through high-level dialogue on areas of common interest to “explore the vast potential of Turkey–EU relations, which has not been realised fully yet” (Council of the European Union, 2015b, point 3). Indeed, the developments following the July 15<sup>th</sup> coup attempt interrupted the potential impact of geopolitical and security considerations to re-energise Türkiye’s accession process. Instead, the result was a functional relationship and cooperation based on strategic partnership and bypassing conditionality requirements for membership (Saatçioğlu, 2020).

Recent years have witnessed an increase in academic studies focusing on the future of Türkiye’s integration with the EU and alternatives to membership. There is also developing literature discussing internal and external differentiated integration and the privileged partnerships with third countries in the context of debates on the future of European integration and enlargement (İçener, 2007; Schimmelfennig et al., 2015; Müftüler-Baç, 2017; Gstöhl, Phinnemore, 2019; Saatçioğlu, 2020; Tekin, 2021).

Those who support calling a halt to enlargement followed the discussions on Brexit and the consequences of the deal between the United Kingdom and the EU very closely. Despite the opposition of certain EU Member States and the criticisms of the European Commission and the European Parliament concerning Türkiye’s de-Europeanisation, EU–Türkiye relations are still – at least officially – on the accession track. That is why it is better to classify the relationship status as being ‘in a coma’ rather than ‘dead’. Similarly, Türkiye is still committed to its membership target, although the EU’s handling of its accession process provoked strident criticism from the Turkish government.

As noted above, the EU recognises the strategic importance of Türkiye and is unlikely to risk losing Türkiye. Then, the crucial issue for the future of Türkiye–EU relations will be the nature of the relationship. The most likely scenario for progress in Türkiye–EU relations seems to be the modernisation of the Customs Union agreement between Türkiye and

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<sup>6</sup> Author’s own emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Author’s own emphasis.

the EU should the political problems blocking such a move are solved. Both sides accept the need to upgrade the Customs Union agreement, and this should be considered not an alternative to EU membership, but rather a stepping stone. More importantly, it is viewed as “an insurance policy against the very threat of Turkey becoming totally unanchored from Europe” (Ülgen, 2017, p. 18). In the current, pessimistic state of relations, research on alternatives to Türkiye’s EU membership have grown. Differentiated integration as a concept is evaluated as “a way out of the dead-end accession track” (Tekin, 2021, p. 174). Clearly, this kind of relationship will perpetuate or deepen the existing functional relationship based on common areas of interest. As highlighted by Saatçioğlu (2020, pp. 180–182), the politicisation of differentiated integration models in Türkiye is the biggest challenge to putting them into practice as a permanent form of relationship. If Türkiye were to be integrated with the EU on selected policy areas as a form of alternative to membership, the relationship would inevitably be asymmetrical. As voting rights on integration issues are privileges of EU membership, the EU cannot treat Türkiye as a partner equal to all other EU Member States. Considering Turkish criticism over the EU’s “double standards” in the existing relationship and the salience of sovereignty in Turkish political culture, it is almost impossible to convince Turkish political actors and public opinion of the benefits of any form of integration with the EU other than the one having voting and veto rights (İçener, 2007, pp. 427–430). How innovative the EU can be in designing the future of integration and its relations with third countries remains to be seen.

## **Conclusions**

This article has examined why Türkiye’s EU accession negotiations have reached the current impasse. Questions over the EU’s commitment and fairness haunt the negotiations after a long period of relations. And mutual distrust and the lack of hope for changing the status quo poison the efforts to improve the relations. More depressingly for the supporters of Türkiye’s EU membership and future enlargement, efforts to design alternatives to EU membership have increased. Some of them aim to complement the negotiation process as there is no political will to go ahead now. Some of them are plans for the future of EU enlargement and integration as the perennial dilemma between deepening and widening the EU continues. Indeed, enlargement has been the EU’s most successful foreign policy tool. And removing the membership perspective or making it an elusive target runs the risk of the irrelevance of the EU

as a transformative or normative power in applicant countries. Or, in Türkiye's case, losing it is a serious possibility. The signs of such an impact are already visible. Domestic factors and political actors play a significant role in Türkiye's recent de-Europeanisation. But the EU's blurring of membership perspective is also responsible for removing the EU anchor/carrot that motivates the political actors to reverse de-Europeanisation or offer alternative policy options to return to the EU reform agenda.

The paper showed that the Europeanisation of the Cyprus problem is the main stumbling block to progress in Türkiye's EU negotiation process. No country can join the EU without meeting the inherent accession criteria. Hence, the issues concerning meeting the Copenhagen political criteria are a genuine concern. And the Turkish government has a responsibility here. Enlargement experience shows us that there are ups and downs in the track record of Europeanisation of the candidate countries. Türkiye may return to a reform agenda to Europeanise Türkiye. Geopolitical considerations and contextual changes allow a flexible application of conditionality and motivate applicant countries to speed up their efforts. But by accepting the Greek Cypriots as EU members, the EU allowed them to use the enlargement/negotiation process to improve their national interests and use their EU membership to strengthen their positions/policies asymmetrically on the solution of the Cyprus issue. This situation leads Türkiye to choose between EU membership and protecting the rights of Turkish Cypriots, which is a national cause. Turkish feelings of unfair treatment towards the Turkish Cypriots following the Annan plan also prevent Türkiye from being more flexible and trusting the EU on the Cyprus issue. All decreases the likelihood of Türkiye attaining their membership target.

At the time of writing this paper, war in Ukraine has broken out. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have applied for EU membership. These applications and the Russian threat to European security and its neighbourhood made the enlargement policy regain the popularity it had in the years of eastern enlargement. Not surprisingly, there is no great enthusiasm among the EU Member States. Alternatives to EU enlargement are discussed as much as the possibility of offering a membership perspective to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia and granting them candidacy status. Security considerations and arguments for a geopolitical Europe are influential. Reluctance for enlargement amid many crises challenging European integration's existence and future is also not surprising. That said, there is also the question of whether the EU will respond to the calls to prove this is "the hour of Europe". The inclusion of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia has a great potential to refresh the strategic thinking about



enlargement policy. This will force the EU to rethink how to integrate the countries of wider Europe into the EU. The EU is bound to do this effectively without compromising EU norms and values. One can expect that the inclusion of new countries in the enlargement process and the rise of the Russian threat will increase the pressure on the EU to upgrade and secure Türkiye's status and encourage all parties to solve the Cyprus issue. If the EU does not deliver the expected, Türkiye will likely stick to its traditional balance of power policy and cement an uneasy alliance with Russia. Such political choices will inevitably affect the quality of Turkish democracy as the basis for the comparison shifts from Europe to Asia. Türkiye–EU relations would come out of their coma if all sides had the will and intention to achieve peace in the EU and its neighbourhood. This needs an act of political courage and is not an easy task.

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