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## **What does Erdoğan's new term in office mean for EU-Turkey relations?**

*The Turkish government has a transactional relationship with the EU – it is of interest to Turkey as a market for Turkish exports and as a provider of foreign direct investment, capital, and high technology. However, as Turkey has become more authoritarian, its accession process with the EU has stalled. The shift to the far right and the rise of nationalism among the Turkish electorate may lead the recently reelected President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to take an even more confrontational approach to EU-Turkey relations. Some experts suggest that Turkey's economic woes necessitate a rationalisation of its economic policy and a moderation of its relations with the EU. Others argue that political restraint in domestic and thus foreign policy is unlikely. Given the above, what can be expected from Erdoğan's new term in office regarding EU-Turkey relations? What are the parameters of the relationship, and what ruptures and continuities are to be expected?*

### **Evangelos Areteos, ELIAMEP, Athens**

EU-Turkey relations will be dominated by two main and rather opposing dynamics: Foreign policy competition and the search for an operational relationship. In any case, the relationship will enter a new phase of transactionalism in which both sides will try to negotiate according to their diverging interests. Brussels will likely lose its weight while EU member states will increasingly enter into further bilateral relations with Turkey.

Turkey will continue on the path of strategic autonomy and will be a constant competitor of the EU in foreign policy matters, especially concerning Russia. Due to its economic fragilities, and also its persistent quest for strategic autonomy, Ankara will keep focusing on developing its relations with Russia and the Gulf states, which will likely be a rigid obstacle hindering the finding of common ground with the EU. However, Ankara will not want to completely break away from the Western orbit and will still try to obtain some gains from the EU, mainly concerning trade and economy, with focus on political dialogue.

The migration issue will dominate deals on both sides. In addition, Ankara will seek an upgrade of the Customs Union Treaty, a topic which the EU will be reluctant to compromise on.

Greece, Cyprus and the southern Mediterranean are also likely to emerge as dominant regions of tension that could further complicate EU-Turkey relations.

**Yaşar Aydın, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin**

Financial and geopolitical necessities will push Erdoğan to look for a more pragmatic form of transactionalism with the European Union. His call for the resumption of accession negotiations, his subsequent approval of Sweden's accession to NATO and the appointment of Mehmet Şimşek as finance minister all underline this trend. The Turkish economy remains dependent on technology, capital inflows and investment from Europe, as well as the European market, which is the main destination for Turkish exports. The EU, in turn, needs Turkey as a partner in migration policy and as a mediator vis-à-vis Russia in the war in Ukraine.

However, a breakthrough in EU-Turkey relations is not to be expected - neither in EU accession nor in the modernisation of the customs union. For this to happen, Erdoğan would have to make a democratic U-turn and initiate reforms. However, an independent judiciary that guarantees democratic rights and freedom of opposition would undermine his power. Erdoğan will therefore continue to tread a fine line between Brussels and Moscow.

Against this background, it is advisable for Brussels to be realistic in its approach to Turkey. A weak and unstable Turkey could become increasingly susceptible to Russian influence. The EU needs to apply a pragmatic policy towards Turkey that stabilises it both economically and geopolitically without legitimising the country's autocratic regime.

**Yevgeniya Gaber, Atlantic Council, Istanbul**

The new Turkish government's EU policy is likely to be shaped by three main factors: the strong personal touch of President Erdoğan, and a limited role for institutions; the need to overcome the financial crisis caused by the unorthodox monetary policy of recent years, to rebuild the country after the devastating earthquake and to revive the economy ahead of the upcoming local elections; and efforts to normalise relations with neighbours and traditional partners.

This means that Ankara's policy vis-à-vis the EU is likely to be based on pragmatic interests, rather than common values; transactional cooperation, rather than strong institutional ties; and geopolitical tit-for-tat, rather than EU integration.

The "Western-friendly" names in the new government's economic bloc, like the Minister of Treasury and Finance Mehmet Şimşek and the new Chairwoman of the Central Bank Hafize Gaye Erkan, and Erdoğan's recent decisions to back the NATO membership bids of Sweden and Ukraine, obviously signal a desire to mend

shattered ties with the European partners – but only if and when Turkey's own interests are taken seriously.

This implies Turkey will try to ramp up its dialogue with Brussels – but will remain a tough negotiator, placing its own interests at the core of any talks. Ankara's renewed interest in Western investment, modernisation of the customs union and visa liberalisation gives the EU the additional leverage of conditionality in its relations with Turkey.

**Cengiz Günay, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip),  
Vienna**

Contrary to most polls which pointed to regime change, Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party managed to mobilise the majority of the electorate over the course of the two round of the May 2023 elections.

The victory came at the cost of a strengthened ultra-nationalist and ultra-conservative sector. Erdoğan relied heavily on the support of the MHP and smaller Islamist parties. Ultra-nationalists have amplified their say on security sector and will also set the tone on the Kurdish question.

His third - and presumably final term - will be characterised by the aim of stabilising the economy, consolidating the presidential system, keeping the nationalists at arm's length and guaranteeing a smooth succession.

The shift in economic policies and the change in Turkey's attitude towards Sweden's NATO membership in the wake of the elections highlight the country's dependency on its Western partners. However, Turkey's relations with the EU and the United States will remain transactional and pragmatic. Moreover, its foreign policy will continue to pursue a multi-vectoral approach aimed at reducing dependencies and balancing foreign policy options. Relations with Russia and regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Egypt should be understood through this lens. Indeed, external financial support will be crucial for regime security.

**Paul Levin, Stockholm University Institute of Turkish Studies,  
Stockholm**

Turkey has a new cabinet with numerous pragmatic ministers. Erdoğan's recent attempt to link Swedish NATO accession to a reboot of Turkey's long quest for EU membership resembles an attempt to improve ties with the EU. And while EU accession is unrealistic, Ankara has asked for Sweden's support to accelerate visa liberalisation and to update the old customs union. The country's dire economic situation is likely the main driver behind such moves, and a weakened Vladimir

Putin may dilute Erdoğan's incentives to continue to walk the tightrope between his Western allies and Russia.

However, the most important part of the cabinet remains: the president himself, who views Turkey squarely in the centre of world affairs. Turkey's autocratic system also imposes natural limits on integration with the European Union. The current shift is therefore likely more tactical than strategic, and is certainly not ideological. Turkish foreign policy will likely continue to be aimed at strengthening the country's autonomy and its position as a regional power. Turkey may desire a more transactional relationship with the EU, but it is unlikely to be an easy one.

### **Marc Pierini, Carnegie Europe, Brussels**

The main obstacles concerning EU-Turkey relations have remained the same during the past few years. These are, from an EU standpoint: the steady degradation of Turkey's rule-of-law architecture, as well as the refusal to abide by judgements from the European Court of Human Rights; and the non-recognition of the Republic of Cyprus, as well as the preference for a two-state solution on the island.

In addition, Turkey's "balanced policy" between Russia and Ukraine, and more generally between NATO and Russia, associated with the litigation around Sweden's accession to NATO, has introduced a new hurdle in its relationship with the EU. Turkey's stance in this conflict matters immensely for European and Western leaders. There are many reasons for Ankara to opt for a middle-of-the-road policy, but so far Moscow has taken substantial advantage of this stance in political, strategic and economic spheres.

It is hoped that the new presidential team in charge of foreign affairs and intelligence will find a way to relaunch a close dialogue with their EU counterparts and that both sides will be able to work together to identify new grounds for agreement.

### **Ebru Turhan, Turkish-German University, Istanbul**

Present-day EU-Turkey relations could be described as 'old wine in a new bottle'. EU-Turkey dialogue will be driven by the paradoxical co-existence of sectoral interdependencies and geopolitical rivalries. The overarching complexity of EU-Turkey relations will force both partners to rely on pragmatism. The parameters of Turkey's European policy will be shaped by national interests, international interdependencies, and Ankara's quest for regime security. Ankara's political pragmatism, coupled with the EU's increasing significance as an economic partner amidst growing economic instability in Turkey, may lead to its partial

rapprochement with the EU. Migration, trade, the European Green Deal, particularly the carbon border adjustment mechanism, and energy policies may promote cooperative trends in EU-Turkey relations. Conflictual dynamics will continue to appear though, especially concerning foreign and security policy, e.g., Cyprus, Syria, and Russia, and democratic governance. While the EU will prioritise the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova in its enlargement process, it will continue treating Turkey as a key third country. By doing so, the EU gives up its normative actorness vis-à-vis Turkey and gradually pushes EU-Turkey relations toward 'hyper-transactionalism'. This, in turn, intensifies the unpredictability and ambiguity of the relationship. The EU thus stands before a major challenge that it co-created: It requires to develop a 'principled' transactionalist approach toward Turkey that includes both normative and interest-oriented ingredients.

**Valeria Talbot, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), Milano**

After securing a new five-year term in office, President Erdoğan appears to be looking westwards again. However, this does not necessarily mean abandoning the path of foreign partnership diversification, or the balancing act the country has played between Russia and the West since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In fact, the change of tone and the renewed interest in joining the European Union, recently expressed by Erdoğan appear to reflect more a tactical move than a strategic shift. At this stage, recovering the country's economy is Turkey's imperative both domestically and in foreign relations. Inevitably, the economic driver pushes Ankara to turn again towards the EU, which remains by far its largest trade partner – bilateral trade therewith amounted to \$196.3 billion in 2022 – and the main source of [foreign direct investment](#) over the past 20 years. Pivoting on its economic lever, the EU is still a force of attraction and appeal for Turkey. Nevertheless, while Turkey is undoubtedly interested in revitalising bilateral cooperation in several sectors, questions arise about its real eagerness to revive the EU accession process.

**Karol Wasilewski, Institute for Turkey Studies, Krakow**

In his latest term in office, Erdoğan suggests that he will seek a new opening with the EU in order to save the country's economy. His political signalling will be accompanied by a narrative from the pro-government camp suggesting a possible pro-Western turn in Turkish foreign policy and presenting it as a chance to finally mend fences between Turkey and the EU.

While a better relationship between the two would benefit both Ankara and Brussels, the EU should focus more on Turkey's actions than on Erdoğan's declarations. This means that the EU should uphold all conditions that are tied to

the modernisation of the customs union and visa liberalisation. Meanwhile, it would also be wise for the EU to make full use of the “ceasefire” offered by the president and to use public diplomacy tools to improve its image among Turkish citizens, tarnished by years of anti-Western propaganda coming from pro-government media. All in all, the EU should try to use this opportunity to tie Turkey closer to itself, without giving Erdoğan the feeling that he is in charge of the process. Put another way, rapprochement will end exactly how it started - with Erdoğan’s words and on his terms.

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