

# TÜRKIYE-EU RELATIONS AND THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY IN THE AFTERMATH OF RUSSIAN INVASION: IS THE TRANSACTIONAL TURN HERE TO STAY?

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# **Türkiye-EU Relations and the European Political Community in the Aftermath of Russian Invasion: Is the Transactional Turn Here to Stay?**

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## Introduction

Bilateral relations between Türkiye and the European Union (EU) acquired an EU conditionality dimension with the 1999 Helsinki decision, granting the country the EU candidacy status. Nevertheless, especially since the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, also known as Türkiye-EU Refugee Deal, what we see is a thorough shift in Türkiye-EU relations from a conditionality perspective to transactionalism, coupled with several domestic and international developments. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the significance of geopolitics and the heightened relevance of *realpolitik* also contributed to a renewed focus on strategic and pragmatic issues, relegating normative concerns to the background within Türkiye-EU relations. All in all, the shift from a conditionality perspective to a security-based logic within the framework of Türkiye-EU relations was mainly determined and characterised by the so-called “transactional turn”. Within this very transactionalist paradigm, both the EU and Türkiye want to pursue their short-term interests at the expense of a long-term principled engagement for some time.

This twist to transactionalism has mainly been dovetailed with the so-called “de-Europeanisation” process in Turkish politics. Türkiye has moved away from the Copenhagen criteria politically and institutionally. At the same time, Türkiye’s leadership sought to change its relationship with the EU from that of a candidate to that of an equal. For the EU, this transformation coincided with a broader ring of poly-crisis within the Bloc. Indeed, from the time of the 2008 economic crises, through the migration and refugee crisis in Europe, up to the Trump era in the United States (US), increased protectionist and separatist practices have been observed across the globe as well as in the EU. The coronavirus pan-

dem and associated restrictions accelerated this trend. Brexit has become the symbol of disintegration and isolationism (Riedel, 2023, p. 298). The so-called “migrant crisis” has demonstrated that the degree of integration and solidarity among EU members is not as deep and complete as expected, bolstering the already existing economic and socio-political crises (Prodromidou et al., 2019, p. 7). Reluctance to share sovereignty has become evident, especially among the post-2004 EU member states. Last but not least, problems associated with the Turkish EU candidacy as well as the emergence of the Western Balkans as a “marginalised and discredited zone of governance failure” showed that the EU’s enlargement policy is also not immune from this crisis-prone context (Bechev, 2012). Within this context, “getting things done” has been the priority on both sides, and bilateral relations have been increasingly determined through a transactional logic, fostered by an intense resorting to securitised discourses and practices.

The launch of the European Political Community (EPC) on 6 October 2022 with 44 European heads of state and government (including all 27 EU member states as well as Türkiye) also contributed to this transactional tide, which aimed to “emphasise European geopolitical cooperation in light of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine; to remedy enlargement fatigue by providing an additional forum for exchange between EU candidates and member states; as well as create a forum for exchange with non-EU security actors” (Tcherneva, 2023). The EPC’s rather flexible structure and focus on mini-lateralism, which could provide greater freedom for leaders to focus on their immediate concerns, also raises eyebrows about whether the EPC would be attentive enough (and even have the mandate) to safeguard human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Jurkovic, 2023).

In light of these debates, the aims of this paper are twofold. First, it aims to explore how recent transactional initiatives between Türkiye and the EU in general and the EPC initiative in particular have unfolded and have been perceived by the Turkish diplomats and foreign policy experts. This endeavour to understand the Turkish perceptions of Türkiye-EU relations mainly focusing on recent transactionalism between the parties will be explored with a particular focus on three thematic layers, namely the foreign policy, migration and energy through semi-structured interviews with Turkish diplomats and foreign policy experts. The main rationale behind picking up these thematic layers is to identify, analyse and describe better the complex nature of Türkiye-EU relations with a particular focus on these policy fields (namely foreign policy, migration and energy), which recently witnessed the highest intensity of interactions between two parties. Second, the paper discusses the significance of the EPC within this very transactional turn and aims to understand whether the EPC is another repercussion of the increasing transactionalism. The final aim of the paper will be to understand whether the EU foreign policy, on the one hand, and the bilateral Türkiye-EU relations, on the other, would evolve in a completely transactional and security-based manner leaving no room for normativity amidst the current global uncertainties and challenges, as well as bringing together policy recommendations for the future.

## **Transactional turn in Turkish-EU relations after 2015: three thematic layers**

Since the election of Donald Trump as the US president in November 2016, some elements of a transactional foreign

policy have been emerging on a global scale. Transactionalism also openly “rejects value-based policymaking which it considers to be harmful to national interests. Transactional relationships are not grounded in common values, and shared historical bonds are a secondary consideration” (Bashirov and Yılmaz, 2020, p. 167). It is purely “bargaining, devoid of norms and values” (Interview 1). The blurring of the line between domestic policy and foreign policy also provides a conducive environment for transactionalism (Interview 5). As the post-war liberal order has declined and weakened over the last 75 years, what has been promoted can be called issue-based, flexible, transactional alliances with an emphasis on consequentialism over appropriateness, interests over rules, delivery over checks and balances (Keyman, 2022, p. 28).

Thus, a transactionalist perspective inherently connects foreign policy and domestic policy concerns, being often associated with populist leaders, most prominently Donald Trump of the US, Vladimir Putin of Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Türkiye (Bashirov & Yılmaz, 2020, p. 168). These populist leaders desire short-term splashy successes that can be quickly sold to domestic audiences for political benefit, leading to foreign policy decisions that have been considered impulsive (Zoellick, 2017). A recent poll made by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in 21 countries found out that although Europe and the US are seen as more attractive and having more respectable values (or, as having more soft power) than both China and Russia, this does not translate into political alignment. For most people in most countries – including some EU countries – what we witness is an à la carte world in which you can mix and match your partners on different issues, rather than signing up to

a set menu of allegiance to one side or the other (Garton-Ash et al., 2023). It seems that the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a turning point in this respect, since which many people outside the West regard the unique importance attributed to this war as an example of Western double standards. Now, with the war in Ukraine continuing for almost two years, another major conflict between Israel and Hamas and a real medium-term threat of armed conflict between the US and China over Taiwan, it looks as if the world is becoming one of multiple wars where post-Cold War multilateralism seems hard to sustain (Garton-Ash et al., 2023).

In this context, the EU's recent focus on the notion of "geopolitics" and the tendency to adopt a more security-based perspective in its foreign policy decisions, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, should be read under the light of this transactionalist turn. Indeed, 24 February 2022 was a historic turning point that forced the EU to become a fully-fledged security actor in the biggest geopolitical conflict in Europe since World War II. Within this framework, according to Josep Borrell, "Europe must quickly learn to speak the language of power" (EEAS, 2020a). This meant a narrative shift on the part of the EU from a "normative power Europe" to "geopolitical Europe". Indeed, the Union's increasing tendency to pursue a security policy model less influenced by liberal aspirations (the so-called "normative power Europe") (Manners, 2002, p. 241) and more relying on "bounded" rational calculation of the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action – so-called *realpolitik* – reached its pinnacle with the invasion. For the EU, the war proved that "Europe is even more in danger than we thought just a few months ago" and brought the EU's "geopolitical awakening" (EEAS, 2022).

In the case of Turkish politics, this broader transactionalist trend coincided with a shift to a security logic in Turkish foreign policy orientations, especially after 2015, coupled with the country's drift away from the Western collective security identity and values as well as an erosion in Turkish democracy, as will be detailed below. After the mid-2010s, it had become apparent that "although Türkiye's relations with the West are characterised by a pattern of recurring crises, there [was] a sense that these conflicts could be 'managed' through a set of transactionalist cooperation mechanisms" (Öniş & Kutlay, 2021, p. 1103). This transactionalist trend dovetailed with a downturn in Türkiye-EU relations significantly after early 2010s. Particularly after 2005, the year when the negotiations between Türkiye and the EU started, the EU-induced reforms in the country mainly relied on popular support and were used to instrumentalise reforms in areas seen as sensitive by the incumbent political party, Justice and Development Party (AKP). Throughout the early 2010s, criticisms from the EU on democratic practices in the country continued, and the EU had lost its central role within the Turkish political landscape.

In this section, I will explore how this overall transactional turn led to the emergence of transactional dynamics in EU-Türkiye relations and transformed the bilateral relations by scrutinising three thematic layers: foreign policy, migration and energy.

### Foreign policy

Throughout the 1990s, a security-centred approach had characterised the Turkish foreign policy (TFP), mainly due to the uncertainties of the post-Cold War era as well as intense PKK terrorism and the macroeconomic instability that the country had been going through. During this period, Türkiye's relations with neighbouring states, including Iraq, Iran, Syria and Greece, were



also significantly deteriorated due to their support for the PKK. This led the Turkish governments to approach the neighbouring states through securitised policies and measures. Nevertheless, there has been a dramatic shift in the 2000s towards more cooperative, liberal policies under the rubric of “Europeanisation”. Against this background, the TFP has mainly been shaped by various developments and the novel policy tools adopted by the foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, particularly after 2009, when he assumed the position. In his view, Türkiye should pursue a proactive foreign policy, first in the region and then elsewhere in the world. In this vein, the AKP’s “zero problem with neighbours” policy and Türkiye’s newly-assumed leadership role in the East as a “regional power and global force” (Davutoğlu, 2011) dovetailed with the EU’s push for democratic reforms, which were still deemed as credible at that time (Alpan & Öztürk, 2022). Türkiye’s region-focused activism in the 2000s drew on the construction of a particular foreign policy identity that defined Türkiye as a peace-promoting soft power bearing the capacity for “instituting order” (Davutoğlu, 2009) in its surrounding regions, namely the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. In this context, Türkiye’s policy towards its neighbourhood aligned with the EU’s “soft power” approach and employed resources such as “cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions” (Nye, 1990, p. 167).

Yet, by the beginning of the 2010s, TFP had drastically shifted away from Europeanisation and transformed its liberal policies back to security-oriented policies (Oğuzlu, 2016). The main turning point towards securitisation was the transformation of the uprising in Syria into a civil war in the early 2010s. The shared 900-km border increased Türkiye’s security concerns related to revive the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) terror and attacks by the Islamic

State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) members entering the country alongside millions of Syrian citizens seeking refuge (Ayata, 2014, pp. 95-96). The nuclear deal that the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) plus Germany (P5 + 1) signed with Iran in 2015 concerning Iran’s nuclear programme brought the possibility of Iran playing a much more decisive and assertive role in the region (Oğuzlu, 2016, p. 63) plus the increased ISIS and PKK attacks leading to the death of many Turkish citizens. These all seem to demonstrate a realist readjustment process taking place in TFP. Things reached a whole new level when Türkiye intervened in northern Syria after the attempted coup of 2016 and did so again early in 2018 (Tziarras, 2018, p. 597). In August 2016 and January 2018, Türkiye launched two military operations in northern Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield, and Operation Olive Branch) with the objective of cleansing areas close to the border with Türkiye of terrorists, including the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the People’s Protection Units International (YPG) and ISIS (Torun, 2021, p. 334). All in all, during this period, Türkiye’s “logic of interdependence” and the “mediator-integrator” role were gradually replaced by an assertive quest for “autonomy”, accompanied by military interventionism and coercive diplomacy (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021, p. 1086). This shift to the logic of “strategic autonomy” was epitomised by the tendency of the Turkish ruling elites to align themselves with non-western great powers (such as Russia and China) and balance the US-led hierarchical order and by a “legitimising foreign policy discourse by which an authoritarian populist government can mobilise its support base at home” (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021, p. 1088). This quest for “strategic autonomy” after the mid-2010s led to a step-by-step consolidation of TFP’s transactional and interest-driven

tendency. It also has to be noted that Türkiye-EU relations during this period have largely been affected and shaped by global and regional political developments, which led to the emergence of the aforementioned dynamics regarding Türkiye's security-based preferences: transactionalism and 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 characterised 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). 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 US. Türkiye's unique security relationship with Russia (epitomised by the purchase of S-400 missiles by the former) was also evaluated by some as proof of Türkiye's shift to transactionalism, also signalling a departure from democratic principles (Arısan-Eralp et al., 2021). Moreover, due to the worsening security environment in the region, Turkish decision-makers have opted for a new foreign policy line that increasingly demonstrated the primacy of conventional security concerns, particularly after 2015 (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 East, the growing geopolitical rivalry between Shi'a and Sunni power blocks, and Türkiye's worsening security situation at home have caused a realist revival in Turkish foreign policy during this period (Oğuzlu, 2020, p. 129).

This was also a period when the EU adopted a more realist and security-based

foreign policy logic. What we see after the mid-2010s is the capitalisation of the notion of "security", leading to the inclusion of further issues within the scope of "security" by the EU. This shift is very much reflected in the EU's 2016 Global Security Strategy, where the understanding of "security" included state and societal resilience, with the aim of tackling governmental, economic, societal, climate and energy fragility (EEAS, 2016, p. 9). In this context, the EU support for certain political values and norms has increasingly been replaced with a pursuit of a "geopolitical comparative advantage over Russia" and "superimposed with a layer of geostrategic diplomacy" (Youngs, 2017, pp. 6-7), hinting that the EU was shifting towards a more realist, pragmatic, and flexible approach in its foreign policy. The same document also introduced the term "European strategic autonomy", pointing to the US-China confrontation and arguing for an EU position not choosing between the two global competitors (EEAS, 2016). EU High Representative Josep Borrell's argument that, "we have to keep a certain degree of autonomy in order to defend our interests," speaking to a group of journalists in June 2020, shows that this concept reifies the EU's capitalisation of an interest-based foreign policy perspective and a quest to become a global geopolitical actor (Zandee et al., 2020, p. 5).

This shift in the geopolitical environment and both the EU's 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. Nevertheless, this recent focus on transactionalism endangers the prevalence of an EU conditionality perspective in the country's domestic landscape, which has already been influenced at large with the recent authoritarian turn in Turkish politics. The foreign policy approach adopted in Syria and Libya also re-

flects the assertive character of the TFP and the extent to which it clashes with those of the EU and some of its member states. Foreign and security policy in the shared neighbourhood is one of the realms where bilateral relations have become increasingly adversarial (Toygür et al., 2022, p. 15). Türkiye's military incursions into Syria as well as the country's support for the Libyan Government of National Accord (the GNA) and the signing of a maritime memorandum with the GNA establishing an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) stretching from southwest Türkiye to northeast Libya proved that the EU and Türkiye have diverging threat perceptions (Toygür et al., 2022, p. 21).

Against this background, the European Commission 2023 Türkiye Report calculated Türkiye's alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy to amount to merely 10%, compared to 8% in 2022 (European Commission, 2023, p. 125). This is partially linked to Türkiye's non-alignment with the bloc's sanctions against Russia, and clearly indicates Türkiye's rise as a central foreign policy rival/competitor rather than a partner in the EU's immediate neighbourhood (Turhan & Tekin, 2023, p. 2).

## Migration

Türkiye's traditionally liberal approach to migration management had been even more fostered starting from the mid-2000s within the framework of the above-mentioned "soft power" approach in TFP. Dovetailed with Türkiye's alignment with the EU conditionality as a condition of membership, especially after the 1999 Helsinki decision, Türkiye had a more flexible approach to migration and border management compared to Schengen Europe. All in all, Türkiye's migration policy has mainly been determined by the EU conditionality up until the 2010s.

Nevertheless, especially from mid-2010s, "security" started to be the buzzword for understanding Türkiye's migration policy while the country's political life became more complicated and polarising, especially after the 2016 coup attempt and ensuing state of emergency, which led to a strict securitisation of management of migration. This has also been intertwined with the worsening security situation in Syria, which had security repercussions on countries hosting Syrians including Türkiye and the rising political polarisation in the country against the background of June 2015 general elections and November 2015 snap elections. Between June and November, Türkiye witnessed a sharp rise in political violence and terrorism as a result of the renewal of the fighting between PKK militants and the security forces in the southeast and two major terrorist attacks by ISIS (Sayarı, 2016, p. 269). Both of these developments, and especially the attacks carried out by ISIS, were strongly influenced by the continuing turmoil and civil war in neighbouring Syria (Washington Post, 2015). Especially when Türkiye began to be directly and indirectly involved in operations in Northern Syria, a series of terrorist attacks killed and wounded hundreds of civilians in Türkiye in 2015 and 2016.

In this vein, the refugee deal between Türkiye and the EU in 2016 has been an almost perfect illustration of the backlash of the security logic in Türkiye's approach to migration and the ensuing transactional turn in Türkiye-EU relations. The EU-Türkiye Deal of March 2016 was a response to the hundreds of thousands of Syrian migrants using the Eastern Mediterranean route to enter Europe during the summer of 2015. The Deal was largely driven by German political will to resolve the rapidly evol-

ving “migration crisis”,<sup>1</sup> maintain unity in the EU amongst member states, and reduce the increased numbers of migrants arriving in Greece. The drivers from the EU’s point of view were controlling EU borders effectively while keeping EU solidarity, helping the Greek overburdened asylum system, reducing if not stopping deaths at sea, and maintaining security within the EU against serious threats such as ISIS (Kale et al., 2018, p. 16). The Deal called for the return of “all new irregular migrants crossing from Türkiye into Greek islands and possibility of rejecting the same migrants’ asylum request based on the identification of Türkiye as a ‘safe third country’ or ‘first country of asylum’” (European Commission, 2016a). Throughout the Deal process, “a purely strategic and functional give-and-take relationship emerged between Brussels and Ankara, whereby the former maintained its conciliatory attitude – given its asymmetric dependence on Ankara – even in the face of ‘dirty’ bargaining tactics (threats) employed by the latter” (Saatçioğlu, 2020, p. 175). Moreover, it was also agreed by the Deal as well as the November 2015 Statement that matters of mutual concern would be tackled at regularly held EU-Turkey bilateral summits (EU-Türkiye High Level Dialogues), emerging as an alternative avenue for EU-Turkey interaction (Saatçioğlu, 2020, p. 175). Thus, the Deal was not really framed through a broader positive agenda to structure bilateral relations or as a part of the EU conditionality, which signalled a genuine epitome of transactionality in Türkiye-EU relations. On the contrary, the Deal needs to be seen as a part of a “reversed conditionality” trend, where the EU conditionality is manipulated by both sides to pursue their interest and reduce the do-

mestic costs that compliance entails (Casarino, 2007, p. 192). “The use of reversed conditionality bestows political leverage on the targeted governments and migration becomes a bargaining chip” (Janvier, 2023, p. 5).

Nevertheless, Türkiye was not the only country with which the EU forged transactionalist agreements in the realm of migration during this period. As part of its response to the aforementioned “migration crisis”, the EU placed renewed emphasis on the “removal” and “return” of irregular migrants and “failed” asylum-seekers in most of its documents on migration (da Rosa Jorge, 2021). “The September 2015 *EU Action Plan on Return* reinforced and strengthened an already existing system of formal EU readmission agreements (EURAs), non-standard agreements and individual state readmission agreements with a range of non-EU countries” (Adamson and Greenhill, 2023, p. 710). Other arrangements, such as the 2016 EU-Afghanistan “Joint Way Forward Declaration” and 2021 “Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation”, which provided for the return of refused asylum-seekers and irregular migrants in exchange for substantial aid packages for Afghanistan, was heavily criticised by human rights groups (Adamson and Greenhill, 2023: 711).

Now, with the rise of the number of migrants and refugees trying to reach Western Europe via the Balkan Route in 2022 (to the highest level since the crisis began in 2015), the migration is likely to be on the bilateral agenda (Stamatoukou, 2023). In September 2023, the European Commission and the Government of Türkiye

<sup>1</sup> It was not really a “migration crisis” as the crisis associated with the mass migration after the summer of 2015 was not because of the migration of refugees, asylum-seekers, and irregular migrants *per se*, but mainly due to failure on the part of host states to deal with the whole process adequately. Nevertheless, the process ensuing in the summer of 2015 resulting in the influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey and EU states will be referred to in this paper as the “migration crisis” to sustain coherence with the general literature.

signed a €781 million contract, the biggest single EU contract ever signed with Ankara, providing EU funds for a social safety net for the most vulnerable refugees (Delegation of the EU to Türkiye, 2023). Merely updating the Deal without a substantial re-evaluation would be a major risk in itself as it would lead to the consolidation of the transactional nature of the existing EU-Türkiye relationship. “Without being complemented by cooperation in other policy fields anchored in normative principles, continued cooperation in migration bears a high risk of being taken hostage by larger geopolitical issues. The overwhelming focus on the EU-Türkiye migration deal intoxicates the overall EU-Türkiye relationship, with the Deal itself being subject to political bargaining and joint accusations breeding substantive mistrust on both sides” (Aydın-Düzgüç, 2021).

## Energy

Among all thematic layers, energy is the most likely one to witness transactionality regarding the Türkiye-EU relations. Although commercial relations tend to be transactional by nature, Türkiye-EU relations in the realm of energy went beyond pure transactionalism starting from 1999, which makes it important to underline the shift throughout the years. In the energy field, Türkiye has always been an important partner for the Union, as a major country for the transit of gas. The joint declaration of the Türkiye-EU High Level Energy Dialogue meeting in 2015 even went one step further and defined Türkiye as “a natural energy bridge and an energy hub between energy sources in the Middle Eastern and Caspian Regions and European Union (EU) energy markets” (European Commission, 2016b). Although it is hard to talk about Türkiye’s compliance with the EU *acquis* in the realm of energy as Chapter 15 (‘Energy’) in EU accession

negotiations has been blocked by Cyprus since 2009, Türkiye has been able to introduce EU-inspired reforms within the domestic energy regulations. The integration of energy markets and the development of infrastructure are also supported within the framework of the EU’s Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) to Türkiye (European Commission, 2014). After 1999, Türkiye’s energy-based links with the EU have been tied to the EU conditionality. Both the EU and EU member state officials publicly acknowledged Türkiye’s role in European energy security and linked that role with Ankara’s EU accession prospects. While the EU’s Nabucco Coordinator Jozias van Aartsen called the project a “stepping stone” on Türkiye’s EU membership path, the then EU Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn highlighted energy as “an area in which the benefits of Türkiye’s EU accession process are easy to see” (cited in Çelikpala & Filis, 2021, p. 8). Manuel Barroso, who was at the time the President of the EU Commission, said that energy cooperation “is one of the cases where we can show to European public opinion how important Türkiye is for the EU [...] Türkiye should not be seen as a burden, but an asset” (Vucheva, 2009). Turkish officials highlighted Ankara’s importance and role in the EU’s energy security, while linking that role with Türkiye’s EU accession prospects (Çelikpala & Filis, 2021, p. 8). President Erdoğan stated that “Türkiye can play an important role in resolving the EU’s energy problem” (EURACTIV, 2009), while former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu underlined Türkiye’s indispensable role in the EU’s energy security (Davutoğlu, 2008, p. 92). Similarly, Ankara has achieved significant results in the electricity sector’s liberalisation process, as Türkiye’s adoption of a new Electricity Market Law in 2013 is largely compliant with the

EU's Third Energy Package (TEP) (Sartori, 2021, p. 374).

Since 2016, and as the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean started to evolve, the EU's attitude and considerations vis-à-vis Türkiye and its role in Europe's energy security and in the region in general have also been securitised, paving the way to a much more pragmatic and interest-based energy relationship between the parties, frequently disrupted by conflicts. The escalation of tensions between Türkiye and other key states in the energy equation of the Eastern Mediterranean, such as Egypt and Israel, has had an impact on the planning of the energy projects. Türkiye, which was part of nearly every planned energy project that would bypass Russia and was part of the Southern European Corridor, is now for the time being excluded from the Eastern Mediterranean plans, such as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (Çelikpala & Filis, 2021, p. 9). The ongoing tension between Ankara and Athens over gas reserves and maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean flared up in July after Türkiye put out a Navtex that it was sending its Oruc Reis research ship to carry out a drilling survey in waters close to the Greek Island of Megisti (Kastellorizo). The specific route of Oruc Reis provided the Eastern Mediterranean quarrel – already escalating since 2019 – with a tripartite securitisation, the other two footings being the Cyprus issue and the Aegean dispute (Alpan, 2020). After a video conference on 14 August, the EU foreign ministers issued a declaration, reaffirming the EU's full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus and underlining that sovereign rights of EU member states must be respected (EEAS, 2020b). It has also been aired many times by EU High Representative Josep Borrell that Türkiye's drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean might face punitive measures.

## **What has the EPC had to do with the transactional turn?**

The launch of the EPC on 6 October 2022 in Prague with 44 European heads of state and government (including all 27 EU member states as well as candidate countries like Türkiye) also needs to be analysed against the background of the aforementioned developments in the global scene. The EPC's claim was to “emphasise European geopolitical cooperation in light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine; to remedy enlargement fatigue by providing an additional forum for exchange between EU candidates and member states; as well as create a forum for exchange with non-EU security actors” (Tcherneva, 2023). Positioned at the juncture of different EU foreign policy initiatives, it was seen as a multilateral vehicle in the re-emergence of traditional power politics and the dominance of a transactional approach” (Mazur, 2023, p. 84). The question as to whether the EPC's claim to fill the “geopolitical void in Europe” (Mazur, 2023: 84) is another instance of the transactionalist tendencies visible in global and regional politics outlined above remains to be addressed.

The EPC is the brainchild of French President Emmanuel Macron, who, unlike his predecessor François Mitterrand before him, who suggested the creation of a looser-defined “European confederation” including Russia, aimed to introduce an ambitious vision of Europe's potential strategic capabilities through this very initiative. “Unlike Mitterrand, Macron is not seeking to fold Russia into his new organization, instead focusing on Europe's periphery and long-time aspirant members, along with a few close economic and military allies” (Moyer, 2022). “The EPC has been set up as a series of summit meetings, as a platform for political dialogue between

European heads of state and government in a period of great geopolitical turmoil. It seeks inter-governmental exchange, coordination and cooperation” (Lippert, 2022).

On a different note, the emergence of the EPC initiative also has to be read in the light of the re-emergence of enlargement in the EU political agenda. The granting of EU candidacy status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 two things: That the EU's Neighborhood Policy was a failed one (Interview 5) and that the EU made a political decision on enlargement out of sheer need to have a secure Eastern front with Russia. Nevertheless, as it is unlikely for the new candidates to conclude the negotiations in the short term, the EU wants to give the candidate countries the feeling of belongingness to the “European family” vis-à-vis Putin’s Russia (Arısan-Eralp, 2022). This had already been aired by Macron on 9 May 2022, arguing that “the EU cannot be the only means of structuring the continent” in the face of Moscow’s expansionism (Malingre, 2023).

Nevertheless, although originally pitched as a community of democratic states, the EPC did not represent itself as “an alliance of values” from the start. The way of doing things within the EPC meetings could also be considered as a clue to support the transactionality of the EPC debate. “At the first meeting in Prague, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson held talks with Turkish President Erdoğan on Sweden’s accession to NATO and the then British Prime Minister Liz Truss met with Emmanuel Macron to discuss bilateral cooperation, notably on energy and migration” (Mazur, 2023, pp. 91-92). In Prague, Truss also sowed the seeds of a Memorandum of Understanding with the North Seas

Energy Cooperation (NSEC),<sup>2</sup> which was signed later in December 2022 (Financial Times, 2022).

More recently, as Spain took over the Presidency of the Council of the EU in July 2023, the main issues emphasised once again by the Russian aggression on Ukraine – from economic sovereignty to energy security, from defence capabilities to enlargement – has been at the top of EU’s six-month agenda. “Even if the Spaniards are not so excited about the initiative, the EPC could be a useful platform for opening up discussion of policy coordination at the continental level. Spain should demonstrate more proactive commitment to the EPC than it has done so far, and do more to bring to the table constructive and innovative ideas to enliven the format” (TEPSA, 2023).

“The EU’s institutions and member states have yet to find a consensus on where the EPC should be heading – between discussion club and “community of action” – and how much political capital the member states should be investing in it” (Lippert, 2022). All interviewees agreed that it is quite unlikely for the EPC to become a very strong European institution with clear objectives and policy tools, beyond the transactionality debate. If the EPC turns out to be a step towards a Europe of concentric circles, grouped around the EU as spaces of cooperation and integration, or if it is seen as an alternative to enlargement, this could irritate many, further aggravating the potential risks of transactionalism for democracy-aspiring EU candidate and neighbour countries. The forthcoming EPC Summits will contribute to the debate whether the Community will be another bargaining

<sup>2</sup> “The voluntary North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), which focuses on supporting the construction of wind farms and distribution networks in the region, is made up of the European Commission, eight EU member states and Norway” (Financial Times, 2022).

venue for transactional relations between its members.

## Conclusion

The EU's resolute response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its wartime discursive shift to (geo)politics after years of strategic ambiguity and indecision towards its Eastern front is naturally noteworthy. Many stressed "the EU's unity even on potentially contested measures within the EU emergency response, such as banning Russia's banks from SWIFT, freezing assets belonging to its oligarchs EU-wide and using the European Peace Facility to procure weapons for Ukraine" (Pintsch & Rabinovych, 2023, p. 3). This "turning point" ("*Zeitenwende*") led to, among others, the launching of a major defence programme to reequip Germany's armed forces. All in all, the invasion of Ukraine led to a fundamental shift in the EU's security architecture narrative, which is more geopolitical and securitised than ever.

Nevertheless, there is no *Zeitenwende* regarding Türkiye-EU relations. The bilateral relations have been in the process of serious decline over the course of the past decade. Due to its multiple crises and populist backlashes, the EU has been in a defensive mood and has been concerned with its internal problems, seriously suffering from enlargement fatigue and poly-crises. The EU enlargement has certainly not been on the agenda until the current security crisis involving the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As of now, although Türkiye is officially still a candidate country, in most of the meetings in Brussels, the Eurocrats speak of the accession of "9 countries" without even specifically mentioning Türkiye. Regardless of the accession process, it is about time that the EU had a serious discussion with Türkiye, going beyond mere transactional bargaining and interest-based calculation. As one interviewee contended,

"as one American expression says, it is now time 'to talk turkey', to talk seriously, to dive into the details of the matter. Now is the time for that" (Interview 4). The solution might be to start with transactionalism in policy areas, to take the relation to a different level, which is more principled and rule-based (Interview 3).

Nevertheless, we should not be deceived by a nostalgic self-induced normativity illusion. It would be misleading to assume that the bilateral relations were very normative in the past and now they have become completely transactional. "While discursively the EU has traditionally felt more at ease in 'talking values' with the third parties, in practice it has generally opted for 'doing interests', particularly if member states' foreign policies are viewed as an integral element of EU foreign policy" (Tocci, 2017, p. 498). The rich academic literature on "Normative Power Europe", as mentioned, has already focused on the dichotomous relationship between values and interests (e.g. Manners, 2006; Diez, 2013). In the current context, had the traditional interests-values dichotomy been upheld in the EU's approach to the third parties, the scales would have likely tilted in favour of the former.

Still, there is, as always, room for optimism. No transactional relation could be purely transactional in the European context, perhaps with the exception of migration (Interview 1). Indeed, the updating of the Customs Union agreement with Türkiye stipulates a norm-based economy. Similarly, the European Green Deal is an opportunity to move beyond ongoing transactionalism in EU-Türkiye relations. It would provide a new framework for action in bilateral and multilateral relations, allowing for a structured partnership between Ankara and Brussels (Interview 2). With the green transition that seems to be defining the EU's



external relations in the medium term, you cannot afford to be non-normative. Accordingly, under the current circumstances, external incentives granted by the EU within the framework of a jointly negotiated “transactional” conditionality setup alongside the already existing accession scheme might prove to be the most effective enforcement mechanism to promote EU-Türkiye cooperation, mutual trust, and political dialogue in the short run (Reiners & Turhan, 2021, p. 422). What Tocci calls “principled pragmatism” should characterise the Türkiye-EU bilateral relations in the near future (Tocci, 2017). “The pragmatism comes into play in the assessment of the external environment, not in the guidance to

the EU regarding how to face up to it” (Tocci, 2017, p. 499).

Setting aside the exigency of the conditions that gave rise to the narrative of “geopolitical Europe”, a recent study assessing the EU integration perceptions of the young population in Romania, Kosovo, Albania, Georgia, North Macedonia and Türkiye shows that the normativity of the European integration is still quite attractive for the young population in these countries (Alpan and Hoti, 2024-forthcoming). With the enlargement prospect on the EU agenda once again, the need for a focus on norms and values is crucial for the EU if it cares about its credibility and coherence in global politics.

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