





Policy Paper


The revival of EU-Turkey relations: Erdoğan's double strategy of rapprochement

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1. Introduction

Following the attempted coup d'état since July 2016, Turkey has been pursuing a two-track strategy towards the European Union (EU). Mainly, because of the course of action adopted by President Erdoğan Administration concerning the treatment of the people allegedly linked with the coup, Turkey has had problematic relations with Brussels and as well as with the Member States. Between March and December 2017, there had not been any visit at the presidential level to-, and from any European countries, even more so, the Turkish President was not invited to meet the EU leaders in Brussels. This was also due to the diplomatic crises which occurred with the Netherlands, Germany and Austria in the spring of 2017. In December 2017, President Erdoğan tried to overcome the problematic relations with Brussels by re-engaging bilaterally with a number of EU Member States such as Greece, France, Italy, the UK, and Germany.

On the one hand, the first track of President Erdoğan's approach has been to meet heads of EU Member States individually and separately, on a constant basis. On the other hand, although relations with the EU are in a stalemate especially regarding the accession process for Turkey, the Union remains a strategic goal for Ankara. The Turkish President has thus expressed multiple times his hope and belief in a renewed momentum for the accession talks, although the possibility of a Turkish EU membership is currently far away from becoming reality. The double strategy is thus, first, to keep the narrative alive regarding the EU accession process, in order to keep the latter as a seemingly concrete objective. Second, the Turkish government is seeking to improve and amend the relations with Brussels via improving its diplomatic ties bilaterally with those EU Member States that have had strains with Turkey, and who are also important from the economic perspective.

2. Background

2.1 Turkey's 2016 attempted coup and the crackdown

In July 2016, Turkish government experienced a coup attempt against its state institutions, and President Erdoğan. It is largely believed that the attempt was carried out by a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces that organized themselves as the Peace at Home Council. On the one hand, the government accused the coup leaders of being linked to the Gülen movement – a transnational Islamic movement inspired by the religious teachings of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher in self-imposed exile in the United States since 1999. On the other hand, Gülen and many pundits have suggested that the coup was known in advance by President Erdoğan, and that he made sure that it failed and produced beneficial outcomes for himself to further consolidate his power.¹²

Following the attempted coup, President Erdoğan Administration kicked off a crackdown, demanding the arrest of thousands of individuals accused of being involved with the coup, adding his authoritarian features to the country's political and social life, and creating an increasingly

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/turkey-coup-conspiracy-theory-erdogan-military-gift-from-god-soldiers-istanbul-a7140516.html>

² <http://www.aei.org/publication/did-erdogan-stage-the-coup/>

repressive regime against the opposition forces. As of August 2018, about 82,000 people have been arrested, around 143,000 detained, and more than 170,000 suspended from their public sector jobs in Turkey. In addition to these massive numbers, 319 journalists were arrested, around 4,500 judges and prosecutors dismissed, and 6,000 academics lost their jobs.³

Since September 2016, the state of emergency that was put in force by the Erdoğan Administration in response to the coup allowed a massive repression against Kurdish groups.⁴ 31% of all those arrested in government operations under the state of emergency were associated with Kurdish-, or leftist groups⁵. Consequently, 78 democratically elected Kurdish mayors were removed from their positions and arrested as a result. Moreover, the Turkish government confiscated more than a thousand companies and seized corporate assets worth \$ 11 billion that were allegedly owned by followers of the Gülen Movement.⁶

Following all these draconian measures, the EU and its Member States made multiple calls upon the Turkish government to ensure that the rule of law would be respected and that transparent legal processes should be initiated for all the people whom Ankara accused of being linked to the coup. However, President Erdoğan refused to listen to these calls and the Turkish authorities even considered restoring the death penalty.⁷ Consequently, relations between Turkey, the EU, and many Member States started to deteriorate.

2.2 Several diplomatic crises between Turkey and EU Member States

The consequent erosion of Turkey's relations with the European countries was especially seen in the diplomatic crisis which occurred between Turkey and the Netherlands on 11 March 2017. Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Family Minister Fatma Betül Savaş attempted to attend rallies in the Netherlands, but they were denied entry in the country and blocked from holding rallies. All these attempts were intended to back the constitutional changes expanding President Erdoğan's powers following the 16 April 2017 referendum, which was set to reform the country's political system into a presidential one, ending up in a victory for President Erdoğan due to the 51% of "yes" votes. That being said Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu was barred from flying into Rotterdam, while Savaş was stopped from entering the Turkish consulate in the Netherlands. The Family minister was escorted out of the country to Germany.⁸

It has been a political tradition for Turkish politicians to organize rallies and meetings in many EU Member States where there are large Turkish communities. Such public rallies came to be seen as problematic by the EU countries in cause and by local authorities, especially in Germany, due to fears that the speeches the Turkish politicians deliver could have the effect of isolating and radicalizing Turkish diaspora from the local society.⁹ After the attempted coup and the subsequent

³ <https://turkeypurge.com>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/29/world/middleeast/amid-turkeys-purge-a-renewed-attack-on-kurdish-culture.html?smid=tw-share>

⁵ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2018-01-29/remarkable-scale-turkeys-global-purge>

⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/fed595d0-631e-11e7-8814-0ac7eb84e5f1>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/18/european-leaders-urge-turkey-to-respect-rule-of-law-after-failed-coup>

⁸ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/erdogan-pledges-to-punish-nazi-remnant-netherlands-in-harsh-way/>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/10/turkish-diaspora-in-germany-divided-on-powers-for-erdogan>

crackdown by the Turkish government, the decision to stop politicians from holding rallies was also and especially due to fears that tensions in Turkey might spill over into EU countries that hosts Turkish communities.¹⁰ President Erdoğan commented that both the crackdown and the wider presidential powers were needed to help tackle serious security challenges Turkey faced at home and beyond its borders.¹¹

President Erdoğan reacted to the ban on his ministers by calling Dutch authorities “Nazi remnants” and threatening to block Dutch flights to Turkey. The Turkish president also stated that the Netherlands still had “vestiges of the Nazis”. Turkey suspended high-level relations with the country and did not allow the Dutch ambassador to Ankara to return to Turkey until the Netherlands would meet Turkey’s conditions over holding rallies. During a speech in France, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu described the Netherlands as the “capital of fascism”.¹²

Austria, Germany and Switzerland banned similar gatherings and rallies where Turkish officials were supposed to speak. “Turkish politicians should be banned from political campaigning across the European Union”, said the then Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern on 5 March.¹³ He justified this ban as it could have increased friction among the already-polarized Turkish diaspora and hindered integration.¹⁴

In the same week, mayors from several German cities and towns, including Cologne and Gaggenau, also decided to cancel Turkish referendum campaign events and rallies due to security concerns.¹⁵ Consequently, President Erdoğan also accused Berlin of “Nazi practices”,¹⁶ and German Chancellor Angela Merkel of “supporting terrorists.”

President Erdoğan currently uses the word “terrorists” to refer mainly to two distinct groups of people among all his opponents: the Kurds and people affiliated with Gülen Movement. Among all the other political dissidents, thousands of people, particularly sympathizers of the Gülen Movement and the Kurds, fled Turkey following the attempted coup and sought political asylum in Germany due to the risk of arrest and torture.¹⁷

The Turkish President accused Berlin of not responding to thousands of dossiers sent by Ankara on suspects accused to be linked with the attempted coup. Chancellor Merkel’s spokesman described the accusations as “absurd”, saying the Chancellor had no intention of taking part in a “competition of provocations”.¹⁸ “The spirit of fascism is running wild on the streets of Europe,” Erdoğan added

¹⁰ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/erdogan-pledges-to-punish-nazi-remnant-netherlands-in-harshest-way/>

¹¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/juncker-says-erdogans-turkey-taking-giant-steps-away-from-eu/>

¹² <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/erdogan-pledges-to-punish-nazi-remnant-netherlands-in-harshest-way/>

¹³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/austria-calls-for-eu-wide-ban-on-turkish-campaign-events/>

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39105683>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/05/erdogan-accuses-germany-of-nazi-practices-over-blocked-election-rallies>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39242707>

¹⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkish-political-refugees-flock-to-germany/3993063.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/turkey-suspends-top-level-ties-with-netherlands-in-escalating-crisis/>

in a televised speech.¹⁹ On 12 March, he continued with his rhetoric by saying at a campaign rally that “I had thought Nazism was over, but that I was wrong. Nazism is alive in the West.”²⁰ In response, Chancellor Merkel called the Nazi comparison “completely unacceptable.” She stated that the remarks were “sad and incredibly misplaced,” and that they trivialized the suffering of victims of the Nazis.²¹

Tensions between Berlin and Ankara were already running high after the arrest of German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel on 27 February 2017. The journalist was charged of terrorism and espionage accusations, which were seen by Berlin as “wrong and disproportionate”.²² Therefore, the escalation between Turkey and Germany and the cancellation of the rallies can be seen as outcomes of the course of action adopted by President Erdoğan to remove opponents, but also of the detention of the *Die Welt* newspaper journalist. The two issues added up to each other to reach a state of strained diplomatic dialogue between Berlin and Ankara.

Following these events, President Erdoğan threatened to break the refugee deal of March 2016 for multiple times. Under the deal, Turkey had agreed to tighten its maritime borders and also break up the people-smuggling networks that had helped migrants to make the crossing across the Aegean Sea to Greece – the starting point of the path to Western-, and Northern Europe.²³

On 15 March 2017, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu told in a television interview that Turkey was ready to walk away from the accord given the current crisis. “We can stop it [the deal] unilaterally. We have not yet informed our [EU] counterparts, all of this is in our hands,” he said.²⁴ Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu threatened to “blow the mind” of Europe by sending 15,000 refugees a month to EU territory.²⁵ Therefore, many pundits suggested that the reaction especially of Germany to the arrest of Deniz Yücel had to be measured due to fear of jeopardizing the EU’s migration deal with Turkey.

Another diplomatic crisis had emerged between Turkey and Greece as Ankara was not happy with Athens hosting suspects wanted over the failed coup and who fled Turkey. Notably, these were eight members of the Turkish Armed Forces who escaped by a helicopter on the night of 15 July 2016.²⁶ After the men requested asylum, Greece refused to hand them over to Turkey and welcomed them as political refugees in January.²⁷ Furthermore, other bilateral issues existing between Turkey and Greece consisted in the stalled peace process over Cyprus, the waves of

¹⁹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/turkey-threatens-eu-on-migrant-deal-as-erdogan-blasts-spirit-of-fascism/>

²⁰ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/13/turkish-president-erdogan-calls-dutch-nazi-remnants-geert-wilders-holland-turkey-referendum-netherlands-nazi-comparisons/>

²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/europe/angela-merkel-recep-tayyip-erdogan.html?action=click&contentCollection=Europe&module=inline®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article>

²² <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/austria-calls-for-eu-wide-ban-on-turkish-campaign-events/>

²³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/turkey-threatens-eu-on-migrant-deal-as-erdogan-blasts-spirit-of-fascism/>

²⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/turkey-threatens-eu-on-migrant-deal-as-erdogan-blasts-spirit-of-fascism/>

²⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/turkey-threatens-to-send-europe-15000-refugees-a-month/>

²⁶ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/freedom-of-thought/news/erdogan-heads-to-uneasy-ally-greece-for-historic-visit/>

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-greece.html>

immigrants from Turkey into Greece, and the problems facing the Turks living in Greece and the Greeks in Turkey.²⁸

Moreover, in July 2017, the authorities of both Austria and the Netherlands obstructed the visit of the Turkish Minister of Economy and the Turkish Deputy Prime Minister respectively within the framework of events set to commemorate the first anniversary of the thwarted coup attempt.^{29,30} In June, a statement made by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was issued directed at the political remarks made by several German politicians against Erdoğan, while the meeting of the President with Turkish nationals in Hamburg for the G20 was being organized.³¹

3. State of play

Despite the fact that currently the accession negotiations are stalled, (until Turkey will apply the [Additional Protocol of the Ankara Association Agreement to Cyprus](#), no chapter will be provisionally closed) President Erdoğan stated, on multiple occasions, that joining the bloc remains a “strategic goal” of the country. The Turkish President repeatedly called the EU to remove hurdles against Turkey’s membership and revive the stalled membership negotiation process. Furthermore, Ankara stated to be seeking deeper trade ties with the Union, as well as visa-free travel to Europe. In October 2017, President Erdoğan said that Turkey would refuse to walk away from discussions, saying that they “will not be the side which gives up.”³²

The EU must “keep its promises” to Turkey, President Erdoğan told Italy’s *La Stampa* newspaper on 4 February 2018. “The EU is blocking access to negotiations and suggests that lack of progress is because of us. It’s unfair,” he said. “We want full membership. Other options are not satisfactory,” he added.³³ However, this has not been the only line of action pursued by Turkey. Erdoğan Administration has started to engage in bilateral relations with European countries at the individual state level since December 2017.

3.1 December 2017: First amending steps towards Europe

Between March and December 2017, President Erdoğan visited and received visits mainly from countries such as Russia, Kuwait, and Qatar. Other visits included countries such as India, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan – but no visit in an European state was made. This changed in December 2017.³⁴

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-greece.html>

²⁹ http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-38_-disisleri-bakanligi-sozcusunun-ekonomi-bakanimizin-viyana-ziyaretinin-engellenmesi-hk-sc_en.en.mfa

³⁰ http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-36_-disisleri-bakanligi-sozcusunun-15-Temmuz-darbe-girisiminin-yindonumune-iliskin-etkinlik-hk-Bir-Soruya-Cevabi_en.en.mfa

³¹ http://www.mfa.gov.tr/qa_33_-29-june-2017_-statement-of-spokesperson-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs_-ambassador-huseyin-muftuoglu_-in-response-to-a-a-question-regarding-the-remarks-of-some-german-politicians.en.mfa

³² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-eu-full-membership-european-union-commitment-president-a8274166.html>

³³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/erdogan-in-rome-let-turkey-be-full-eu-member/>

³⁴ <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/receptayyip Erdogan/speeches/?&page=1>

Nine months after the diplomatic crisis between the EU and Turkey, President Erdoğan decided to visit Greece on 7-8 December 2017. The event made President Erdoğan the first head of Turkish state to make an official visit in 65 years. President Erdoğan first went to Athens to meet Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos and then to the Thrace region, home to Greece's main Muslim minority.³⁵ This visit gained significant importance for the Turkish foreign policy, coming in a time when Turkey found itself isolated from the Western world, particularly from European countries. President Erdoğan thus decided to reach out to a historically “antagonistic” neighbor to start amending problematic relations with the EU and its member states.³⁶

President Erdoğan needed a “a P.R. success story to break Turkey's diplomatic isolation”, “a photo opportunity with a country that is a member of NATO and the European Union,” said Thanos Dokos, the director of Eliamep, an Athens-based think tank.³⁷ During the visit, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras defended his decision to reverse an earlier promise to President Erdoğan regarding the eight Turkish military officers that fled to Greece.³⁸

Subsequently, President Erdoğan made an official visit to France's President Emmanuel Macron on 5 January 2018. President Macron appeared very willing to engage with Turkey, insisting that the EU should maintain dialogue with Ankara. This was mainly due to the fact that President Macron described Turkey as an “essential partner” in fields of cooperation including Syria, where France was seeking to play a more influential role.³⁹ France and Turkish officials signed defense, banking and commercial deals, including the planned sale of 25 Airbus A330s to Turkish Airlines.⁴⁰ These deals were symbolic of the beginning of a renewed dialogue between one of the most influential European countries and Turkey.

A month after, President Erdoğan paid a visit to Italy on 4-5 February 2018. Erdoğan met first with Pope Francis. The matters discussed during the meeting were Turkish-Vatican relations, developments concerning the decision by Trump Administration to move US Embassy to Jerusalem, the humanitarian tragedy in Syria, the fight against terrorism, xenophobia and Islamophobia – recites the press statement of the Turkish government.⁴¹ It was also very interesting to notice that President Erdoğan broke another long-term diplomatic silence by making the first presidential visit from Turkey to Vatican after 59 years.

The visit to Vatican City was very significant given that President Erdoğan accepted the invitation of the Pope for two main reasons. Firstly, the meeting was symbolic as Erdoğan met the Pope presenting himself as the leader of the Muslim world, encountering the leader of the Christian world. Secondly, the visit was a crucial opportunity for the Turkish president to reconnect with the Western world by meeting with one of its most symbolical figures, the Pope.

³⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/freedom-of-thought/news/erdogan-heads-to-uneasy-ally-greece-for-historic-visit/>

³⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-greece.html>

³⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-greece.html>

³⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/c348340c-dc43-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482>

³⁹ <https://www.thenational.ac/world/europe/erdogan-macron-meet-in-paris-what-to-expect-1.693017>

⁴⁰ <https://www.france24.com/en/20180105-french-president-macron-suggests-partnership-deal-turkey-eu-not-membership-erdogan>

⁴¹ <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/89288/president-erdogan-to-visit-vatican-city-and-italy>

President Erdoğan consequently met with Italian President Sergio Mattarella and then received former Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni. The matters discussed were the ones on the common agenda of the two countries, as the Turkish press release explains, such as the latest developments in Syria, Iraq and Libya, the unilateral decision by the Trump Administration about the status of Jerusalem, cooperation in the fight against terrorism and irregular migration, and Turkey-EU relations.⁴²

Therefore, from December 2017, President Erdoğan kicked off a policy of rapprochement vis-a-vis the EU. From the meeting with Greece, to the visit paid to France and Italy, the Turkish President slowly but surely tried to start re-engaging and improving the relations between Turkey and the EU countries. Most importantly, he needed to amend the diplomatic problems occurred during the previous year.

The meetings with Greece, France, Vatican City and Italy were crucial from both an internal-, and foreign policy point of view. By meeting such EU leaders in their countries, President Erdoğan sent a message of renewed dialogue with the European countries, but he was also *able* and *allowed* to meet the leaders *notwithstanding* the breaches of human rights, rule of law and press freedom carried out during the crackdown initiated after the coup. Internally and externally, Erdoğan thus aimed at giving an image of leader of the Muslim world meeting with European leaders, despite the abovementioned issues.

3.2 The EU-Turkey Summit of March 2018

On 26 March 2018, the Turkey-EU Summit took place in Varna, Bulgaria. President Erdoğan met with the Presidents of the EU Commission and EU Council. The issues touched upon at the summit were: cooperation on the management of migration flows, the shared interest in combating terrorism, the rule of law in Turkey, Turkey's recent actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea, and Turkey's involvement in Syria.⁴³

The previous summits were held on 7 March 2017⁴⁴, and on 29 November 2015.⁴⁵ It is very interesting to notice that these two summits were held in Brussels, while the last one of March 2018 was held in Bulgaria. This can be interpreted in a symbolic way. Indeed, during the 2017 Summit, it was proposed to make Varna the permanent venue for the talks between Ankara and Brussels. This proposal carries some intrinsic meaning in that, as Serkan Demirtas writes, "Turkey-EU ties have become so damaged over the last few years that meetings between the leader of a candidate country, President Erdoğan, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, and EU Council President Donald Tusk should take place anywhere but not in Brussels."⁴⁶

The March 2018 Summit failed to yield any notable outcomes. Following the summit, the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, commented that "in terms of concrete solutions, we did not reach a concrete compromise today, but I still hope it will be possible in the future." He added that

⁴² <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/89288/president-erdogan-to-visit-vatican-city-and-italy>

⁴³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2018/03/26/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2016/03/07/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/11/29/>

⁴⁶ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/serkan-demirtas/varna-summit-signals-a-new-model-for-turkey-eu-ties-129398>

improved EU-Turkey relations would depend on progress on the rule of law, press freedom, and Syria. Tusk said he understands Turkey's need to increase security and deal with it effectively after the thwarted coup, but also that the EU is "concerned that some methods used undermine fundamental freedoms and the rule of law".⁴⁷

The relation between President Erdoğan and Bulgarian Prime Minister Borissov was crucial for the intention of President Erdoğan to amend EU-Turkey relations. The two leaders seem to have been developing stronger relations, which led the Turkish president to calling Borissov a "great friend" during the Summit, thanking him for hosting the event.

The friendship was demonstrated in that President Erdoğan promised to reopen a 120-year-old Bulgarian Church in Istanbul in January 2018. The Bulgarian Prime Minister Borisov was present during the ceremony and said that the reopening of the church proved that there can be friendship, mutual understanding, and goodwill between the Muslim and Christian countries.⁴⁸ This was crucial for the dawning attempt of President Erdoğan of achieving rapprochement to Europe and to create a bridge between the "Muslim world" on one hand, of which he presents himself as the leader, and the Christian Western world, on the other. During President Erdoğan's visit to Greece, the Turkish President used the church as an example of Turkey's religious tolerance towards Christians, contrasting with the Greece's alleged discrimination of their Muslim minorities.⁴⁹

During the ceremony, Prime Minister Borisov pledged to exert more efforts to help normalize relations between Turkey and the EU. He called on all sides to do their best to make 2018 a year in which Ankara and the Brussels can fix their relations. "Bulgaria holds the rotating EU presidency," Erdoğan said in Istanbul – "having this reopening ceremony at this period would deliver an important message to the international community." Former Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim added he believed that, during the Presidency, "additional cooperation opportunities will emerge and will gain momentum."⁵⁰

Therefore, the Summit would not have happened if Bulgaria had not held the Council Presidency from January to June 2018. Because of this, a "win-win" situation presented itself to the eyes of all three involved actors: Turkey, the EU, and Bulgaria. First, President Erdoğan was able to continue his process of rapprochement to the EU by having the Summit organized and being invited to it. Second, European actors were still implicitly refusing the possibility of meeting Erdoğan in Brussels, thus the prospect of a Summit in another European country was an efficient alternative.

Third, the meeting was for the Bulgarian Prime Minister an important opportunity to reiterate the good relations of Bulgaria with both Turkey and the EU, and to make noticeable to the public opinion the importance of one of the Member States considered for some as being the least influential. At the Summit, Prime Minister Borissov praised Turkey for abiding to the migration deal, commenting that Bulgaria experienced "zero migration pressure" as a result of the deal, and reiterated the good relations of Sofia with Ankara. Therefore, Bulgaria presented itself as a bridge between the EU and Turkey.

⁴⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/varna-to-become-permanent-venue-for-eu-turkey-talks/>

⁴⁸ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-to-reopen-historic-bulgarian-church-in-istanbul-on-jan-7-125325>

⁴⁹ <https://www.euscoop.com/en/2018/1/5/iron-church-in-istanbul-reopening>

⁵⁰ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/07/c_136878347.htm

3.3 Visits to the UK, Germany, and the Syria Summit

Next charm offensive of Turkish President was the UK, where, on 13-15 May 2018, President Erdoğan paid a visit to; he met Queen Elizabeth II and PM Theresa May. He also attended the seventh meeting of the Turkish-British Tatlıdil Forum, which, according to the press statement of the Turkish government, seeks to further enrich the bilateral relations by involving dialogue and meeting with the prominent business figures of Turkey and the UK.⁵¹ During the meeting, the matters discussed were the improvement of bilateral relations in areas such as economy, trade, security, defense, and culture; the current situations in Syria and Iraq and their regional developments, Cyprus, relations with the EU, and joint fight against terrorism.⁵²

President Erdoğan did not visit London without a specific objective in mind. On the one hand, the EU accession process for Turkey has now reached the state of serious deadlock, and the prospect of membership increasingly seems to be very difficult to achieve. On the other hand, the UK is to leave the Union by March 2019, and the possibility of a “hard Brexit” is slowly materializing. The UK is therefore currently in the position of looking for trade partners in the post-Brexit period, while seeking to limit future economic damage. Therefore, President Erdoğan was confident that, during the meeting, more attention was going to be paid to trade deals and less to the current state of human rights and the rule of law in Turkey.

Turkish President stated that “We are ready to cooperate with the UK in the post-Brexit period in every field – I see the strategic partnership between Turkey and the UK as a necessity, rather than a simple choice, for the interests of the two countries”. In a recent speech, he also commented that “the UK will need trade after Brexit, and *rest assured Turkey is willing to help.*” To such statements, Prime Minister May responded that she believed that enhancing trade ties between the UK and Turkey “will be to the benefit of both our countries and for the prosperity of both our nations.”⁵³

Already in January 2017, Britain and Turkey signed a deal worth more than U.S. \$128 million to develop fighter jets for the Turkish military.⁵⁴ During the May 2018 visit, three Turkish companies signed a deal with a British specialist in vehicle test systems and autonomous vehicles. The four-company agreement aims to boost cooperation in the field of unmanned technologies. The deal involves co-development programs, production in Turkey, and sales to Turkey, Britain and other countries.⁵⁵

The Turkish President continued on his line of action leading to renewed relations with key European countries and on 27-29 September 2018, he paid a state visit to Germany at the invitation of President Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany. The Turkish administration press statement states that the issues addressed during the talks consisted in Turkey-Germany cooperation in political, economic, security, defense, cultural and social areas: the issues related to the Turkish

⁵¹ <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/94172/president-erdogan-s-visit-to-the-united-kingdom>

⁵² <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/94172/president-erdogan-s-visit-to-the-united-kingdom>

⁵³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/president-erdogan-theresa-may-post-brexit-trade-turkey-a8351531.html>

⁵⁴ <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2018/10/31/general-electric-beats-rolls-royce-to-power-turkeys-indigenous-fighter-jet/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2018/05/24/is-the-us-out-as-turkeys-top-western-arms-dealer/>

community in Germany; the regional and global developments (particularly those concerning Syria); cooperation in the fight against terrorism and irregular migration; and Turkey-EU relations.⁵⁶

The visit was groundbreaking because it was the first state visit from Turkey to Germany after seven years. The press statement defines Germany as a “NATO ally and a leading economic partner of Turkey”. Moreover, President Erdoğan also inaugurated the DITIB Central Mosque in Cologne and came together with the Turkish community in Germany. The press statement recites that the “Turkish community of 3.5 million living in Germany acts as a bridge of friendship between the two countries.”⁵⁷

On last October 27th, Erdoğan hosted Macron, Merkel and Putin in Istanbul for the latest Syria Summit. This Summit represents a breakthrough in the dialogue between not only Turkey and the EU, but also Russia and the EU. By inviting the three actors from his initiative in his own country, President Erdoğan was able to build a connection between the four world leaders, himself included. The intention seems that of building a “power pole” around which France and Germany get involved in order to address the critical political issues of Syria. Lastly, President Macron invited the Turkish President to attend, along with other participating heads of states, governments and international organizations, the commemorative ceremony held in Paris for the 100th anniversary of the armistice that ended World War I.⁵⁸

4. Future prospects for EU-Turkey relations

4.1 Turkey's economic crisis and economic strategic instruments

As it was highlighted above, Turkey has been carrying out a double track strategy towards the EU and the Member States. The approach has been surely beneficial for Erdoğan Administration, but the question is whether this strategy has been and is fruitful for the Union as well. The EU could consider other opportunities with Turkey than the membership negotiation process in order to continue a constructive dialogue without having to ignore matters of human rights and respect of the rule of law in Turkey. How should the EU consider its future relations with Turkey and how should this approach be shaped?

Since early 2018, Turkey has been suffering from a financial and economic crisis, triggered by the excessive current account deficit of the Turkish economy and foreign currency debt, as well as the increasing authoritarian practices by Erdoğan Administration and his unorthodox ideas about interest rate policy.^{59,60} The Turkish lira lost more than 42% of its value against the American Dollar as of the end of August 2018 also because of the leveraging effects of the frictions with the United States.⁶¹

⁵⁶ <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/98744/president-erdogan-to-visit-germany>

⁵⁷ <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/98744/president-erdogan-to-visit-germany>

⁵⁸ <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/99646/president-erdogan-attends-in-paris-100th-anniversary-commemorations-of-the-armistice-that-ended-world-war-i>

⁵⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_currency_and_debt_crisis,_2018

⁶⁰ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/25/erdogan-is-a-mad-economist-and-turkey-is-his-laboratory/>

⁶¹ <https://seekingalpha.com/article/4206844-insiders-take-turkeys-economic-crisis>

The US-Turkey relations started to deteriorate as President Donald Trump pushed more for the release of pastor Andrew Brunson, detained in Turkey together with other US citizens. This led to a diplomatic standstill, as such arrests have been used as a tool for negotiating with Washington.⁶² At the same time, as Reva Goujon writes, “the US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces and “Turkey's imperative to divide and weaken the Kurds in Syria will remain a significant friction point.”⁶³

Enhancing the economic ties between EU and Turkey in a time when the Turkish economy is hit by the political challenges that it has with the US, could lead to strengthened cooperation between the two actors. Further Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Turkey, from European companies, could deepen the economic interdependency of the both parties toward each other. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the outward stocks of FDI from the EU to Turkey was 72.3 € billion as of 2016.⁶⁴ The EU Member States are currently by far the largest group of investors (67.9% of total investment in 2017) in Turkey.⁶⁵

Not only the FDI, but also opening negotiations for an upgraded Customs Union could be a significant tool to further enhance the relationship between the EU and Turkey.⁶⁶ By not only maintaining but also by increasing the volume of FDI directed towards Turkey, and by renewing the talks for the EU-Turkey Customs Union, the Member States, on one hand, and the EU on the other, could be able to help the economic crisis in Turkey. This line of action would be pursued with the objective of strengthening the bilateral relations not only between individual Member States and Turkey, but also between the EU as a whole and Ankara.

The EU and heads of EU Member States do want to help the Turkish economy flourish not to collapse. Germany in particular, as Chancellor Merkel has stated in September 2018, has a “strategic interest” in a sound economic development in Turkey.⁶⁷ However, this interest does not come at any price. Both the continuation and increase of FDI and the prospect of a renewed EU-Turkey Customs Union will presuppose “similar rules in the economic, public procurement, competition, and labor areas, and a trustworthy justice system”, writes Marc Pierini. Therefore, Turkey needs to realize that “strong economic links with Europe can only rest on rule-based governance. Choices have to be made”.⁶⁸

The refugee deal of March 2016 represents a successful example of efficient EU-Turkey cooperation. Turkey received €6 billion in financial aid and agreed to sign the deal, abiding to it.⁶⁹ Therefore, this occurrence shows that providing economic assistance has a positive feedback for political relations. However, who was born first – the egg or the chicken? Should the EU wait for a better human rights situation and then offer more economic help, or give more financial aid with the prospect of a renewed respect for the rule of law as a response?

⁶² <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/between-us-and-turkey-andrew-brunson-only-part-problem>

⁶³ <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/making-sense-turkeys-economic-crisis>

⁶⁴ http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_111603.pdf

⁶⁵ https://en.portal.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/turkey/foreign-investment?&actualiser_id_banque=oui&id_banque=0&memoriser_choix=memoriser

⁶⁶ <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/01/23/toward-renewed-eu-turkey-customs-union-event-5796>

⁶⁷ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/merkel-vows-support-to-turkeys-economy-136545>

⁶⁸ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/77212>

⁶⁹ <https://www.dw.com/en/the-eu-turkey-refugee-agreement-a-review/a-43028295>

An answer could be that both approaches can be carried out at the same time. Firstly, the parties, namely the EU and Turkey, can do everything possible to maintain and increase the level of FDI directed from Europe to Turkey, but at the same time, both the Member States and the European institutions should continue to call for the respect of rule of law, human rights, and freedom of expression and address these issues vigorously. Second, although EU's financial support is subject to conditionality with respect to ensuring rule of law and human rights, whereas the very same conditionality clause is not applicable when Member States are concerned.

Such conditions could consist in “restoring rule of law in a number of areas, with both symbolic gestures and substantive improvements”, as Pierini argues, with a view to stronger economic support from Europe.⁷⁰ Following such improvements, economic cooperation with Europe would have the potential of receiving a substantial boost.

4.2 Support to purged individuals

Another course of action that the EU might consider is not only to nurture the existing civil society entities and media organizations in Turkey who are critical to the undemocratic practices of the executive branch, but also support thousands of civil society representatives, journalists, and academics who have been and are the post-coup repressive measures. In particular, the EU should step up in supporting the individuals who lost their jobs due to ongoing crackdown. The support by the EU to thousands of people who used to work for civil society and opposition media might have a positive impact on the overall situation of rule of law and democracy in the country.

In addition to that, the EU should establish channels of communication with the Turkish government to discuss about thousands of individuals – such as medical doctors, academics, lawyers, judges who lost their jobs following the coup attempt of 2016 and are no longer allowed to practice their profession in Turkey. Supporting these individuals financially and making sure that they can work in Turkey will decrease the number of asylum-seekers fleeing Turkey via legal, and/or illegal ways to Europe.

It would indeed be less costly, from both a humanitarian and financial point of view, to support the Turkish people affected by the crackdown in Turkey, rather than later on when they would arrive in Europe. The current situation in Turkey is one that needs to be tackled at its roots, not only after the fleeing of many individuals to EU Member States, and the consequences that brings.

4.3 Alternative ways to improve the rule of law, human rights and media freedom issues

Relevant authorities of Member States should find alternative channels to address issues related to human rights, democracy, media freedom, and the rule of law in Turkey. The EU should step up in defense of core EU values in one of its most important neighbors: Turkey. Official ways to raise such issues have been used for a number of times since the July 2016 coup attempt.

⁷⁰ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/77212>

Alternative measures could involve engaging names that could have an impact on the Turkish authorities. Important European figures which were seen as having good relations with the Turkish President could be mobilized. For instance, German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel was released from the Turkish prison following the intermediation not only of former Minister for Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel, but also and especially of former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The latter met President Erdoğan twice after press conferences, supposedly to discuss the release of Yücel.⁷¹ Similarly, Schröder had acted as an intermediary in secret talks to free German rights activist Peter Streudtner in 2017.⁷²

In February 2018, when asked about Schröder's importance in the rapprochement between Germany and Turkey, Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu said: "Schröder is a good friend of Turkey, and whenever there is turbulence in the relationship, he intervenes in a sense, but in a good and positive way. He sends the right messages to both sides. We worked very well with him when he was Chancellor, and he is very wise."⁷³ Indeed, the former Chancellor has maintained good relations with the Turkish President since his time in office (1998-2005).⁷⁴

Schröder represents a good example of an individual who has good ties with Erdoğan and which is supposed to have a certain degree of leverage and influence on the decisions taken by the Turkish President and his administration. The help of political figures such as the former German Chancellor could be instrumental in talks with Erdoğan concerning the upholding of human rights, democratic values, respect of media freedom and of the rule of law. The impact that such individuals could have on the decision-making of the Turkish authorities regarding such issues should be taken into account in the hopes of improving EU-Turkey relations, with an eye to an improvement of human rights and the rule of law in Turkey.

4.4 Meetings in Brussels

Lastly, a crucial decision could be that of inviting President Erdoğan to Brussels. The EU leaders should offer the Turkish President the possibility of a meeting in the capital of Europe and of its institutions. Erdoğan would thus visit not only the Commission and the European Council, but also the European Parliament. A hearing at the latter of President Erdoğan would be of extreme importance as Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) would have the possibility to put their questions without any censorship. President Erdoğan would then be in a position of having to reply to questions regarding certain issues which have not been brought up in Turkey by journalists since 2016 due to the arrest of opposition reporters.

Such a scenario would be definitely conducive to renewed and ameliorated EU-Turkey relations. It would signalize not only to the EU, but also to the Turkish people that they are not cut out from Europe. Inviting President Erdoğan to Brussels does not imply a renewal of the accession talks by default, which is what EU leaders seem to be concerned about. It would just conduce to improved communication between Brussels and Ankara, and perhaps improved decision-making at the

⁷¹ <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/fall-deniz-yuecel-tuerkischer-aussenminister-betont-rolle-von-gerhard-schroeder-a-1194161.html>

⁷² <https://ahvalnews.com/germany-turkey/german-fm-negotiated-journalists-turkey-release-newspaper>

⁷³ Translation from German: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/fall-deniz-yuecel-tuerkischer-aussenminister-betont-rolle-von-gerhard-schroeder-a-1194161.html>

⁷⁴ <https://en.qantara.de/content/release-of-german-journalist-deniz-yucel-its-not-over-yet>

Turkish administration level regarding issues of human rights, democracy, press freedom and rule of law. Talks about the need to improve such matters should be carried out in a way where a conversation between two sides is actually taking place, and not only with formal resolutions and no response by the side of Ankara.

5. Conclusions

After the thwarted coup d'état in July 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan started carrying out a crackdown, imprisoning individuals suspected of being linked with the coup. A state of emergency was put in force, which led to the jailing of larger numbers of individuals who are allegedly linked to various Kurdish groups and the Gülen Movement; the latter started to be referred to by President Erdoğan as a terrorist organization and accused of being the main entity who plotted of the coup. Consequently, high numbers of private companies allegedly owned by people linked to Gulen Movement were confiscated by the Turkish state and their owners were to large extend detained and arrested.

The purge and the consequent disturbances in Turkey led to an even more strained EU-Turkey relations. In particular, in March 2017, Turkish ministers were denied entrance to the Netherlands where they intended to hold rallies in support of the upcoming Turkish referendum. Gatherings were banned also in Germany and Austria, leading the Turkish president to accuse such European countries of behaving like Nazis.

These developments led to severe diplomatic crises between Turkey and several European countries. The detriment of these relations resulted in President Erdoğan not being able to visit EU states at the presidential level between March and December 2017. The situation changed when the Turkish President decided to start amending these relations and visited, in turn, Greece, France, Italy and the Vatican in 2018.

President Erdoğan thus engaged in a strategy of improved bilateral relations with EU countries, eventually renewing the political relations all the way to the EU-Turkey summit of March 2018. The summit was ground-breaking in that it did not take place in Brussels but in Bulgaria, who held the Council Presidency at the time. This decision signaled the willingness of EU leaders to still be cautious with inviting the Turkish President in Brussels, on the one hand, but also to re-engage with Ankara and to uphold to the successful migration deal of March 2016, on the other hand.

After the Summit, President Erdoğan proceeded with his rapprochement strategy by visiting the UK and Germany. Lastly, he sealed such approach by inviting to Istanbul German Chancellor Merkel, French President Macron, and Russian President Putin for the Syria Summit in October 2018. During these meetings, President Erdoğan sought to present himself in three main ways: first, as representing the leader of the Muslim world; second, as representing the bridge between the EU and Russia; third, as a leader who, is still able to meet and negotiate deals with EU Member States despite severe human rights violations and erosion of rule of law in his country.

In essence, President Erdoğan is carrying out a double strategy towards Europe. First, the official statements made by himself and other Turkish officials keep underlying that the country's EU

membership is still a strategic goal although increasingly more difficult as a prospect. Second, his administration is reproaching EU countries bilaterally, sealing deals to concretize the relations. A number of policies could be advanced by the EU to continue relations with Turkey and keep supporting Turkey to improve the overall situation of human rights and rule of law. Firstly, the EU should continue seeking to help the Turkish economy, which has been suffering tremendously over the past one year. Stable or even increased Foreign Direct Investment and the prospect of an EU-Turkey Customs Union should be discussed in the context of conditionality, which would entail amendments and improved conditions of human rights and rule of law in Turkey in exchange for economic aid by the part of the EU countries.

Secondly, the EU could provide support to endangered Turkish individuals both in Turkey and in Europe due to post-coup crackdown by Erdogan Administration. Such support could be carried out through civil society organizations. This strategy would be approached with a view to humanitarian and financial support to Turkish professionals which are struggling to find a job and seeking to flee the country to the EU due to current political realities of Turkey.

Thirdly, prominent European political figures close to the Turkish President could be approached and their help could be sought to improve the dialogue with President Erdoğan when requesting to respect values of human rights and rule of law. The example of the intermediation of former German Chancellor Schroder for the release of journalist Yucel from the Turkish prison demonstrates the leverage that such individuals could have in the decision-making of the Turkish administration.

Lastly, President Erdoğan could be invited to Brussels in order to stabilize the ongoing dialogue between the two parties. Especially, Turkish President would be in the position of having direct public hearings with MEPs in the European Parliament, which could produce frank and close discussion with the Turkish president through asking him questions regarding issues of human rights and rule of law which are not being addressed in Turkey due to the dismissal of opposition media.

In conclusion, Turkey's bilateral relations with the Member States are improving due the realities of interdependence of the both sides toward each other. But the relations with Brussels is still strained, especially in the context wherein the voices that call for either freeze or suspension of accession talks are multiplying. However, the current problematic political and economic situation in Turkey should not be underestimated in terms of its potential to affect the EU and its member states negatively. The EU should be at the forefront in supporting Turkey both in fighting the currency crisis and in upholding to values of human rights and rule of law. This can be done only with more direct support and dialogue between the both sides. Aid and communication represent the key solutions in such a situation, which might not result in renewed accession talks for EU membership, but at least in better, stable and sincere relations between Brussels and Ankara.

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