

## Chapter 2: Attitudes towards the EU and Its Presence in the Mediterranean: Perceptions of Elite Actors in Turkey

The relationship between Turkey and the EU is of a peculiar nature not only due to the length and breadth of the engagement between the two entities, but also its mix of convergence and divergence over decades.

The evolution of this relationship has been greatly affected by changing political and economic circumstances in both the EU and Turkey, as well as international and regional dynamics. Despite the volatile nature of the relationship, Turkey is of paramount interest to the Union due to its strategic position, acting as ‘a buffer between the EU and a region whose instability might easily spread to Europe’.<sup>2</sup>

This is why Turkey–EU relations and their future direction are decisive for addressing the common challenges and threats emerging from the recent developments shaping the regional and global order including the Mediterranean area, where the implications of the post-2011 period are still visibly felt.

This chapter thereby attempts to offer a perceptual analysis on the EU, its relations with Turkey, as well as its policies in the Mediterranean by using the findings of the elite survey conducted in Turkey.

Among the countries in which the elite survey was conducted, Turkey appears to hold a distinct position as the only country having candidate status, since 1999. As a previous report has argued, the Mediterranean ‘does not exist as an individual region’ in Turkey’s foreign policy discourse with a well-defined and structured policy

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1 Emir Bayburt contributed in the preparation of the country profile section.

2 Nilgün Arısan Eralp, ‘Quo Vadis Turkey-EU Relations?’, in *Orient*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (2017), p. 24, <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/4223>.

framework.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, this chapter shows that while discussing the EU's role, the respondents tended to engage more on country-specific issues compared to those relevant to the larger Mediterranean region. Overall, the EU is seen as among the region's main stakeholders, yet its presence as a 'political player' is under question. There are also clear references to the EU's 'interest-motivated' approach towards the Mediterranean region in the elite discourse, which often noted a shift from a 'normative' to a 'realist' actor. In the context of Turkey–EU relations, the perception mainly revolves around the age-long membership deal, yet the centre of focus appears to be moving more to bilateral relations with individual member states in view of international and regional developments.

The structure of this chapter takes the form of three main sections, the first of which introduces a short country profile on Turkey including a brief history of EU–Turkey relations and their changing dynamics under the influence of domestic and regional developments. The second part is devoted to the findings and analysis of the elite survey, which sought to investigate the principal research question of 'how do elites perceive European policies in the Mediterranean area' including towards Turkey.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the findings, the chapter ends with a set of policy recommendations that could contribute to the navigation of the future relationship between the EU and Turkey as well as the future of Euro-Mediterranean relations. The entire chapter aims to foster informed public considerations and policy-making efforts related to Turkey–EU relations, and also the EU's policy efforts in the Mediterranean.

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3 Aybars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark, 'Turkey, the EU and the Mediterranean: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects', in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 7 (June 2017), p. 15, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13395>.

4 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey in MEDRESET', in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July 2017), p. 4, <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>.

## 1. Turkey in brief

### 1.1 Demographics

With an estimated population of 80.8 million<sup>5</sup> Turkey ranks as the eighteenth-largest population in the world. Although Turkey's rate of population growth fell in the beginning of 2010s from 1.4 to 1.3 percent, it is now 1.6 percent.<sup>6</sup> According to the UN Data, as is the case in most industrial countries, Turkey's society mostly resides in large cities, with urban residents making up 73.4 percent of the total population. Turkey is a very young country since approximately 88 percent of the population are below the age of 60, 63 percent are between the ages of 14 and 60, and 25 percent are younger than 14.

Geographically, Turkey acts a natural bridge between Europe and Asia, making it part of the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Asia, and Europe. Turkey's predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, lasted for 600 years and spanned three different continents: Southeast Europe, East Asia, and North Africa. This historical geographical location engendered and continues to develop potent bonds with culturally-different neighbouring regions, while offered the privilege of hosting a rich cultural mosaic.

Reflecting a vast and intricate ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, the population in Turkey include Turks, Kurds, Caucasians, Balkans, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, among others. Considering their number and geographic concentration, Kurds, by far, compose the most significant ethnic minority.<sup>7</sup> With the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the official language was determined as modern Turkish. In addition to the official language, Kurmanji (a dialect of Kurdish), Arabic, Zazaki (a dialect of Kurdish), Abkhaz, Adyghe, Georgian, Laz,

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5 Turkish Statistical Institute, 'Population Projections, 2018-2080', in *TurkStat Press Releases*, No. 30567 (21 February 2018), <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=30567>.

6 See UN CountryStats website: *Turkey: Social Indicators*, <http://data.un.org/en/iso/tr.html>.

7 According to the estimations by earlier studies, Kurds make up between 15 and 25 percent of Turkey's population.

Albanian, Bosnian, Armenian, Greek, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Coptic are still living languages within Turkey.

Turkey's population has a large Muslim majority, most of whom are Sunnis, with a small portion of other religious communities, including Christians and Jews. The Alevi, a long-persecuted Shia sect, constitute the second-largest religious group in Turkey right after the Sunni Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

Long being a country of emigration and immigration, Turkey has also become a crossroads of migratory movement, especially after the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011. Turkey now hosts over 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees within its borders,<sup>9</sup> providing them access to basic services along with employment and education opportunities.

## 1.2 Turkey's main stakeholders

Turkey has distinct stakeholders at the domestic, regional, and global levels and they play a significant role in the formation of the country's political, economic, and social power structures.

With the Constitutional Referendum in April 2017 and later the June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, the governance system in Turkey transformed into an 'executive presidency' from the parliamentary regime that had functioned since the formation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. In the new system of government, the executive power is vested in the incumbent president, who is the head of both the government and the state, embracing all responsibilities and authorities of the prime minister and authorized to issue executive

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8 The official number of Alevi population is a matter of contention. According to information provided by the Minority Rights Group, estimates range from 25 to 30 percent of the total population. See more at Minority Rights Group website: 'Minorities and Indigenous People in Turkey: Alevi', in *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*, updated June 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/?p=4940>.

9 For up-to-date figures, see the website of the Turkish Ministry of Interior-Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), *Migration Statistics: Temporary Protection*, [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection\\_915\\_1024\\_4748\\_icerik](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik).

decrees. While the premier's office has been abolished, the new post of vice president has been established, with cabinet members assigned by the president.<sup>10</sup>

The constitutional amendments are largely related to the government system with modifications in the judiciary and legislative branches. There are however two major changes regarding the parliament. With the new system, the number of MPs at the Grand National Assembly (TBMM) increased from 550 to 600, and the minimum age to run for the parliamentary election has been reduced from 25 to 18.<sup>11</sup>

In this setting, political parties still have a significant potency to influence the political dynamics as domestic stakeholders in Turkey. At present, the political parties represented in parliament include the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and the İyi [Good] Party, which was the most recent addition to parliament.

The AK Party has been leading politics in Turkey since 2002 and the incumbent president is popularly elected from within. In the June 24 elections, AK Party received 42.6 percent of votes, losing the majority in the parliament, yet through its 'People's Alliance' with the main nationalist party MHP, which had 11.1 percent of the vote, the two parties reached 53.7 percent.<sup>12</sup>

On the other side, the 'Nation's Alliance'—including CHP, İyi Party and Saadet [Felicity] Party (SP)—had 33.9 percent of the votes. CHP had 22.6 percent, and its allies İyi Party and SP took 10 and 1.3 percent respectively. Finally, HDP, the mainstream political party representing the rights of the Kurdish community in Turkey, received 11.7 percent of the votes.

Civil society is Turkey's next most-considerable stakeholder at the domestic level. These actors are significantly involved in the areas of

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10 Serdar Gülener and Nebi Miş, 'Constitutional Framework of Executive Presidency in Turkey', in *SETA Analysis*, No. 29 (April 2017), pp. 10-15, <https://www.seta.org/en/constitutional-framework-of-executive-presidency-in-turkey/>.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

12 See 'Turkey Elections 2018', in *TRT World*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/elections/>.

business, environment, human rights, politics, economy, and academia. During the last decade, however, the impact of the civil society elements has dissolved to a certain extent due to the volatile nature of Turkish politics.<sup>13</sup> At the economic level, on the other hand, business associations can be considered as another domestic stakeholder since they have the capacity to influence policy-making mechanisms in Turkey.

At the regional level, there are certain observable powerhouse states in the Middle East of today: Saudi Arabia as an Arab power, and Turkey, Iran, and Israel as non-Arab powers. While most of the Middle Eastern countries have been subjected to uprisings and political erosions, the three non-Arab states have continued to function with their solid governmental structures and institutions. In the evolving geopolitical struggle in the region, Turkey has opted for sustaining a balanced position between Israel and Iran. With economic and political co-operation overshadowing the crises, Turkey has tried to pursue a balancing act with these two countries. Moreover, Turkey sustains a warm relationship with Qatar both diplomatically and economically. From the onset of the Saudi-led blockade against Qatar, Turkey has shown its support to the country not only through its reconciliation efforts but also through military and economic aid.

Finally, on the international level, besides the EU, the US and Russia are considered as Turkey's main stakeholders. Regional dynamics, notably the Syrian conflict, have been shaping the course of relations between Turkey and these two major powers. Although unable to bring a concrete political solution to the conflict, the Astana Talks first initiated by Russia and Turkey, and later joined by Iran, in January 2017 represented a significant attempt towards implementation of a ceasefire and de-escalation zones. As part of the agreement under the Astana Talks, Turkey has also undertaken efforts to establish security posts in Idlib, located in north-western Syria on Turkey's border, to monitor the truce between the Syrian regime and the opposition.

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13 For possible indications on this topic within different societal segments in Turkey, see: Ulaş Tol, 'The Alevis Agenda from July 15 to the Present', in *PODEM Publications*, April 2017, <http://podem.org.tr/?p=4141>; Vahap Çoşkun, 'From July 15 Coup Attempt to the Referendum: Impressions from Diyarbakır', in *PODEM Publications*, April 2017, <http://podem.org.tr/?p=4132>.

### 1.3 Turkey–EU relations: A snapshot

Among the countries on the line to EU membership, Turkey is singled out as the country with the longest history of accession. The country's elongated history of relations with the EU took a major step when the accession negotiations began 14 years ago, however, over time the relations have had substantial rises and falls.

Although the commencement of accession negotiations is presumably the major achievement of the milestones in Turkey's relations with the European community,<sup>14</sup> the current picture looks different from what was initially anticipated. Currently, only 16 chapters have been opened and one has been provisionally closed.<sup>15</sup> The debate over Turkey's accession process has revolved around certain factors and foreign policy issues like the unresolved Cyprus dispute, European countries that are not in favour of Turkey's inclusion in the Union, and also the perception of Turkey vis-à-vis the EU as well as member states, which has been prone to change.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the dynamics of EU–Turkey relations have been constantly shaped according to domestic and regional developments both in and outside of Turkey and Europe. In the current picture, as also became evident in our elite survey, the main areas of discussion between the EU and Turkey can be classified as the visa liberalization process, revision of the Customs Union (in a way that the agreement would benefit Turkey more than its current state), the rise of rightist political groups within the Union, and the refugee crisis.

By 2016, relations had become significantly challenging for both parties. In 2017, from the EU's perspective, there were a number of complicated issues within Turkey, and the points of critique touched

14 See the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Turkey-EU Relations*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-the-european-union.en.mfa>.

15 See the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Directorate for EU Affairs, *Current Situation in Accession Negotiations*, updated 6 June 2017, [https://www.ab.gov.tr/current-situation\\_65\\_en.html](https://www.ab.gov.tr/current-situation_65_en.html).

16 On Turkey–EU relations, see: Çiğdem Nas and Yonca Özer, *Turkey and EU Integration. Achievements and Obstacles*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017; Çiğdem Nas *et al.*, 'IKV Report on Turkey-EU Relations: Keeping Together in the Face of Multiple Challenges', in *Economic Development Foundation Publications*, No. 288 (June 2017) <https://www.ikv.org.tr/ikv.asp?id=1922>.

upon the following: the extension of the State of Emergency, which was put into action following the failed coup attempt in 2016; the freedom of press and expression; the supremacy of the rule of law and the separation of powers; and transparency. Another significant issue between the sides was the migrant crisis. On 18 March 2016, the third EU–Turkey Summit took place,<sup>17</sup> and both parties came to mutual terms regarding the issue of irregular migration through a readmission agreement. On the other hand, the acceleration of the visa liberalization process for Turkey was a part of this agreement, which has yet to be realized and is affected by the strained relations between the parties.<sup>18</sup>

The position of individual EU member states regarding Turkey, as well as Turkey's bilateral relations with these countries, is equally decisive in the push and pull dynamics of Turkey–EU relations. Turkey's relations with member states do not appear to develop on a parallel course in line with the Union's approach as an institutional entity. Seeing that openness towards Turkey and its partnership varies from one member state to another according to political, economic, and social factors, Turkey pursues different levels of relationships with EU member states. Relations with Germany have, for example, experienced crises, as Germany not only asked for the complete suspension of the negotiation talks in September 2017, but also affected by the diplomatic tension over election campaigns, while Germany, at the same time, pushed for a specific role of Turkey in terms of migration.

#### *1.4 Regional issues and interactions with the EU*

At the beginning of the 2010s, the EU displayed the strategy of intensifying, 'bilateral relations with all countries in the region, particularly through trade agreements and reform programs under the ENP, but also by

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17 See *EU-Turkey Statement*, 18 March 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement>.

18 See Nathalie Loiseau, Ömer Çelik and Jean Yves Le Drian, 'EU to Send Team to Turkey for Visa Exemption Talks', in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 4 April 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/eu-to-send-team-to-turkey-for-visa-exemption-talks-129754>.

investing in region-building endeavors such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).<sup>19</sup>

Europe had the expectation that these institutions would transform the region into a more peaceful, stable, and prosperous neighbourhood. Similarly, Turkey's former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu devised a 'zero-problems with neighbours' policy. At that time, Turkey's trajectory had already changed from pro-Western and military-enforced secularism to a nation embracing its past and welcoming more religious identities while increasing its engagement with the Muslim and Arab countries in the region.<sup>20</sup> However, both the European and Turkish strategies appear to have been unable to realize their prospects as the Middle East was inundated with conflicts following the events of the Arab uprisings.

Turkey was directly influenced by the conflict in Syria, with which it has a 900-kilometer-long border. In the beginning, Turkey 'was well positioned to play a guiding role'<sup>21</sup> as 'Ankara first urged the Syrian leadership to carry out meaningful political reforms, and then when that failed cut its ties with the regime'.<sup>22</sup> Due to its ties with parts of the Syrian opposition, Turkey had higher stakes in Syria than did the EU. Ankara thus participated in the Astana talks, together with Iran and Russia. In late 2017 and early 2018, Turkey's attention shifted to the Democratic Union Party (PYD)/People's Protection Units (YPG) forces, which are linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization located in northern Syria. Turkey struggled and continues to combat against the expansion of ISIS and the formation of an the Democratic Union Party (PYD)/People's

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19 Eduard Soler i Lecha and Melike Janine Sökmen, 'Turkey and Its Transatlantic Partners in the Wider Mediterranean: The European Perspective', in Sasha Toperich and Aylin Ünver Noi (eds), *Turkey and Transatlantic Relations*, Washington, Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2017, pp. 149-150, <https://archive.transatlanticrelations.org/?p=3048>.

20 Ziya Öniş, 'Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East', in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2014), pp. 203-219.

21 Malik Mufti, 'Turkey's Choice', in *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Winter 2017), p. 73.

22 Ibid.

Protection Units (YPG) corridor within northern Syria, with operations including the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch.<sup>23</sup>

The refugee influx which escalated with the Syrian conflict has become another issue of strategic importance between the Union and Turkey. The migrant crisis has created division in the EU over how to best deal with resettling people. Turkey has been shouldering a great responsibility by hosting a massive number of Syrians under temporary protection<sup>24</sup> and took a series of steps including legislation on migration management not only to provide humanitarian aid, but also to protect these peoples' fundamental rights and address their social and economic needs. On the other side, the refugee crisis has become a major challenge for the EU with increasing rightist trends, which has appeared to make it harder for European countries to accommodate the migrants.<sup>25</sup> To enhance migration co-operation with Turkey, the Re-admission Agreement—signed in 2013 and fully applicable in 2016—intended to reduce the flow of migrants and asylum seekers moving from or through the country to the EU. The 2018 Turkey progress Report by the European Commission highlights the decrease in irregular crossings and in saving lives in the Aegean Sea since the implementation of the Action Plan, as well as Turkey's good progress on migration and asylum policy.<sup>26</sup>

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- 23 See Merve Seren, Murat Yeşiltaş and Necdet Özçelik, 'Operation Euphrates Shield Implementation and Lessons Learned', in *SETA Publications*, No. 97 (2017), <https://www.setav.org/en/?p=7306>.
- 24 Temporary protection is granted to Syrians within the framework of Article 91 of Law No. 6458 of 4 April 2013 on Foreigners and International Protection and Temporary Protection Regulation of 22 October 2014.
- 25 See Krisztina Than, 'Hungary Seeks Broader Anti-Migrant Alliance after Austria, Italy Elections', in *Reuters*, 12 March 2018, <https://reut.rs/2p4epOW>.
- 26 European Commission, *Turkey 2018 Report*, SWD(2018)153, 17 April 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0153>. According to the European Commission, the EU–Turkey agreement reduced irregular arrivals by 97 percent, while the number of lives lost at sea has diminished also. See European Commission, *EU–Turkey Statement Two Year On*, April 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20180314\\_eu-turkey-two-years-on\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20180314_eu-turkey-two-years-on_en.pdf).

Another regional point of discussion between the EU and Turkey has been the historical conflict over Cyprus.<sup>27</sup> Cyprus has been going through an on-and-off peace process with uncertainties on the future of the reunification talks. In 2016, two summits took place which remained ineffective due to Turkey's shifting its foreign policy focus to Syria and the rising importance of the migration crisis in the Middle East. In 2017, the Cypriot leaders met in Geneva for a new negotiation process, but this meeting did not result in a significant impact on relations.

The next agenda item between Turkey and the EU at the regional level is energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean, where the natural gas discoveries in recent years have introduced new trade opportunities as well as disputes over drilling rights and maritime borders. Turkey has further shown its opposition to gas exploration by Greek Cyprus—with its argument resting on the violation of Turkish Cypriots' rights—mainly due to the politically-unresolved Cyprus issue.

Taken together, it could be underlined that the issues—notably the Cyprus question, the relations with Greece over the Aegean Sea, the natural gas discoveries in the Mediterranean as well as the repercussions of the Arab uprisings including the migration crisis—are not treated under a unified or single Mediterranean policy but are distinct foreign policy issues in Turkey's agenda.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. Elite Survey: Research findings on Turkey

### 2.1 Methodology

The methodology of this study is based on a qualitative interviewing method to provide a deeper understanding and assessment on (1) elites' perceptions of EU policies in Turkey and the Mediterranean; (2) geopo-

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27 On the background of the Cyprus issue, see: Çigdem Nas and Yonca Özer, *Turkey and EU Integration*, cit.

28 Aybars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark, 'Turkey, the EU and the Mediterranean', cit., p. 5.

litical challenges and policy issues; and (3) the EU's impact in the region and (4) the effectiveness of its policies. The chapter further aims to acquire insights on expectations from the Union, and future steps for Turkey–EU relations that would contribute to the EU's policy-making efforts.

To this end, the elite survey was conducted in three cities of Turkey—Istanbul, Ankara, and Diyarbakır—between November 2017 and March 2018 with 19 interviewees<sup>29</sup> (see anonymized list of interviewees in the Annex). In line with the research objectives, which target the 'local actors at the senior level' through a top-down approach,<sup>30</sup> the selection of interviewees involved purposive methods. While selecting the local elites, their knowledge on and potential in analysing social dynamics and politics in Turkey and influence over policy-making processes were taken into consideration.

The researchers carried out in-depth interviews with senior state officials; academics and researchers at universities and NGOs; professionals from business and media sectors; and CSO representatives with different social and political leanings. Despite the limitations, the researchers tried to maintain a balanced approach in the selection of interviewees, aged between 30 and 60, in terms of gender and social identity.

In three main parts, this section first explores the perception of the EU in Turkey and the effectiveness of EU policies at the state and public level; the second section delves into the cooperation and policy areas with the EU and the third section focuses on the EU's regional role and presence in the Mediterranean.

All interviews were anonymous and not recorded, and the interviewees were informed about the interview and the project content beforehand. The interviews were between 30 and 45 minutes in duration, and were carried out either in person or, as in two cases, by Skype and phone. The interviews were conducted by the author together with two researchers at PODEM, and the researchers only took notes during the interviews.

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29 Preliminary meetings for research arrangements took place before the actual interviews.

30 Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, 'Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations...', *cit.*, p. 3.

Before moving to the following part, it should be noted that the chapter does not claim that the survey findings presented here form a general depiction of the views of the elite actors in Turkey, but are illustrative of the major themes.

## 2.2 Perception of the EU as an institution, and of its member states

In view of the multi-pronged nature of Turkey–EU relations, there is a high awareness and knowledge on the EU as an institution and its policies, along with individual EU states, at the elite level in Turkey. Although counted an important stakeholder for Turkey, the EU is not interpreted as an ‘influential’ political actor in the Mediterranean region, and is mostly referred to as a soft-power practitioner and trade partner. It was further observed at the time of the interviews that the perception of the EU is closely linked to Turkey’s EU membership deal and relations with certain member states, primarily Germany, France, and the UK as reflected in this section.

The cyclical moments of conflict in Turkey’s relationship with the EU were said to be an important factor, which has resulted in attitude change towards the Union at the official level. To this end, it was argued that the public perception was highly supportive of the Union and it was seen as an anchor for reform notably between 2002 and 2005, during which the accession negotiations were officially opened with Turkey, and a series of legislative reforms were introduced to meet the accession criteria.<sup>31</sup>

‘Turkey has been knocking on the EU’s door for more than fifty years, and during this time, there are countries that joined the EU within a relatively shorter period. This ‘on-hold’ situation has surely shaped the public opinion.’<sup>32</sup>

The recent growth of the far-right movements across Europe, as well as the politicization of Turkey in European electoral debates, were seen with concern. ‘Looking at the last five years, instead of an inclusive approach, observing anti-

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31 European Commission, *Turkey 2005 Progress Report*, SEC(2005)1426, 9 November 2005, [https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB\\_Iliskileri/Tur\\_En\\_Realitons/Progress/Turkey\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2005.pdf](https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/AB_Iliskileri/Tur_En_Realitons/Progress/Turkey_Progress_Report_2005.pdf).

32 Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018.

Turkey sentiments along with the rising Islamophobia has had a decisive role on the attitudes of the public opinion in Turkey to Europe and the Union.<sup>33</sup>

From the side of Turkey, the perception was that despite their severity and intensity, these cyclical moments have not reached the point of turning one's back on Europe entirely. This is due to the dense economic, cultural, and societal exchanges between the two sides over decades, as well as the presence of a sizable Turkish diaspora residing in Europe,<sup>34</sup> which was viewed as adding a further dimension to the relations that cannot be disregarded.

One point which resonated in the interviews was that either the EU or its member states have already come to the table with alternative proposals to shape the continuation of Turkey's accession process. These are (1) privileged or strategic partnership; (2) long-term gradual steps towards membership; (3) freezing the talks and choosing a wait-and-see approach; and (4) the cancellation of the accession deal altogether. According to senior officials, such scenarios keep the relations in limbo, stressing that the root of Turkey–EU relations has a '*supra-state*' nature:

'Thinking of its geopolitical position, Turkey has always been a strategic point of the region. Rather than keeping the rhetoric on strategic partnership, there is the need to look at the possible gains of Turkey's accession to the Union with a win-win scenario, especially in addressing common problems.'<sup>35</sup>

'The EU is a commonly-recognized goal; this view has not been abandoned, no matter that Turkey has been under the administration of different governments.'<sup>36</sup>

On Turkey's road to EU membership, the decades-long Cyprus issue was described as 'a deadlock' by both officials and experts. One official commented that the resolution of the Cyprus conundrum would open the door of progress on EU–Turkey relations, while a senior academic

33 Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

34 According to figures provided by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkish people living abroad exceeds 6 million, and around 5.5 million of whom live in Western Europe. See the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Turkish Citizens Living Abroad*, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-expatriate-turkish-citizens.en.mfa>.

35 Interviewee 14: EU affairs counsellor, male, phone, February 2018.

36 Interviewee 2: Specialist on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

pointed to the row on oil and gas reserves and the drilling rights in the eastern Mediterranean region, a contentious issue between Turkey and Greek Cyprus that has been ongoing for years. The instruments that the EU Council put into force for the economic development of northern Cyprus prior to the Greek Cypriot accession to the EU—including the Green Line Regulation, Direct Trade Regulation and Financial Aid Regulation—were also said to be unable to fulfil their prospects.

‘The Cyprus issue is what has brought us to the current scene in Turkey–EU relations. It is one of the underlying reasons and the starting point of the political disagreements. The dispute has created a kind of erosion on the bilateral relations. Both sides have been so far unable to propose an effective solution.’<sup>37</sup>

‘On the side of the EU, the Cyprus issue has become a “convenient excuse” to refer to whenever a delay in the negotiation process is put on the table.’<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, the EU’s absorption capacity—which was originally expressed in the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria and exacerbated with the ‘big bang enlargement’ of 2004 and 2007 that paved the way for the membership of 12 countries in Central and Eastern Europe—was perceived to influence Turkey’s accession deal and its position vis-à-vis the EU. The implications of the EU’s enlargement—for its institutions, finances, and cultural identity—are claimed to make EU policy-makers as well as the public wary about additional expansion, including to Turkey.<sup>39</sup>

‘There is a problem of absorption from the side of the EU—the problem of Turkey’s absorption into the Union, which contributes to scepticism towards Turkey.’<sup>40</sup>

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37 Interviewee 3: Senior academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

38 Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

39 Aslı Toksabay Esen, ‘Absorption Capacity of the EU and Turkish Accession: Definitions and Comments’, in *TEPAV Policy Briefs*, 9 May 2007, <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/1076>.

40 Interviewee 8: Academic, female, Ankara, December 2017.

‘The EU and Turkey are sitting at the same table, but to leave off, neither part wants to take the responsibility. The EU is still struggling to get ready for the inclusion of Turkey.’<sup>41</sup>

On the other side, the regional and domestic problems—most notably the Syrian civil war, the refugee crisis, and the fight against terrorism—that Turkey is facing were perceived as ‘not independent from the relations with the EU in general’. During the interviews, particular importance was attached to the EU’s attitude and lack of support on Turkey’s counterterrorism efforts and the 2016 coup attempt. The Union was also observed to adopt a similar attitude while considering Turkey’s national interests and sensitivities in the security of its borders, notably in relation to the military operations in Syria against the PYD/YPG that it acknowledges as the offshoot of the outlawed PKK. One comment was that the EU’s conditional stance at critical times poses a handicap on ensuring mutual trust and collaboration.

Among the member states, three countries—namely Germany, France, and the UK—appear to occupy more space in perceptions at the elite level. Starting with Germany, the prevailing view was that Germany—one of the ‘big four’ of the EU together with France, Italy and, the UK (on its way to leaving the Union)—is a central actor when it comes to EU decision-making, thus steering the direction of Turkey’s accession process, especially with its public call to terminate the talks. It was perceived that whenever German governments were supportive, relations moved forward, otherwise the progress remained in stalemate. ‘Germany and France interpreted Turkey’s accession to the EU as a “civilization problem”. This developed a cumulative reaction in Turkey.’<sup>42</sup>

‘Germany’s position to Turkey seems complicated as it has not made up its mind on how it should approach Turkey. This is a rivalry of a developed and a developing country; especially from the side of Germany. Despite the disputes, Germany considers Turkey an important partner.’<sup>43</sup>

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41 Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018.

42 Interviewee 3: Senior academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

43 Interviewee 1: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

‘While the pragmatic pattern of German and Turkish relations was accentuated during the interviews in terms of the traditionally dense political, societal, and economic linkages, 2018 is seen a recovery period for both sides, which are dependent on each other on the issues of migration and security.’<sup>44</sup>

France is perceived to be placing more priority on its relations with Turkey compared to the time of the Sarkozy (2007–2012) and Hollande (2012–17) administrations, despite President Emmanuel Macron’s statement on ‘no prospect’ for Turkey’s EU accession.

‘Thinking of Macron’s political gesture, France appears to take a warmer stance towards Turkey now, yet his move may not bring about significant changes in Europe’s attitude unless Germany is in.’<sup>45</sup>

‘If France can keep itself distanced from populist rhetoric, this will help make progress on averting anti-Turkey sentiments in Europe.’<sup>46</sup>

Particular emphasis was put on co-operation with France on the migration crisis and counterterrorism efforts, notably against ISIS. The defence sector is another field where Turkey and France are trying to boost collaboration, one example being Turkey’s 2018 deal with the French–Italian joint venture Eurosam on air and missile defence systems.<sup>47</sup> It was however noted that the improving relations are not expected to bring progress on Turkey’s membership, but merely influence the bilateral ties.

Among European actors, the UK, whose days as an EU member state are numbered, has historically been open to Turkey joining the EU. The UK’s position to Turkey is generally viewed positively, including its acknowledging stance on Turkey’s move to secure its borders from the perceived security threats: ‘The UK is a good ally of Turkey in Europe, sharing Turkey’s concerns especially on security and terrorism.’<sup>48</sup>

44 Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018.

45 Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

46 Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

47 See Cyril Altemeyer and Leigh Thomas, ‘Turkey Awards Missile System Study to Franco-Italian Group, Turkish Firms’, in *Reuters*, 5 January 2018, <https://reut.rs/2CE9IUf>.

48 Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

The Brexit process is understood as an important factor in future relations with Turkey, as the UK is now in need of ‘more friends and trading partners outside of Europe’<sup>49</sup> and is seen to prioritize bilateral relations on regional security and trade. Being the second largest export market for Turkey,<sup>50</sup> the UK is expected to remain in the spotlight as far as economic partnership is concerned.

Despite the volatility in relations, the ‘organic bond’ between Turkey and the Union was underscored, which was said to constitute a solid basis to develop mutual confidence, as well as the continuous diplomatic dialogue, which is believed to add vitality to the relations and accelerate progress on main policy areas such as foreign policy, trade, security, and migration.

‘Sociologically-speaking, breaking ties with the EU would be difficult for Turkey. A certain part of people in the country is in favour of Europe for specific motivations, mostly education and tourism.’<sup>51</sup>

‘Despite the fact that the EU has been convulsed with its own problems, there is still a demographic which sees the EU a threshold to sustain stability.’<sup>52</sup>

Referring to the possible gains of the integration process from the side of the public, it was put forward that the EU’s leverage can be reinforced as long as the Union is willing to take steps towards advancement in certain policy areas, especially on visa liberalization, which is further detailed in the following sections. This tendency was also said to exist among the business community with the expectation of improvement in Turkey–EU relations as well as in relations with EU member states, in line with the economic considerations.

However, the interviewees also pointed to the psychological ground of the public attitude with reference to cultural identity, more

49 Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı, ‘Europe and the Syrian Conflict: Policies and Perceptions’, in *PODEM Publications*, September 2017, p. 35, <http://podem.org.tr/?p=4552>.

50 Turkish Statistical Institute, ‘Foreign Trade Statistics, November 2018’, in *TurkStat Press Releases*, No. 27794 (31 December 2018), <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=27794>. See also Margarethe Theseira, *Bilateral Trade between Turkey and the UK*, DAC Beachcroft, March 2017, <https://www.dacbeachcroft.com/media/823304/bilateral-trade-between-turkey-and-the-uk.pdf>.

51 Interviewee 7: Journalist, author, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

52 Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

specifically the debate on the impact of Turkey's EU membership on European identity and multiculturalism.<sup>53</sup> The argument was that at the very beginning, accession to the EU was perceived as an asset for Turkey to achieve its foreign policy objective of 'Westernization', which in return triggered the question of 'Are we European?' among the public.<sup>54</sup> Considering the fact that the changing international and regional context surrounding Turkey has led it to strengthen ties with its neighbours and function as a regional actor, Turkey's inclusion in the EU is now expected to be perceived to be a possible gain for the Union, especially addressing the challenges on cultural and religious diversity.

### 2.3 Co-operation and policy areas with the EU

The dynamics of the relations have evolved over a number of policy areas under the influence of the changing political and economic situation in both Europe and Turkey along with international and regional dynamics. In the elite survey the most highlighted policy issues for co-operation between the EU and Turkey can be discussed under four categories, namely trade and economy, visa liberalization, migration and security, and civil society.

*Trade and economy:* In broad terms, Turkey and the EU rely on solid economic and commercial ties, with Turkey being the EU's fourth-largest export destination and fifth-largest import source, respectively with 84.5 billion euro and 69.8 billion euro worth of trade, according to 2017 figures.<sup>55</sup> Because economic relations are subject to political influence, the nature of the business environment in both Turkey and the EU is seen to play a vital role vis-à-vis perceptions. Given the current outlook of EU–Turkey relations, although trade relations with individual

53 See Meltem Müftüleri Baç, 'The European Union and Turkey: Democracy, Multiculturalism and European Identity', in *RECON Online Working Papers Series*, No. 2011/20 (July 2011), <http://www.reconproject.eu/projectweb/portalproject/AbstractRECONwp1120.html>.

54 Interviewees 7 and 8.

55 See European Commission DG Trade website: *Countries and Regions: Turkey*, <https://europa.eu/!Kr48Jd>.

EU states are continuing, these bilateral economic relations are seen as unable to provide any added value to the future of EU–Turkey relations.

It was further commented that European companies adopt a relatively principled attitude to Turkey whenever the relations are strained, while Turkish companies have a ‘pro-business’ approach, setting political and economic interests apart from each other.<sup>56</sup> ‘There is a high level of economic rationality in Turkey, and the EU is aware of this.’<sup>57</sup>

The ‘pro-business’ attitude within Turkey’s business community was also mentioned as a factor facilitating the ‘resilience’ of Turkish companies. It was understood that Turkish companies opt for diversifying the market place and explore new investment areas if the political climate poses a challenge against their operational zones, as previously witnessed in the Russia–Turkey jet crisis.<sup>58</sup>

Looking at the current challenges for economic relations, the modernization of the Customs Union constitutes one of the primary areas of concern. Officials pointed to the ‘mutual benefits’ of the renewal of the agreement by extending its scope to include public procurement, services, and agricultural sectors (i.e., beyond the processed agricultural products) with possible economic growth for both sides.<sup>59</sup> The commentators indicated the lack of consensus within the EU on whether to start the talks or not, especially with the opposition of Germany, linking the start

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56 The foreign trade figures provided by the Turkish Statistical Institute appear to support this argument. Despite the fact that Turkey’s relations with the EU and major EU member states, notably Germany, have undergone a period of high tensions in the last three years, exports to the EU showed a 10.9 percent increase in 2018 compared to the previous year, while the main partner for exports was Germany with over 1.4 billion dollars, followed by the UK and the Italy as the second and third. See Turkish Statistical Institute, ‘Foreign Trade Statistics, November 2018’, cit.

57 Interviewee 15: Businessman, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

58 See ‘Russia Drives Turkey to Seek out New Markets’, in *Daily Sabah*, 9 February 2016, <http://sabahdai.ly/nQzqhh>.

59 See BKP Development, Panteia and AESA, *Study of the EU-Turkey Bilateral Preferential Trade Framework, Including the Customs Union, and an Assessment of Its Possible Enhancement. Final Report*, Brussels, European Commission DG Trade, 26 October 2016, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/155240.htm>.

of the negotiations to the decline in democratic norms and the human rights situation in Turkey.

On the other side, the deepening of the Customs Union is seen as an advantage for Turkey's regulatory and legal harmonization to the EU *acquis* on trade, especially on attracting more European investors to the Turkish market.

'Whenever a European company partners with a Turkish one, coherence between the companies' legal and trade legislations is pretty crucial to quickly familiarize with each other's business environment and facilitate future collaboration. Therefore, Turkey's harmonization to EU trade legislation could grow investments.'<sup>60</sup>

*Visa liberalization:* During the interviews, the comments on the visa liberalization issue were mostly provided by officials, mentioning that Turkey has fulfilled 65 of the total of 72 benchmarks and is pushing for dialogue with the EU on visa-free travel within the Schengen area. As the migrant deal between Turkey and the EU (further discussed in the following sections) promised the acceleration of the visa exemption issue, Turkey expects the EU to take the necessary steps in this direction.

At the time of the interviews, officials stated that a technical committee was preparing a position paper to be submitted to the EU on the progress of the visa dialogue, with a roadmap for the remaining benchmarks yet to be fulfilled.<sup>61</sup> To secure visa-free travel, the remaining benchmarks include the expectations on reforming the country's anti-terrorism legislation, data protection law, law enforcement, and anti-corruption measures in line with the EU recommendations. One expert comment was that to address the benchmark on anti-corruption measurements, a package covering the articles that would conform to the EU's GRECO recommendations might be a possible solution for Turkey.

According to the officials, it is possible to make necessary arrangements for most of the remaining benchmarks, yet the benchmark on the better alignment of Turkey's legislation on terrorism with the EU should be carefully handled considering that the current trajectory of

60 Interviewee 15: Businessman, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

61 See Sevil Erkuş, 'Turkish, EU Leaders to Meet in Bulgaria's Varna', in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 March 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-eu-leaders-to-meet-in-bulgarias-varna-129232>.

security threats is changing the dynamics of counterterrorism efforts, also from the side of Turkey.

*Migration and security:* The findings retained from the elite survey demonstrate that the migration issue is where the Union's switch from 'deeper EU integration' to 'realpolitik behaviour' can be observed in its relations with Turkey. To that end, the re-admission agreement between Turkey and the EU—which was put into force in 2016 to curb the strong flow of refugees trying to cross into Europe—was given as a significant example.

Commentators pointed out that the EU constructs the migration issue in the region as a basic 'security threat' against its stability. It was stated that the EU has been unable to offer good living conditions to the refugees taking shelter in certain member states.

'The cumulative impact of migration is politically destabilizing the EU.'<sup>62</sup>

'On the migration issue, the EU has failed; the hosting conditions of refugees, as witnessed in Greece, are rather bad.'<sup>63</sup>

While the migration deal has significantly discouraged the flow of refugees in the Mediterranean,<sup>64</sup> experts argued that Turkey, which is hosting the largest population of Syrian refugees of more than 3.6 million, will continue to be on the front line of the refugee crisis with its commendable efforts on humanitarian aid and support for the Syrian people in the country.<sup>65</sup>

62 Interviewee 9: Senior academic on EU affairs, male, Istanbul, January 2018.

63 Interviewee 12: Research fellow at a think-tank, male, Skype, January 2018.

64 See European Commission, *EU–Turkey Statement Two Year On*, cit.

65 To provide humanitarian aid and access to accommodation, healthcare, education, food, and social activities, Turkey has spent more than 30 billion on the Syrian refugees since the civil war in Syria broke out in 2011. See 'Turkey Spends \$30 Billion on Syrian Refugees: FM', in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 6 November 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-continue-responding-to-humanitarian-crises-121982>. As for the EU, the Facility for Refugees committed 3 billion euro, out of which more than 1.93 billion has been disbursed. The EU announced an additional tranche of 3 billion euro at the EU–Turkey leaders' meeting in Varna. See European Commission, *EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey. List of Projects Committed/Decided, Contracted, Disbursed*, Status on 4 October 2018, <https://>

‘As long as the regional conflicts continue, co-operation between the two sides will have to remain over security and migration. Turkey acts as a ‘station’ for migration and security.’<sup>66</sup>

At the official level, it was noted that although this agreement has additional action points including acceleration of the fulfilment of visa liberalization and re-energizing Turkey’s accession process by opening new chapters, these two commitments have yet to be realized.

Aside from these, some commentators raised the lack of an efficient border management system by the EU and the disintegration of a common EU response to the migration issue.

‘The Union has not found a durable solution to the refugee crisis. Border management is a crucial security matter for the EU, however an effective regulation has still not been put into force.’<sup>67</sup>

There is a common expectation that the EU should act more through development projects and budget support to raise the living standards of refugees in the host countries including Turkey.

*Civil society:* With the proliferation of civil society discourse in Turkey in 1990s, the EU became one of the stakeholders in this particular field, assuming ‘the role as a contributor to [Turkey’s] democratic consolidation’.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, the Union has supported the programmes on public–civil society co-operation as well as civil society capacity-building through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)<sup>69</sup>

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ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/facility\_table.pdf; and Georgi Gotev, ‘Varna to Become Permanent Venue for EU-Turkey Talks’, in *EUROACTIV*, 27 March 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1225251>.

66 Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018.

67 Interviewee 6: Academic, female, Istanbul, December 2017.

68 Emre Toros, ‘Understanding the Role of Civil Society as an Agent for Democratic Consolidation: The Turkish Case’, in *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2007), pp. 395-415. See also Ayhan Kaya and Raffaele Marchetti, ‘Europeanization, Framing Competition and Civil Society in the EU and Turkey’, in *Global Turkey in Europe Working Papers*, No. 6 (February 2014), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/1594>.

69 The total allocation for Turkey under IPA II between 2014 and 2020 amounts to 4,453.9 million euro. The priority sectors include ‘Democracy and governance’, ‘Rule of law and fundamental rights’, ‘Environment and climate action’, ‘Rural

or direct funds from the EU Delegation in Turkey, which also targets programmes on specific areas ranging from human rights to education and agriculture to gender rights.

As far as the Union's initial impact on Turkey's civil society environment is concerned, an EU affairs official commented that the EU facilitated the co-ordination culture and operations of associations through legislative reforms, which were put into effect in line with Turkey's membership deal. This was followed by the establishment of national development agencies, which helped Turkey to form its own strategies in the civil society sector. Some of the commentators, however, shared the view that the Union has increasingly diverted from its inclusive approach while addressing civil society groups in Turkey:

'The Union seems to pursue political and identity-oriented priorities while supporting civil society. However, this approach contradicts with the needs and realities of Turkey.'<sup>70</sup>

'The EU's civil society initiatives no longer represent the Union's core ideals or its identity of Europeanization. The civil society collaboration with Turkey could be better than its present status. More activity channels can be created.'<sup>71</sup>

Here, the main criticism lies in the EU's selective attitude, which was said to fail in reaching varied social groups within Turkey, and therefore appears to be unable to contribute to the larger segment of the society.

It was further understood from the interview discussions that EU support to civil society in Turkey is among the main priorities of its financial aid, which is seen a legitimate involvement. Since 2006, Turkey has received 54 million euro in financial aid from the EU for the EU–Turkey Civil Society Dialogue.<sup>72</sup>

Within the IPA regulatory framework, the EU aid is implemented through decentralized management; however it was noted during the

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development', 'Innovation', and 'Energy'. See European Commission website: *Turkey – Financial Assistance under IPA II*, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/funding-by-country/turkey\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/funding-by-country/turkey_en).

70 Interviewee 1: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

71 Interviewee 2: Specialist on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

72 See IPA I and II Programming: [https://www.ab.gov.tr/ipa-i-amp-ipa-ii-programming\\_45627\\_en.html](https://www.ab.gov.tr/ipa-i-amp-ipa-ii-programming_45627_en.html)

interviews that there is an ongoing negotiation to centralize the fund management by directly assigning the EU Delegation in Ankara as sole authority. According to the officials, this change could reduce the state's level of involvement and impact on the EU-backed civil society activities, especially in those aiming to contribute to public policies. Regarding the IPA funds to Turkey, some commentators pointed to the cut in the 2018 budget,<sup>73</sup> mentioning that this move has a symbolic importance and is being used as political leverage by the EU.

Throughout the interviews, the sustainability of CSO activities between the EU and Turkey was highlighted with the expectation of keeping away from politicization, and instead strengthening Turkey's capacity to absorb funds, achieve results and implement CSO projects in a timely manner—an important shortcoming also raised by the officials. Commentators similarly mentioned the need to improve the efficiency of civil society groups in Turkey, which has been affected by politically volatile times in recent years: 'In a working democracy, civil society brings fruitful results, otherwise it may become a target. Civil society should play a greater role in shaping the dynamics between society and the state in Turkey.'<sup>74</sup>

In terms of gender perspective, female respondents were generally more enthusiastic on the advancement of CSO initiatives especially on environmental issues and women's rights, hinting at the relational context between gender equality and environmental development.

'There is a more visible unity among women in Turkey, which enhances social development. The unity over environmental concerns and animal rights has also heightened. These areas do not directly challenge established political interests, so they can more easily flourish.'<sup>75</sup>

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73 See European Parliament, *EU Budget 2018 Approved: Support for Youth, Growth, Security*, 30 November 2017, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20171127IPR88936>.

74 Interviewee 10: Expert, academic on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

75 Interviewee 8: Academic, female, Ankara, December 2017.

#### 2.4 *Perceptions on the Mediterranean region and the role of the EU therein*

At the elite level, the Mediterranean region is perceived as a junction point of migration, energy, and trade, as well as a tense space fuelled by political, economic, and social instability. As further retained from the interviews, the outbreak of Arab uprisings left a power vacuum and a proxy struggle in the region, and there was a spread of rampant disinformation that further provoked the developments.

When asked about the concrete geopolitical challenges the region is facing, the commentators raised the following: (1) demographic challenges in the North African countries pushing migration, along with women and youth problems; (2) lack of democracy; (3) proliferation of terrorist groups; (4) continuation of proxy states; (5) the Syrian crisis; (6) sectarian conflicts; and (7) fragile domestic economies and war economy.

Particular emphasis was placed on the lack of opportunities for youth in the Mediterranean: ‘The youth in this region is a big potential on its own. Together with income equality, being unable to meet the expectations of the youth is fuelling the problems.’<sup>76</sup>

With the dissolution of power in the region, notably following the Arab uprisings, three types of actors are seen to have a say in the region’s future: (1) major global powers including Russia and the US; (2) the current monarchies and authoritarian regimes; and (3) the dissatisfied society with potential to effect change.

According to the respondents, the uprising showed that the EU is not an actor with a capability to change the direction of developments in the region on its own. The Union is not counted among the ‘game changers’, and instead two global powers, the US and Russia, are often mentioned as actors shaping the regional dynamics. ‘The US, Russia and also Saudi Arabia maintain political leverage in the region. For the US and Russia, it is to count them [within the alliances of] US–Israel and Russia–Iran as these countries have strong bilateral relations.’<sup>77</sup>

Some commentators drew attention to the lack of military defence power within the EU member states, which has led them remain out of

76 Interviewee 5: Researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

77 Interviewee 1: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017.

the scene, particularly in the Syrian crisis. It was further acknowledged that the EU was diplomatically absent and unable to form a tangible policy on Syria with the outbreak of the civil war because of the lack of a unified position among the member states; and that its policies remained within the orbit of the US at the time of the Arab uprisings.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, the interviews support the argument that the Union's discourse towards the region 'has shifted from a normative/transformational region-building approach to a more interest-driven, pragmatic and bilateral one'.<sup>79</sup>

According to the commentators, this has shown itself particularly within the context of the refugee influx and the Arab uprisings. A senior expert stated that when it comes to the Mediterranean countries, the EU follows the manifesto of 'stop migration to boost trade'.

Almost all commentators shared the view that the EU adopted an interest-driven approach during the uprisings, and lost its credibility by adopting a favouring attitude to autocratic regimes for the sake of its security interests. It was further noted that human rights and democracy issues have become marginalized items in the Union's foreign policy agenda.

'The EU's narrative on Arab uprisings initially focused on democratization efforts, yet the Union diverted from its strategy later. In the case of Egypt, what the EU did went down as a demerit in its history.'<sup>80</sup>

'From a certain point of view, the Arab uprisings would 'crown' the Western values, however it was realized that the region's needs were different from a Western-style democracy promotion.'<sup>81</sup>

'The EU showed a different level of commitment to its neighbourhood policy. It was first willing to change the scene, but failed to achieve its goals, [like] stability,

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78 See Ayşe Üstünel Yırcalı, 'Europe and the Syrian Conflict: Policies and Perceptions', cit.

79 Münevver Cebeci and Tobias Schumacher, 'The EU's Constructions of the Mediterranean (2003-2017)', in *MEDRESET Working Papers*, No. 3 April 2017), p. 2.

80 Interviewee 3: Senior academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017.

81 Interviewee 18: Senior official on MENA affairs, male, Ankara, February 2018.

modernization, and capacity-building. The Arab Spring created another room, yet this time the EU left its initial approach.<sup>82</sup>

The national interests of EU member states were also seen as another factor that obstructs the Union in finding middle ground, and acting in coherence towards the Southern countries. One expert pointed to France's unilateral diplomatic intervention last year over the Libyan crisis when it bypassed Italy, the co-ordinator of Libya's diplomatic actions at the EU and the UN level.<sup>83</sup> 'Whenever a crisis triggers, EU actors focus on their national interests, which is the main factor behind the existing discrepancies. They might have legitimate concerns, yet to face the challenges, they need to compromise.'<sup>84</sup>

Most of the commentators referred to the ineffectiveness of the ENP or the UfM, criticizing that the Union has imitated its own practices in the partner countries without anticipating the needs and expectations of the societies there.

'The aim of the EU's neighbourhood policy was to create "a friendship circle," yet the region is in a circle of fire now. The EU's neighbourhood policy did not prove efficient to eliminate the regional threats.'<sup>85</sup>

'The EU seems to be unable to address the larger population in the Mediterranean; for example it appears much closer to secular groups in Tunisia. The Union is not a power for change in MENA as it was once in Eastern Europe.'<sup>86</sup>

To address the current problems more effectively, the EU is also seen as lacking a 'holistic approach' to the region:

'EU countries regularly gather to discuss the Mediterranean, yet they always express all too common concerns, which are important, but they are unable to look at the region as a whole. And because the region is huge, sub-regional divisions can be formed with relevant countries on specific themes.'<sup>87</sup>

82 Interviewee 12: Research fellow at a think-tank, male, Skype, January 2018.

83 See Crispian Balmer, 'Italy Upset over French Diplomatic Intervention in Libya', in *Reuters*, 24 July 2017, <http://reut.rs/2uRiRo5>.

84 Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018.

85 Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018.

86 Interviewee 19: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, March 2018.

87 Interviewee 9: Senior academic on EU affairs, male, Istanbul, January 2018.

With respect to Turkey's involvement in the Mediterranean region, senior officials noted that as a member of the UfM, Turkey regularly joins the committee meetings and efforts to strengthen co-operation among the countries in the region. It was further observed that Turkey's engagement with the Mediterranean region, notably the North African countries, is constructed at a country-specific level, which could be attributed to the lack of an inclusive policy approach to the region.<sup>88</sup> A senior official stated that the level of Turkey's diplomatic dialogue with the North African countries varies, with Algeria and Tunisia appearing to be higher than the others, yet Turkey has established trade relations with the North African countries, where the relations are seen to go beyond political interests due to the cultural legacy of the former Ottoman Empire in most of the region.

## Conclusion: Future steps on EU–Turkey and Euro-Mediterranean relations

This chapter set out to investigate the perception of the elite actors in Turkey towards the EU and the effectiveness of its policies in the Mediterranean region by the use of an elite survey.

To recap the main points of the survey findings discussed above, according to the elite perception, the Union occupies an established space in the political agenda of Turkey despite cyclical ups and downs which are shaped not only by the direction of the relationship between Turkey and individual member states, but also the regional and international developments affecting both sides.

It is thus possible to argue that despite the challenging journey of EU–Turkey relations, there are major themes like the issues of regional stability and security—under which the migration/refugee crisis and counterterrorism can be mentioned—where the EU and Turkey can strive for joint action to manage the problems in their mutual neighbourhood.

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88 Aybars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark, 'Turkey, the EU and the Mediterranean', cit.

In terms of the EU's presence in the region, however, the common view is that the EU is seen as an 'introvert actor' and not a 'game-changer', with less political leverage than the US and Russia as stakeholders.

In light of the findings, the following recommendations based on the interviewees' responses can contribute to the EU's policy-making efforts on its relations with Turkey and the Mediterranean region by highlighting policy priorities for future collaboration in areas where interests are converging.

### *Expectations on Turkey–EU relations*

*Reaching an agreement on a precise roadmap for Turkey's EU membership deal:* Despite the cyclical nature of Turkey's relationship with the EU, there is an immediate need to settle the ambiguous nature of Turkey's path to membership, which will require mutual efforts. To recommit to the process, while Turkey is expected to revive political reforms along with improvements in the area of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, the Union is expected to move on the negotiation process by re-opening the blocked chapters.

*Encouraging joint efforts for an efficient burden-sharing system to tackle the refugee crisis:* As understood from the elite survey findings, the EU should help shoulder the responsibility for refugee protection through long-term solutions that would also consider the economic dimension of the migration crisis, which has been putting a burden on host countries including Turkey.

*Fostering close co-operation on regional stability and security:* The next recommendation would be ensuring further steps in security co-operation with Turkey, which could also serve the EU's interests at home and in the Mediterranean, where the Union is seen to require a politically-stable neighbourhood. When asked about Turkey's domestic and regional challenges, almost all commentators acknowledged terrorism within the country and across the borders, an issue where Turkey expects support from its European allies for counterterrorism and conflict resolution.

*Enhancing knowledge and experience exchange at the bureaucratic level:* Senior officials interviewed for this research expressed the need to improve bureaucratic functioning and decision-making process in state institutions through further collaboration with EU institutions, especially on excelling in project management (e.g., for civil society programmes). This recommendation was also heard from the business-sector professionals, indicating that the expert training programmes for ministerial specialists to become familiar with trade legislation contribute to the harmonization process at a technical level, and boost communication between both sides.

*Promoting constructive political discourse:* The findings retained from the elite survey demonstrate that the political discourse of EU member states shapes the direction of public perception towards the Union and the related countries. While the interviewees highlighted the politicization of Turkey in the European Parliament and the domestic agenda of specific EU member states, further steps are expected from both sides to improve bilateral relations—which would positively influence the direction of the political discourse towards Turkey without disproportionate politicization.

*Pushing efforts on mutual achievements in technical negotiations:* Keeping up the good work with the EU at the technical level is expected to act as a leverage to maintain a positive rhetoric on political dialogue, for which the two major technical negotiations, modernization of the Customs Union and visa liberalization, play an essential role. An additional recommendation is to concentrate on non-political chapters, most of which address reforms on trade and economy. Facilitating the implementation of technical negotiations could foster high-level dialogue initiatives between the two parties.

*On the broader Mediterranean region*

*Eliminate internal challenges to addressing fast-changing international and regional conditions:* To balance its short- and long-term approaches to the Mediterranean region, experts argued that the EU should first resolve its internal problems: (1) the need for sustaining solidarity within

the member states; (2) resolving economic challenges; and (3) regaining the required capacity to solve the internal crisis it faces. The EU should further increase its capability to absorb crises and sustain resilience within itself.

*Conflict mediation:* To adequately address its Southern neighbourhood, the EU should remain involved in high-level diplomacy in the region and exert efforts to open diplomatic channels within regional powers. Some commentators pointed to the EU's mediator role in the Iran nuclear talks, which was seen to be a promising approach to improve its leverage on foreign policy and conflict mediation in the broader region.

*Place more focus on the societal dynamics and expectations in the region:* Commentators put forward that while forming its policies addressing the region, the EU is expected to give greater consideration to the societal dynamics as well as the demands and expectations of varying demographics, including youth and women.

*Strengthening civil society in the region:* This recommendation was particularly linked to the EU's role in the Syrian crisis. Considering the EU's weakened political influence in the Middle East, the Union is expected to be more active in Syria's reconstruction and economic development in the post-war period. To achieve this, the Union could strengthen and improve the capacity of the local civil society groups, which will be an important stakeholder of the reconstruction process.

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## Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017  
Interviewee 2: Specialist on EU affairs, male, Ankara, November 2017  
Interviewee 3: Senior academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017  
Interviewee 4: Academic, researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017  
Interviewee 5: Researcher in CSO sector, male, Istanbul, December 2017  
Interviewee 6: Academic, female, Istanbul, December 2017  
Interviewee 7: Journalist, author, male, Istanbul, December 2017  
Interviewee 8: Academic, female, Ankara, December 2017  
Interviewee 9: Senior academic on EU affairs, male, Istanbul, January 2018  
Interviewee 10: Expert, academic on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018  
Interviewee 11: Researcher on EU affairs, female, Istanbul, January 2018  
Interviewee 12: Research fellow at a think-tank, male, Skype, January 2018  
Interviewee 13: Academic, male, Diyarbakır, January 2018  
Interviewee 14: EU affairs counsellor, male, phone, February 2018  
Interviewee 15: Businessman, male, Istanbul, February 2018  
Interviewee 16: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, February 2018  
Interviewee 17: Senior official on EU affairs, male, Ankara, February 2018  
Interviewee 18: Senior official on MENA affairs, male, Ankara, February 2018  
Interviewee 19: Researcher at an NGO, male, Istanbul, March 2018