

CHAPTER 7

Perceiving ‘Europe’ in Dire Times

Elite Perceptions of European Integration in Turkish Politics after the 2010s

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Abstract

This chapter explores the transformative dynamics in Türkiye–EU relations post-2010, particularly within the context of Turkish political elites’ perceptions. The chapter underscores the profound impact of the strained Türkiye–EU ties, marked by blocked negotiation chapters and democratic backsliding. Emphasizing the shift from conditionality to transactionalism, it scrutinizes the evolving geopolitical landscape and realpolitik considerations, notably in light of the Ukraine war. The analysis centres on Turkish members of parliament involved in the Türkiye–EU Joint Parliamentary Committee, probing their perspectives on economic, security, and identity dimensions. Historical context, key events, and the concept of ‘peripherality’ are examined,

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employing interviews and Committee meeting minutes. The chapter culminates in an assessment of recent perceptions of the EU perceptions among Turkish political elites, examining potential centre-periphery dynamics in bilateral relations.

Keywords: Türkiye–EU relations, elite perceptions, geopolitics, EU conditionality, transactionality

Introduction

As Puchala (1971) famously described it, the EU is an elephant approached by several blind men. It is an evolving institution and a structure perceived differently by different actors at different points in time. But what would happen if there were another elephant in the room? Indeed, especially starting in the 2010s, when Türkiye–EU relations experienced a historical drop, with negotiation chapters remaining blocked and Turkish democracy backsliding, the Türkiye debate in Brussels and elsewhere in Europe was almost completely silenced, making Türkiye the elephant in the EU room – one still, however, endowed with formal EU candidacy. In this context, it is important to understand how this dramatic shift in relations impacted on the perceptions of the EU in Turkish politics from the 2010s onwards, focusing on the ‘insider’s gaze’, as already scrutinized in [Chapter 1](#) of this volume. By ‘insiders’, we mean in this chapter MPs of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) who are or have been members of the Türkiye–EU Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), the committee that established in the aftermath of the 1963 Ankara Agreement responsible for the evaluation of bilateral issues between Türkiye and the EU and annual reports submitted by the Association Council to the presidents of the TGNA and the European Parliament.

In this regard, the primary objective of this chapter is to evaluate the perceptions of the political elite in Türkiye regarding the EU and the process of European integration during the post-2010 period. This period marked a significant shift in EU conditionality within the country, accompanied by sentiments of disenchantment and disillusionment with the EU among both political elites and the public. Moreover, the chapter will delve into the contestation of the EU in this context, examining the factors contributing to the changing views of the Turkish political elite regarding the EU and European integration. Especially since the March 2016 migration deal between the EU

and Türkiye, this context has undergone significant changes. Several domestic and international developments contributed to turbulence within bilateral relations, resulting in a thorough shift in Türkiye–EU relations from a conditionality perspective to transnationalism, prioritizing mutual interests for Ankara and Brussels. In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, the renewed significance of geopolitics and *realpolitik* also contributes to this varied focus on Türkiye in terms of strategic and pragmatic issues, relegating normative concerns to the background within Türkiye–EU relations.

One also must add to this inquiry into perceptions of the EU among the Turkish political elite the significant dimension of ‘peripherality’, an indispensable research dimension of this volume and the LEAP (Linking to Europe at the Periphery) Network. Do the Turkish political elite perceive Türkiye as peripheral to European integration? Has there been any shift in this ‘peripherality perception’ lately? This endeavour to understand the Turkish elite’s perceptions of the EU after 2010 will proceed with a particular focus on three thematic dimensions – namely economy, security, and identity – through interviews with Turkish MPs who currently are or have been in the past members of the JPC and minutes of the post-2010 JPC meetings (see Appendix, [Table A7.1](#) for details of the interviewees).

The chapter is structured as follows: following the introduction, the next section provides a historical background of EU perceptions within the Turkish political landscape. The third section explores the overarching features of Türkiye–EU relations, with a specific emphasis on three pivotal dimensions central to the analysis in this volume and chapter – namely, economy, security, and identity. Additionally, this section examines three significant events in Türkiye–EU relations during the specified period, as identified through interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders and in the minutes of JPC meetings. Subsequently, the fourth section focuses on the methodology employed in this research. The fifth section delves into the findings obtained from our field research, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the data collected. The final section offers concluding remarks that assess recent perceptions of the EU among the Turkish political elite, specifically examining whether these perceptions reflect a centre–periphery dynamic within the bilateral relations between the two parties.

Setting the Context: Background Perceptions of the EU in Turkish Politics

For Turkish politics, ‘Europe’ is probably the most popular concept, albeit a contested one. Starting from the later eras of the Ottoman empire and lingering after the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, ‘Europe’ emerged as the primary determinant of Turkish political history. The 1963 Ankara Agreement (the Association Agreement between Türkiye and what was then the European Economic Community) and the 1999 Helsinki European Council announcing Türkiye as an official EU candidate – events which marked the pinnacle of this perseverance both institutionally and legally – clearly showed that ‘Europe’ means ‘the EU’ for Türkiye as both an institution and an ideational project.

Therefore, from the start, the Turkish perception of Europe has been filtered through two ideational lenses: *‘Europe’ as a foreign policy orientation* and *modernity as an anchor*. After the 1999 decision and the equalization of the ‘Europe’ ideal with the EU *par excellence*, a further lens was added to the above list, and since then, the EU has also been perceived through a policy-based discourse. Especially after the 1999 Helsinki decision, Türkiye was required to carry out reforms particularly in fields of democracy and human rights. In this sense, ‘the EU appears as a transformative actor that has a crucial role in consolidating democracy, human rights, and rule of law in the country, with positive implications for foreign policy as well’ (Eralp & Torun 2012, pp. 85).

However much EU membership is perceived as a natural extension of the Turkish modernization process, a counter-argument also historically finds resonance in Turkish politics: *double standards discourse* (Alpan & Şenyuva, 2020, p. 49; Alpan, 2021, p. 122). Double-standard discourse has been prevalent in Turkish politics since the early years of European integration. This perception of the EU revolves mainly around the EU’s ‘insincerity’ and ‘insensitivity’ to Turkish priorities and values stemming from history and state tradition (Alpan, 2021, p. 122). Legal and political changes stipulated by the EU, such as the Copenhagen Criteria and the provisions in the Progress Reports, only instrumentalize Türkiye’s EU bid, while Türkiye is deliberately kept aside by the Union. The idea is prevalent in the country that despite completing all of the requirements, Türkiye will never be accepted as

an EU member and will face new preconditions every time the current set is met: '92% of Turks believe that the Union has "double standards" when it comes to Turkish accession', as it was put by Egemen Bağış, a former minister of EU affairs (Bağış, 2011).

In the post-2010 period, the above-mentioned double standards discourse also found resonance in political debates, particularly on the EU's transactional relations with Türkiye in the realms of migration and energy and in the debates revolving around the 15 July coup attempt in 2016, as will be elaborated below.

Shift from Accession Candidacy to Transactional Partnership: Three Dimensions and Three Milestones in Türkiye–EU Relations after 2010

The first point to be made regarding Türkiye–EU relations after 2010 is about the deterioration of EU conditionality and the backsliding in the EU-induced reform process in Türkiye. This is labelled in the literature the period of 'de-Europeanisation' (Aydın-Düzgit & Kaliber, 2016; Özçelik & Çakmak, 2022) or 'Europeanisation-as-denial' (Alpan, 2021). The political commitment to European integration began to undergo a transformation as early as 2005. This shift was observed not only within the ruling party at that time, the Justice and Development Party (AKP, Turkish acronym), but also among other domestic political actors. Simultaneously, there was a rise in Eurosceptical tendencies within the broader Turkish public. These dynamics were closely intertwined with the diminishing significance attributed to Europeanization and EU accession. The contestation of the EU within the wider Turkish public further contributed to changing perceptions of and attitudes towards European integration. That is, in the period after 2010, 'Europe' was no longer the *lingua franca* in the Turkish political landscape, and every political actor had to speak that language to assert their location within politics (Alpan, 2014, p. 69). In the EU camp, growing scepticism was also voiced about Turkish EU membership, including a rise in anti-Islamic and xenophobic notions (Hauge et al., 2016, p. 18). Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci sum up the main dynamic of this phase by stating that 'since 2005, "anti-Turks" in Europe and "anti-Europeans" in Türkiye have reinforced each other, generating a spiral of antagonism and a lack of reform in Türkiye, and increasing the distance between them' (Aydın-Düzgit & Tocci, 2015, p. 31). The growth

in the distance between Turks and Europeans has impeded constructive dialogue and cooperation on various fronts. The spiral of antagonism described by Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci continues to impact the relationship between Türkiye and the EU, creating challenges in fostering a more productive and mutually beneficial engagement between the two parties.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the influence of 'Europe' did not entirely vanish from the realm of Turkish domestic politics during this period. It continued to play a role in shaping economic policy orientations, security considerations, and identity debates. Consequently, this section aims to delve into the noteworthy developments that unfolded in the post-2010 era, examining the key issues that propelled Türkiye–EU relations in various directions. These issues have been identified through the insights and perspectives shared by our interviewees, allowing us to paint a comprehensive picture of the bilateral relationship.

Economics

As previously mentioned, the 1999 Helsinki decision had a significant impact on Türkiye–EU relations, particularly in terms of the transformative effects it triggered within Turkish politics, polity, and policies. This influence extended to various aspects, and the realm of the economy was no exception. Indeed, Türkiye's EU accession efforts entailed a significant level of economic policy convergence (Akman & Çekin, 2021, p. 296), in order to meet the economic elements of the Copenhagen Criteria, which emphasize a functioning market economy, the capacity to cope with competitive pressures, and harmonization with the *acquis* (European Council, 1993). Türkiye's efforts were therefore motivated by the twin imperatives of the economic benefits associated with the status of EU membership and the EU's financial assistance. Nevertheless, the influence of the EU on Türkiye declined markedly after 2008, coinciding with the onset of the global economic crisis. As the reform process ground to a halt, the economies of both entities suffered, leading to a downturn in their bilateral political relations (Akman & Çekin, 2021, p. 297). All in all, 'the EU's anchor for Turkish institutional reforms and leverage over Turkish politicians ended abruptly around 2010 as the accession process almost completely stalled' (Acemoğlu & Üçer, 2015, p. 23).

In the post-2010 period, the most significant milestone event regarding the thematic dimension of economics has been the modernization of the Türkiye–EU Customs Union Agreement, as also pointed out by our interviewees. The Customs Union (CU) and its institutional structure had contributed to EU–Türkiye relations and the introduction of EU-induced polity in Türkiye (The Turkish–EU Joint Parliamentary Committee that this chapter particularly focuses on is one of these institutions). Nevertheless, the overall backsliding in the reform process was reflected in the operation of the CU, as ‘institutional rule-based economic governance [was] weakened’ in this period (Arısan-Eralp, 2018, p. 3). Discussions on upgrading the CU started in 2014 at the initiative of the European Commission and were accelerated with the May 2015 declaration by Türkiye’s economy minister Nihat Zeybekçi and the European Commissioner for Trade Anna Cecilia Malmström (Arısan-Eralp, 2018, p. 1). Based on an impact assessment, the Commission recommended to the European Parliament and the European Council the commencement of negotiations for the modernization of the CU and ‘to further extend the bilateral trade relations to areas such as services, public procurement, and sustainable development’ (European Commission, 2016).

Another important development in the economic thematic dimension of Türkiye–EU relations during this period was the launch of the IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) II period in 2014 (which would last until 2020). Within the framework of the IPA II funding scheme, Türkiye was supposed to receive €4.4 billion, reduced to €3.5 billion in reaction to Türkiye’s distancing itself from the EU. These recent cuts in IPA funds due to democratic backsliding in Türkiye have served to politicize the funds (Toygür et al., 2022, p. 4).

During the post-2010 period, despite the deteriorating bilateral relations between the parties, the Commission’s annual reports on Türkiye referred to the country as a key partner in economic terms, making the economy a significant thematic dimension shaping relations. It could be argued that the economic criteria have been the most unproblematic set of Copenhagen Criteria in terms of Türkiye’s compliance with the EU *acquis* from the start. Similarly, the economic dimension has been the least conflictual aspect of the bilateral relationship in the post-2010 period, despite the overall deterioration of relations – something that needs to be noted when thinking about the context that has shaped the perceptions of the political actors.

Security

It has frequently been argued that Türkiye's potential contribution to the EU's security structure was perceived as a reason for the country to become a candidate for accession (see Toygür et al., 2022; Aybet & Müftüler-Baç, 2000; and Gregoriadis, 2006, for a discussion on the contribution of Türkiye's potential EU membership to the European security architecture). Thus, security has always been a significant thematic dimension of bilateral relations. From a post-structuralist perspective, 'security' has been the 'privileged signifier' characterizing discourses on 'Europe' in the Turkish political landscape (Alpan, 2010).

First, it must be noted that Türkiye–EU relations during this period have been significantly affected and shaped by global and regional political developments, leading to the emergence of two important dynamics regarding Türkiye's security-based preferences: transnationalism and a return to a realist security logic. To start with, the intensifying power struggles between the US, China, and Russia not only laid the foundation for a new multipolar system characterized by the pursuit of hard power but also prompted some middle-range powers to balance their interests in relation to the so-called great powers (Conley, 2023; Renda et al., 2023). With the rise of China and Russia in the so-called multipolar system, alternative foreign policy destinations have emerged for Türkiye, causing it to shun its existing ties with the United States. Türkiye's unique security relationship with Russia (epitomized by the purchase of S-400 missiles by the former) has also been evaluated by some as proof of Türkiye's shift to transnationalism, as well as signalling a departure from democratic principles (Arısan-Eralp et al., 2021). Moreover, due to the worsening security environment in the region, Turkish decision-makers, particularly after 2015, have opted for a new foreign policy line that increasingly demonstrates the primacy of conventional security concerns (Oğuzlu, 2020, p. 136). The Russian military involvement in Syria in late 2015, the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in late 2016, Trump's continuing efforts to undo the legacy of Obama, the increasing penetration of China into the Middle Eastern theatre, the growing geopolitical rivalry between Shi'a and Sunni power blocks, and Türkiye's worsening security situation at home caused a realist revival in Turkish foreign policy during this period (Oğuzlu, 2020, p. 129).

This shift in the geopolitical environment and Türkiye's renewed focus on a harder security logic also had a direct impact on bilateral Türkiye–EU relations, rendering the 'security' dimension as prevalent as ever. Even under the direct circumstances where Türkiye is perceived as undermining regional stability and security in the EU's neighbourhood (namely, the Eastern Mediterranean), EU foreign ministers have continued to recognize that 'the EU and Türkiye have a strong interest in an improvement of their relations through a dialogue which is intended to create an environment of trust' (cited in Toygür et al., 2022, p. 4). Moreover, we witness in the post-2010 period that issues like migration and energy are also included within the scope of security, i.e. securitized (see Buzan et al., 1998, and Buzan and Wæver, 2003, for main examples of the literature on 'securitization'). In this vein, the Türkiye–EU statement of March 2016 should be read as a response to the Syrian migrants trying to reach to the European shores via the Eastern Mediterranean during the summer of 2015. The statement, as announced by the European Council and Türkiye on 18 March, led to a reordering within Türkiye's migration policy and stipulated that 'all new irregular migrants crossing from Türkiye into Greek islands as of March 20 will be returned to Türkiye' and 'for every Syrian being returned to Türkiye from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Türkiye to the EU, taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria' (European Council, 2016).

Another pressing issue on the security agenda between Turkey and Cyprus during this period revolved around the sphere of energy. The existing dispute between Ankara and Athens over gas reserves and maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean flared up in July 2020 after Türkiye put out a Navtex that it was sending with the *Oruç Reis* research ship to carry out a drilling survey in waters close to the Greek island of Kastellorizo (Alpan, 2020; Alpan & Öztürk, 2022, p. 50). After the Navtex, Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called for an EU embargo on Türkiye given the country's latest 'illegal' drilling and exploration activities (Alpan, 2020). In this respect, it needs to be noted that non-normative reasoning based on security concerns has been shared by the two parties during the crisis. While Türkiye viewed the current dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean as a major threat to its national security stemming from its long-standing issues with Greece and Cyprus, the EU, as expected, supported its member. Turkish officials went as far as to refer to the Eastern Mediterranean as

the 'Blue Homeland', implying that Türkiye has an indisputable right to assert territorial claims in the region's maritime delimitation efforts.

Nevertheless, the most significant security-related event in the specified period that had repercussions for bilateral relations was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as also underlined by almost all interviewees. Türkiye has actively pursued a diplomatic solution since the war broke out. Ankara's initial reaction to Russia's attack on Ukraine was that Moscow's decision and stance were unacceptable, and it conveyed a message of support to Kyiv (Renda et al., 2023). Later, it decided to close the Turkish Straits to both littorals and offered to mediate between Russia and Ukraine (Çelikpala, 2022). The war highlighted Türkiye's dependence on NATO as its ultimate insurance policy vis-à-vis Russian expansionism. According to Bechev, in the longer term, the war would bring Türkiye closer to the West, whereas Türkiye's de-democratization limits its convergence with both the US and the EU (Bechev, 2022). In this respect, the Russian invasion could also be a way for Türkiye to refresh the country's stalled relationship with Western allies and to take part in the EU's future restructuring (such as the European Political Community initiative), since it is already clear that there is little chance of getting back to 'business as usual' with Russia (Wasilewski, 2022). Similarly, the Russian invasion was also pointed out by our interviewees as the most significant security-related milestone.

During the post-2010 period, there has been a notable shift in the nature of the bilateral relationship between Türkiye and the EU. The relationship has transitioned from being primarily normative and rule-based to becoming more pragmatic and strategic (Renda et al., 2023). This shift has further emphasized the significance of the security dimension within the relationship. Notably, developments in areas such as migration and energy have highlighted the relevance of security considerations in shaping the bilateral relationship. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine stands out as a pivotal event during the specified period, impacting the dynamics between Türkiye and the EU. However, despite contestation between the two parties, albeit motivated by different factors, they have managed to find avenues for cooperation, particularly in the realm of security. This is primarily due to Türkiye's critical role within the broader European security framework. Türkiye's strategic importance, its geographical position, and its efforts in addressing common security challenges have contributed to

the recognition of its role as an important partner in ensuring regional stability and security cooperation with the EU.

Identity

The Cold War and the ensuing profound social and political transformations led to the emergence of new social and political identities. Scholars particularly working on critical theory, post-Marxism, post-structuralism, postmodernism aimed to grasp these societal changes and the emerging complexities. European studies reacted to these dynamics by undertaking the reconceptualization of identity-based politics (Alpan, 2010). After the signing of the treaties of Maastricht (1991) and Amsterdam (1997), European integration became linked with issues such as democracy, minority rights, culture, belongingness, and multiculturalism. Although the relevance of identity to Türkiye–EU relations is rather a far-fetched debate, we will focus on the emergence of the EU as the *modernization anchor* under the rubric of the identity dimension regarding bilateral relations.

The late 1990s were a period in which Türkiye further formalized and institutionalized links with the EU, particularly after the 1999 Helsinki decision. In this respect, European integration has been used synonymously in Türkiye with ‘democratization’ (Aydın & Keyman, 2004; Müftüler-Baç, 2005; Öniş, 2009; Kubicek, 2005; Ulusoy, 2008) and ‘modernization’ (Alessandri, 2010; MacMillan, 2016). The anchoring of Türkiye to EU conditionality brought about by the Helsinki decision led to a comprehensive set of legal changes, particularly in the realms of human rights and democracy, which contributed for some time to the above-mentioned association between democratization and EU integration. The picture of EU–Türkiye relations started to change after 2005. Identity constructions in the post-2005 period rarely entailed references to ‘Europe’ or ‘the EU’ (Alpan, 2021, p. 122). In this respect, the post-2010 period is labelled the period of ‘de-Europeanization’ or ‘Europeanization-as-denial’ in the literature due to the decreasing political commitment to European integration and the erosion of the EU as the democratization actor.

As discussed in [Chapter 1](#) of this book, the concept of ‘de-Europeanization’ is crucial in understanding contestation and resistance against EU norms, values, and institutions. De-Europeanization refers to the potential reversibility of EU-induced reforms and instances

of resistance and contestation. The concept sheds light on the split between societal preferences and the interests of the political class, highlighting the potential stagnation or reversal of reforms during the accession process. This has been particularly the case in Türkiye during the post-2010 period. For example, the government's attempts to delegitimize and outlaw the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the government's 2014 ban on social media sites such as Twitter and YouTube were indicative of a reversal of the Turkish government's commitment to the EU conditionality. The prevalence of transnationalism in the relations, as was explored in the previous section, complements the picture, further adding to the erosion of the normative dimension of Türkiye–EU relations, relegating relations to a sectoral collaborative framework in fields such as energy and migration. In this vein, the keyword 'transnationalism' had been the most significant milestone characterizing Türkiye–EU relations in terms of the identity thematic dimension in the focused period, as stated by almost all of our interviewees.

On a different note, the 15 July 2016 coup attempt also contributed to the waning of the EU democratization perspective in the country. The EU's reaction to the state of emergency proclaimed after the attempt and the repression in the aftermath led to the rejuvenation of the double standards discourse (explored in the previous section) within the Turkish political circles on the grounds that 'the EU does not fully understand the magnitude and severity of the challenges Türkiye has been facing' (Anadolu Agency, 2018). This perception led to a further decoupling of Türkiye's democratization prospects from European integration after the coup attempt, in which the divergence between Türkiye and the EU on normative matters became even more apparent, leading to a significant strain in their relationship. The state of emergency, which lasted for two years (July 2016 to July 2018), played a pivotal role in exacerbating this divide. It provided a catalyst not only for the rise of an authoritarian regime but also for consecutive constitutional reforms. These reforms ultimately led to the replacement of Türkiye's parliamentary system with an executive presidential system in 2018, consolidating power in the hands of the president.

More recently, Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 further fuelled concerns regarding the erosion of rights and freedoms, the rule of law, and judicial independence. This withdrawal, coupled with the arbitrary dismissal of high-level bureaucrats,

particularly those in key economic positions, and their subsequent replacement with individuals closely aligned with the government, has raised red flags. These actions create a worrying trajectory, impeding Türkiye's progress towards alignment with EU norms and principles (Özçelik & Çakmak, 2022, pp. 7–8). As a result, unlike the economy and security dimensions, the identity issue has produced significant contestation dynamics not only within the Turkish political arena against the EU but also in the EU arena against Türkiye's shift from a democratic regime to a more authoritarian one. The issue of identity has generated substantial dynamics of disagreement and conflicting perspectives, reflecting the divergence of understandings and values between Türkiye and the EU on matters of governance and democratic principles.

Methodology

The primary method for this chapter is based on semi-structured interviews with members of the Turkish parliament who have joined the Türkiye–EU JPC, as well as an analysis of minutes from the 2010 meetings of the JPC between Türkiye and the EU. This combination of data sources offers a comprehensive method for comprehending the perceptions of the political elite, to investigate their motivations and priorities regarding Türkiye–EU relations. Understanding how MPs perceive the relationship can shed light on the main perception nodal points regarding European integration, as well as on whether and how the interviewees perceive the 'peripherality' of Türkiye within the bilateral relations over the thematical dimensions of economic, security, and identity.

We conducted interviews between 22 December 2022 and 20 February 2023. The selection of MPs was based on their participation in Türkiye–EU JPC meetings. We initially contacted the selected MPs via email or their respective political party headquarters, paying close attention to their participation in the most recent JPC meetings. Although we received responses from opposition party MPs, we were unable to secure appointments with MPs from the ruling party AKP and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP, Turkish acronym), despite visiting their offices in person. As a result of the tragic earthquake disaster that occurred on 6 February 2023 and the subsequent general election campaign, several opposition MPs were forced to cancel their

appointments. Consequently, we conducted face-to-face interviews with a total of nine MPs. However, to establish a general framework, we analysed the minutes of a total of 14 JPC¹ meetings held since 2010. In addition, the records of the TGNA from February 2022 to December 2022 were reviewed to incorporate the impact of the Ukraine conflict on Türkiye–EU relations into our analysis.

The incorporation of semi-structured interviews not only improved the study's validity and reliability but also provided the opportunity to obtain rich, in-depth perspectives directly from MPs. These interviews enable a nuanced understanding of parliamentarians' individual perspectives, experiences, and perceptions. The examination of JPC minutes provides valuable insights into the dynamics of bilateral relations as well as the impact of EU-related policies on Turkish parliamentary debates. The minutes of the meetings between Turkish and EU officials are a valuable historical record that provides insight into the negotiations, obstacles, and points of agreement that occurred during those meetings. By examining the JPC minutes, we can identify patterns of cooperation, key concerns, and the influence of EU policies on domestic decision-making. This ensures a multidimensional analysis of the political landscape: the triangulation of data from the diverse sources strengthens the findings' robustness and credibility, allowing for a thorough examination of the research questions and contributing to a better understanding of the complex dynamics within the Turkish political context.

Main Findings

Economy

Despite shifts in Türkiye's democratization process and EU aspirations, as well as changes in foreign trade priorities, particularly since 2010, Ankara maintains a strong interest in preserving its economic ties with the EU – the least conflictual area in terms of bilateral relations. However, as highlighted by various statements from Turkish parliamentarians and members of the European Parliament, there are significant challenges and concerns that need to be addressed.

There are several complexities surrounding the Türkiye–EU Customs Union, exploring issues such as visa liberalization, free trade agreements (FTA), technical barriers to trade, participation in EU

agencies, and the modernization of the Customs Union. One of the key concerns raised by MPs is the issue of visa liberalization. Turkish businesspeople are said to face hurdles in competing with their counterparts in the EU due to the visa question, which acts as a handicap and hampers the smooth functioning of the Customs Union. Interviewee #2 emphasized 'the necessity to solve the visa question, which is a handicap for Turkish businessmen and affects the good functioning of the Customs Union'. Another significant challenge stems from the FTAs negotiated by the EU with third countries. Although Türkiye is not directly involved in these negotiations, it is still expected to implement the agreements, creating difficulties for Turkish businesses. This places Türkiye in a disadvantaged position, as it must adhere to agreements that it has no say in shaping, potentially impacting its trade competitiveness. This is a common concern agreed upon by Turkish MPs, and they further labelled the situation as 'unfair'. For instance, one bureaucrat who took part in the JPC meeting mentioned that 'third countries refrain from signing FTAs with Türkiye if they have done so with the EU, which results in a serious competition disadvantage for Türkiye' (63rd JPC Meeting, 2010).

Technical barriers to trade pose further challenges within the CU. These barriers include import restrictions on goods previously moving freely within the EU, subsidies for public procurement, unnecessary inspections regarding intellectual property issues, counterfeiting within the free trade area, and transport quotas. Such barriers impede the seamless flow of goods and can hinder the economic benefits of the Customs Union. Moreover, Türkiye's non-membership in EU agencies for chemicals, food safety, and medical matters creates a gap in regulatory alignment. This not only affects trade harmonization but also hinders Türkiye's ability to participate in decision-making processes and contribute to shaping regulations that impact its economic interests.

The harshest criticisms raised by the former minister of EU affairs, Egemen Bağış, stated that the issue of double standards is also prominent in discussions surrounding the Customs Union. Egemen Bağış highlighted 'the perceived discrepancies in the treatment of Türkiye compared with other candidate countries'. Bağış posed a thought-provoking question, asking whether Europe can afford to lose Türkiye and highlighting the need for fair treatment and recognition of Türkiye's progress. Such criticism suggests that Türkiye feels it is being treated as a peripheral country despite being a part of the core. Referring to the

heightening economic competition among the US, China, and the EU, one interview participant pointed out:

The US was the world's leading economic power in the 2010s, followed by the EU in second place and China in the third. However, now that China has surpassed the EU, Türkiye can be the second after the EU. Ukraine cannot achieve this, and other candidate countries cannot either. (Interview #3)

This confidence was also evident during the JPC meetings, as Turkish MPs generally believe that if the EU wants to regain its economic dynamism in the post-Brexit era, it can do so only by establishing a strong partnership with Türkiye. On the other hand, in our interviews, one opposition MP conveys the following regarding the EU's stance towards Türkiye:

I have visited Brussels three times this year. Each time, we clearly felt that there is no progress on issues such as the renewal of the Customs Union, the work on migration legislation, or the topic of visa liberalization. None of these matters are being addressed. Developments related to human rights and the rule of law in Türkiye are seen as the most significant obstacles ahead, and everyone is awaiting the outcome of the election. (Interview #1)

In conclusion, the Customs Union between Türkiye and the EU is confronted with various challenges and concerns. Visa liberalization, free trade agreements, technical barriers to trade, participation in EU agencies, and double standards are among the key issues that require attention and resolution. Regarding the upgrade of the Customs Union, one should also add the Cyprus issue to this equation, as it was raised as a potential impediment to strengthening economic relations between Türkiye and the EU. Still, the MPs see Türkiye as an equal partner of the EU as well as a part of the 'core' regarding economic ties.

Security

As expressed by the MPs and found through the analysis of JPC minutes, the importance of security is evident not only in the context of EU relations but also at the heart of Türkiye's relations with the West. Three key issues have dominated the security agenda between Ankara and Brussels since 2010: migration, energy security, and the war in

Ukraine. This last has emerged as the most significant milestone event, underscoring the importance of the country in the EU security architecture.² We now first document findings in relation to the three thematic issues, then we explore the extent to which the war in Ukraine has changed bilateral relations in terms of the security dimension.

Migration. According to the interviews, there are various security-related perspectives and dimensions of Turkish–EU relations specifically concerning migration management and its broader implications. The first perspective emphasizes Türkiye’s role as a stabilizing force for the EU’s periphery, particularly in managing migration and ensuring security.

The EU wants to keep its periphery a little stronger for its own stability. It wants this for migration, and it wants this for security. Just imagine if Türkiye were to experience something like Syria. What would happen? The EU would collapse ... Therefore, even if Erdoğan tries to annihilate this country, the EU will want to keep it afoot because its interests require this. (Interview #4).

The second perspective revolves around the issue of visa liberalization, which was a part of the 2016 migration agreement between Türkiye and the EU. Opposition MPs express frustration over the EU’s failure to fulfil its obligations, such as progressing with the visa liberalization process and granting visas. However, it is important to note that visa liberalization involves a complex set of criteria that Türkiye needs to meet. For instance, an opposition MP told us during the interview, ‘We have fulfilled all our responsibilities in the migration agreement, but the EU is not doing its part. We need to create pressure there. Not only are they not progressing in visa liberalization, but they are also not granting visas to anyone right now’ (Interview #5).

The third perspective highlights the evolving nature of Türkiye–EU relations, shifting from a candidate country perspective to a negotiation with a third country. This change is attributed to the Syrian crisis and the subsequent refugee crisis, which compelled a re-evaluation of Türkiye’s membership negotiations. The focus shifted towards maintaining ties with Türkiye while prioritizing areas of mutual benefit rather than full membership. For one opposition MP, the characterization of the relationship as ‘transnationalism’ highlights the pragmatic approach of concentrating on mutually advantageous issues. He argues:

Especially after the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011, and with the subsequent refugee crisis becoming an increasingly pressing issue over the years, the perspective towards Türkiye naturally shifted away from membership negotiations ... Instead, the focus turned towards finding a way to keep Türkiye connected to the EU without severing the ties completely. The emphasis became on concentrating on the areas that would be more beneficial to the EU ... Rather than seeing it as a candidate country due to those transactional relationships, it's more like 'let Türkiye stay on the side and maybe we can have a partnership with them'. (Interview #1)

Finally, there is a perception that the EU places greater emphasis on migration control than on addressing concerns about declining democracy and human rights in Türkiye, as it is believed that the EU is primarily preoccupied with whether Ankara can stop the flow of migration from Türkiye to Europe. One MP explains this as follows:

Progress reports have turned into regression reports. The Commission's latest report is 140 pages long, and within those 140 pages, they just criticized. The only place they applauded was for hosting refugees. But ... democracy is almost non-existent. Human rights are almost non-existent, press freedom is almost non-existent, and European Court of Human Rights decisions are almost non-existent. Demirtaş and Kavala cases are almost non-existent. (Interview #3)

In a nutshell, the EU's interest in maintaining stability and managing migration and the pragmatic focus on specific areas of cooperation demonstrate the complex nature of evolving Türkiye–EU relations in terms of security considerations. However, criticisms of democratic decline and human rights issues point to ongoing challenges and disparities in priorities between the two sides. Although the normativity dimension of the bilateral relationship is eroding, which is resented by the MPs, this makes Türkiye even more indispensable for the EU security architecture, making it a core partner for European security.

Energy. The other component of Ankara–Brussels security relations has been energy. Türkiye has long been considered the energy hub for the EU. This has gained more significance particularly following the war in Ukraine.

You cannot find a solution to the energy crisis by bypassing Türkiye and solely relying on an agreement with Azerbaijan to double the capacity of the TAP [Trans Adriatic Pipeline]. Similarly, increasing the capacity of the Greece–Bulgaria Interconnector System cannot address the energy crisis that Europe will face. All these projects rely on Türkiye as a transit point. Consequently, if you continue to disregard Türkiye in this manner, you will not benefit the European Union, Türkiye, or the relationship between the two sides. (Interview #1)

This again points to the centrality of Türkiye to the European security architecture.

Russian invasion of Ukraine. However much the issue of migration was perceived by the interviewees as significant to the security dimension of bilateral relations, when asked about the key milestone event regarding security, almost all respondents mentioned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This could partly be because the interviewing period and the start of the invasion were very close together, while the migration issue had been on the agenda for some time.

To start with, almost all interviewees argued that the war in Ukraine showed how indispensable Türkiye is to the European security architecture. As one interviewee argued: ‘The fact that Türkiye is not an EU member is drifting us away, but if we need to think about security as a whole, it will include NATO as well as the EU, and of course Türkiye’ (Interviewee #1). Of course, this is a point not immune from harsh criticism by opposition MPs. One of our interviewees argued, ‘Whatever Türkiye is selling now is brutal power. The country is trying to carve a space for itself in the European security structure after the war in Ukraine ... Nevertheless, the country is now facing the risk of being thrown out of the Council of Europe. This is what really matters’ (Interview #4).

Another important point about the Russian invasion of Ukraine in relation to Türkiye’s centrality in Europe’s security framework is that Türkiye is able to play a brokerage role between the parties to the war, which is something ‘manageable for the EU’ (Interview #5). This interviewee continues:

The war has severely affected sectors like food and logistics, which is also quite problematic for the EU itself ... Because Türkiye is a part of this equation, the EU finds itself in a more comfortable zone ... That

is, the fact that Türkiye is a part of these relations makes the war more manageable for the EU. (Interview #5)

Identity

Although Türkiye claims to maintain a central position in its relations with the EU in terms of both security and economics, it is not an ambitious claim to assert that Türkiye has increasingly distanced itself normatively from the EU, particularly since the 2010s, and has strengthened its position as one of the periphery states that reluctantly attaches itself to the EU's democratic principles. There is a prevailing belief, particularly from a Turkish perspective, that the EU represents a project aimed at fostering democratization. As one of our respondents claimed:

the process of membership in the EU should be acknowledged as a process, and it should be pursued without making any concessions until the end of this process. The goal of this process is for Türkiye to attain universal values and to reach the standards, principles, and values that prevail in the European Union. (Interview #1)

While such ambition to become part of the EU still exists, it is commonly acknowledged by our interviewees and revealed in the JPC meetings that Türkiye gradually abandoned the progress it made in terms of democratic conditionality between 1999 and 2005, and moved towards becoming an authoritarian country, deviating from its path as a democratic nation. Another interviewee confirmed that, especially after 2010, Türkiye has experienced a regression in terms of the democratic values of the EU, and the ruling party, which operates with an unconventional confidence, has evolved from democracy towards an authoritarian system:

Let's take Erdoğan, for instance. Let him attend the European Council meeting. Why the hell does nobody look like me there, Erdoğan might wonder. Let's take Erdoğan. Let's bring him to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit and make him sit there. Erdoğan will say, everyone is just like me. It's that simple for him. When he goes there [Shanghai Cooperation Organization], does anyone mention Kavala or talk about his release? Does he differ from Putin? Lukashenko or China? There's no difference. Is this real Türkiye? It shouldn't be. (Interview #3)

All of this suggests that Türkiye carries out its relationship with the EU without fully adhering to democratic principles. Thus, according to the interviewees, the milestone event in terms of the identity dimension in Türkiye–EU relations has been the shift to transnationalism, which has rendered Türkiye’s position in the European integration process even more peripheral. Such a situation in bilateral relations is usually captured by the transactional relationship. As one interview participant notes:

Currently, there is a completely transactional relationship, to put it bluntly, which resembles horse trading. ‘Transactional’ may seem like a sophisticated term, but it’s just like negotiating at a horse market. What will we do about migration? Oh, here’s a migration agreement. What about intelligence and security cooperation? Oh, here’s an agreement for that too. (Interview #4)

Conclusion

There is currently almost no Türkiye debate in Europe. This is partly because of the deterioration of Turkish democracy and the erosion of EU conditionality in the country, but also due to the perpetual crises experienced by the EU itself. The EU, which has long projected liberal norms and values, has also been affected by these changes, especially after the Eurozone crisis of 2009. This crisis damaged the EU’s external reputation and caused internal disputes, weakening its integrity. Subsequent events like the Arab Spring, migration influxes, the rise of authoritarianism in member states (Hungary and Poland), Brexit, the impact of COVID-19, and the Ukraine war further distorted the EU’s vision of being a more integrated, harmonious, and united global actor. Consequently, the EU has struggled to project its normative agenda both externally and within its borders.

These challenges, characterized by declining democracy, geopolitical shifts, migration crises, internal disputes within the EU, and conflicts such as that in Ukraine, have all contributed to the deteriorating relationship between Türkiye and the EU and the silencing of the Türkiye debate in Europe. They have exacerbated existing differences and hindered cooperation on various fronts, impacting the overall dynamics between Ankara and Brussels. In fact, as early as 2008, Turkish–EU relations had already started to lose their initial zeal, prompting some

leading scholars to understand the dynamics of the bilateral relationship from the perspective of de-Europeanization.

Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, the refugee crisis, and the dispute over the Eastern Mediterranean problem, it has never been more crucial to comprehend bilateral relations between the EU and Türkiye. Although Brussels and Ankara have encountered numerous problems throughout their history, bilateral relations reached their lowest point during the aforementioned crises. Of these, the war between Russia and Ukraine is the one that has brought about a substantial transformation in the security and defence strategies of the EU. Moreover, this event has underscored the critical significance of enhancing diplomatic relations between Türkiye and the EU. While Türkiye's relationship with the EU initially revolved around its candidacy for membership, it has evolved into a strategic partnership based on mutual needs.

Against this background, this chapter has explored how the bilateral relationship in its current stalemate context is perceived by the Turkish elite, particularly after the 2010s. The interviews with the Turkish MPs who are or have been part of the JPC, a pivotal institution in the institutional aspect of bilateral relations since the 1963 Ankara Agreement, and analysis of JPC minutes show that with respect to the thematic dimensions of economics and security, the Turkish elite see Türkiye as quite a part of the 'centre', seeing both parties as equal partners equidistant from decision-making processes. Nevertheless, in terms of Türkiye's identity-related relation to the EU, the country is still seen as peripheral to the democratization and modernization processes regarded as indispensable to European integration – something which has been exacerbated with the rising transactional tone in bilateral relations.

Notes

- 1 The JPC meetings between 19 December 2018 and 17 March 2022 were not held due to the claim made by Turkish side regarding the Swedish parliamentarian (Evin İncir) representing the European Parliament, alleging proximity to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). The meetings were rescheduled following the departure of İncir from the JPC (Interview #1).
- 2 Another important thematic issue that was raised by the MPs was, not surprisingly, Cyprus, which we do not include into the analysis here. Despite being a significant game changer of the relations, the Cyprus issue does not have a direct bearing on the research question at hand on 'peripherality', which is a distinct topic on its own.

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Appendix

Table A7.1: Interviews with Turkish MPs serving in the Turkish–EU JPC

Interview code	Gender	Party affiliation	Political ideology	Date and type of interview
Interview#1	Male	Republican People's Party (CHP, Turkish acronym)	Centre left	23 December 2022 In person
Interview#2	Male	CHP	Centre left	22 December 2022 In person
Interview#3	Male	Good Party (İYİ Parti, Turkish acronym)	Centre right	20 February 2023 In person
Interview#4	Male	People's Democratic Party (HDP, Turkish acronym)	Left	3 February 2023 In person
Interview#5	Female	CHP	Centre left	22 December 2022 In person
Interview#6	Female	HDP	Left	14 January 2023 In person
Interview#7	Male	CHP	Centre left	16 January 2023 In person
Interview#8	Female	CHP	Centre left	16 January 2023 In person
Interview#9	Female	İYİ Parti	Centre right	22 January 2023 In person