

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Strategic Interdependence without Accession: EU-Türkiye Relations

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### **S***ummary*

Mutual security, economic and regional interests continue to sustain the EU-Türkiye cooperation despite persistent political and normative disagreements.

The EU–Türkiye relationship is increasingly marked by deepening functional cooperation alongside persistent political tensions. While Brussels engages with Ankara on areas such as trade, migration, connectivity and regional security, democratic concerns and geopolitical tensions continue to obstruct meaningful progress in the accession process. Recent debates within the EU further suggest that Türkiye is increasingly being viewed less as a future member and more as a strategic external actor.

## **EU’s Framing of Türkiye**

The EU–Türkiye relationship is characterised by deepening functional engagement in trade, migration and security, alongside widening political differences over values, the Cyprus issue, and foreign policy alignment. The most recent debate was triggered by the EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during an event hosted by the German daily *Die Zeit* in Hamburg on 19 April 2026, where she stated that “we must succeed in completing the European continent so that it is not influenced by Russian, Turkish or Chinese. We have to think bigger and geopolitically”.<sup>1</sup> The remarks suggested that the EU increasingly views Türkiye as a strategic external actor rather than as a candidate steadily moving towards integration.

On 21 April 2026, EU Commission spokesperson Paula Pinho clarified that Leyen was highlighting Türkiye’s added responsibility, as an EU candidate country, to use its regional influence in line with EU values.<sup>2</sup> She noted that the remarks specifically referred to Türkiye’s role in the Western Balkans, emphasising expectations that its actions in the region remain consistent with EU principles.

However, the combination of assertive wording and quick clarification reveals both the EU’s geopolitical context and its hesitation to fully own that framing. Speaking at the European Parliament on 20 April 2026, European Commission enlargement chief Marta Kos highlighted that “in light of the changing geopolitical realities in Europe and the Middle East, we need Türkiye”,<sup>3</sup> emphasising the importance of stronger partnerships in the EU’s immediate neighbourhood. She noted that Türkiye is the EU’s fifth-largest trading partner, with trade volumes surpassing those with Mercosur and India combined. Kos highlighted Türkiye’s significance as a major economic partner, a critical connectivity corridor between Europe and Asia, and an increasingly important security actor whose role would be central to any future post-war security arrangement in the Black Sea region following a settlement in Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hella Kemper, [“Ursula Von Der Leyen Calls On Europe to Completely Reposition Itself”](#), *Die Zeit*, 19 April 2026.

<sup>2</sup> [“EU Clarifies Comments on Türkiye’s Role in Neighboring Regions”](#), *Daily Sabah*, 21 April 2026.

<sup>3</sup> [“Speech by Commissioner Kos at the Structured Dialogue with the European Parliament”](#), European Commission, 20 April 2026.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Von der Leyen’s formulation should be read as part of a broader EU shift from enlargement as a normative project to enlargement as geopolitical consolidation. By grouping Türkiye with Russia and China, she effectively placed it in the category of external actors capable of shaping Europe’s neighbourhood. This does not suggest that Brussels views Ankara as an adversary; rather, it indicates that Türkiye is increasingly being perceived as a strategically important actor positioned outside the EU’s normative and political core, rather than as a candidate progressing steadily towards membership.

The broader geopolitical environment has reinforced this strategic reassessment. Türkiye has been expanding cooperation with Ukraine in line with European security objectives, increasing its influence in Syria in ways that help alleviate EU concerns over counter-terrorism and migration management, and playing an active role in the South Caucasus through renewed dialogue to resume trade and reopen the border with Armenia.<sup>5</sup> These developments have strengthened Türkiye’s relevance to European strategic calculations even as political integration remains stalled.

## **Functional Cooperation without Political Integration**

The practical relationship between Türkiye and the EU is not collapsing. On 6 February 2026, Marta Kos and Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan agreed in Ankara to continue efforts to modernise the EU–Türkiye customs union and improve its implementation.<sup>6</sup> In a joint statement, both sides expressed commitment to unlocking the agreement’s full potential to enhance competitiveness, economic security and resilience. They also welcomed the European Investment Bank’s gradual resumption of operations in Türkiye, with plans to support projects domestically and in neighbouring regions. In March 2026, it was reported that the EU had floated the possibility of including Türkiye in the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA)<sup>7</sup>, highlighting continued interest in deepening economic integration despite stalled accession talks.

Previously, on 3 April 2025, the High-Level Economic Dialogue (HLED), the first since 2019, served as a platform for the EU and Türkiye to review their economic and financial ties and explore ways to strengthen them, in line with the Joint Communication to the European Council.<sup>8</sup> The dialogue also enabled an exchange

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<sup>5</sup> Veronika Melkozerova, [“Ukraine Bets On Turkey, Syria to Counter Russia in the Black Sea”](#), *Politico*, 10 April 2026; [“Türkiye and Armenia Move Closer to Direct Trade Links in Sign of Warming Ties”](#), *Arab News*, 13 May 2026.

<sup>6</sup> [“Europe, Turkey Agree to Work Toward Updating Customs Union”](#), *Reuters*, 6 February 2026.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Spicer, [“EU Pitched for Turkey to Join Its Payments System, Envoy Says”](#), *Reuters*, 19 March 2026.

<sup>8</sup> [“The Commission Hosts EU–Türkiye High-Level Economic Dialogue”](#), European Commission, 3 April 2025.

on political concerns, with the EU raising issues over recent arrests and detentions of elected officials, civil society members and media actors. Emphasising that strong democracies and the rule of law underpin investor confidence and macroeconomic stability, the EU reiterated that Türkiye, as a candidate country and longstanding member of the Council of Europe, is expected to uphold the highest democratic standards.

Türkiye’s geographical position placed it at the centre of one of the largest displacement crises in recent history. When the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye was established in 2016, the country was hosting more than 3.1 million Syrian refugees and nearly four million refugees overall, underscoring the scale of the humanitarian burden it assumed.<sup>9</sup> Established in March 2016 as part of the EU–Türkiye Statement, the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye mobilised €6 billion between 2016 and 2019 to support refugee assistance and host communities. EU engagement has since continued, with an additional €6 billion allocated for 2020–2027 to sustain programmes in education, healthcare, protection and socio-economic support for refugees in Türkiye.<sup>10</sup>

Europe continues to retain strategic significance for Türkiye. It remains Ankara’s largest trading partner, provides important institutional frameworks for interoperability and procurement, and constitutes a shared security environment in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean where Turkish and European interests frequently converge. Türkiye’s participation in the German-led European Sky Shield Initiative, along with its expanding defence-industrial cooperation with Italy and Spain, further illustrates these continuing strategic linkages. In addition, Türkiye supplies military equipment to eastern flank states seeking to strengthen their deterrence capabilities.<sup>11</sup>

## **Persistent Barriers to Accession**

The European Parliament stated in a May 2025 report that Türkiye’s EU accession process should remain frozen due to ongoing democratic backsliding, including the suppression of protests, the weakening of the rule of law, and politically motivated actions against opposition figures such as Ekrem İmamoğlu.<sup>12</sup> Notably, İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul, was seen as Erdoğan’s main challenger from the opposition Republican People’s Party in the 2028 presidential election. While acknowledging

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<sup>9</sup> [“EU Refugee Support in Türkiye Continues Under New Phase As Facility for Refugees Concludes”](#), European Commission, 6 March 2026.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Murat Yeşiltaş, [“Türkiye’s Post-European Security Moment”](#), Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), 5 May 2026.

<sup>12</sup> [“Türkiye’s EU Accession Process Must Remain Frozen”](#), Press Release, European Parliament, 7 May 2025.

Türkiye’s strategic importance as a NATO ally and regional actor, members of the European Parliament emphasised that EU membership criteria, covering democracy, human rights, and alignment with EU foreign policy, are non-negotiable and cannot be offset by geopolitical considerations.

On 5 May 2026, writing from prison, Ekrem İmamoğlu argued that his detention reflected a deeper crisis in Türkiye’s democracy, rule of law, and its strained relationship with the EU. He contended that the accession process had become largely symbolic, stalled by both Ankara’s democratic backsliding and the EU’s inconsistent strategic vision.<sup>13</sup> Referring to criticism from the European Parliament and to Leyen’s position, he warned that treating Türkiye as an adversary alongside powers such as Russia and China ignored its institutional ties with Europe, including its membership in the Council of Europe and NATO. While acknowledging that internal democratic erosion lay at the core of the tensions, İmamoğlu called for a renewed political vision in Türkiye grounded in rights, pluralism, and the rule of law, alongside a more consistent and forward-looking EU approach to rebuilding a meaningful partnership.

A May 2025 report by European Parliament rapporteur Nacho Sánchez Amor noted that the visa liberalisation process could restart once Türkiye meets the remaining six of the 72 benchmarks required for visa-free travel to the Schengen Area.<sup>14</sup> While 66 conditions have been fulfilled, outstanding issues include revising anti-terror laws, concluding an operational agreement with Europol, implementing anti-corruption recommendations from GRECO, ensuring judicial cooperation with all EU member states, fully applying the EU–Türkiye Readmission Agreement, and aligning data protection laws with European standards. The report emphasised that visa liberalisation would be supported once these criteria are fully met and without discrimination against any EU member state.

## **Türkiye’s Strategic Response**

On 5 May 2026, Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan argued that the EU cannot become a true global power without fully including Türkiye, while blaming Greece and Cyprus as key obstacles to Ankara’s EU accession. He claimed the process has been hindered by political bias rather than technical criteria, with the Cyprus dispute acting as a central barrier.<sup>15</sup> Erdoğan also criticised the EU’s past decisions, including Cyprus’ 2004 membership, and contrasted Türkiye’s prolonged candidacy with Greece’s relatively rapid accession. Despite this, he stated that

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<sup>13</sup> Ekrem İmamoğlu, “[Don’t Treat Turkey Like Russia And China](#)”, *Politico*, 5 May 2026.

<sup>14</sup> “[EU Tells Turkey Progress in Trade Ties Requires Steps Toward Cyprus](#)”, *Cyprus Mirror*, 21 April 2026.

<sup>15</sup> “[Erdoğan: EU Cannot Become Global Power Without Turkey](#)”, *eKathimerini*, 5 May 2026.

Ankara has continued its EU-oriented path since the launch of accession talks in 2005 and has met its obligations, while accusing European institutions of prejudice based on factors such as democracy, population and faith.<sup>16</sup>

However, Türkiye is likely to continue engaging European partners through a pragmatic and selective framework, particularly by expanding defence-industrial cooperation with specific states. Nevertheless, these interactions are increasingly transactional rather than indicative of strategic dependence. Ankara participates in European security mechanisms when they align with Turkish national interests, while simultaneously pursuing alternative strategic and institutional arrangements where existing European frameworks are perceived as insufficient or incompatible with its broader geopolitical objectives.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

The EU–Türkiye relationship is increasingly characterised by strategic interdependence without corresponding political integration. While democratic backsliding, disputes over Cyprus, and divergence in foreign policy alignment continue to constrain Türkiye’s accession trajectory, functional cooperation between the two sides remains substantial in areas such as trade, migration management, defence cooperation and regional security. Recent debates within the EU also indicate a broader shift in how Türkiye is perceived: from a candidate moving steadily towards membership to a strategically consequential regional actor operating outside the EU’s normative core.

At the same time, Ankara appears to be adapting to this reality through a more selective and interest-driven approach towards Europe. Türkiye continues to engage European institutions and security frameworks that align with its strategic priorities, while simultaneously diversifying its external partnerships and pursuing greater strategic autonomy.

The evolving geopolitical environment, growing security concerns linked to Russia, and uncertainty within the transatlantic relationship are increasingly pushing the EU towards a more pragmatic redefinition of its relationship with Türkiye beyond the traditional accession framework. As a result, EU–Türkiye relations are increasingly operating within a pragmatic framework in which geopolitical necessity sustains cooperation despite limited prospects for full integration.

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<sup>16</sup> Esra Tekin, “[Türkiye's President Urges EU to Refrain From Rhetoric That Could Undermine Ankara's 'Constructive Stance'](#)”, *Anadolu Agency*, 4 May 2026.

<sup>17</sup> Murat Yeşiltaş, “[Türkiye's Post-European Security Moment](#)”, no. 11.

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