

# EU Leaders' Narratives on Turkey: From Membership Aspirant to a Transactional Partner and Problematic Neighbour

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## *1. Introduction: Why Should We Study EU Leaders' Narratives on Turkey?*

Relations between the European Union (EU) and Turkey have been highly topical in recent years. Growing hostilities, political turmoil and verbal skirmishes have kept this partnership in the limelight and aroused heated discussions in academic, political and public debate. Rather than being the exception, tensions and conflicts in EU-Turkey affairs have become the new normal. Turkey's backsliding democracy and shift towards a more assertive foreign policy in Syria, Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean have largely contributed to the EU's perception that "Turkey is increasingly moving away from the Union".<sup>1</sup> Between autumn 2016 and summer 2022, the European Parliament has adopted sixteen critical resolutions vis-à-vis Turkey.<sup>2</sup> In October 2019, the Foreign Affairs Council imposed a framework for restrictive measures to protest against Turkey's illegal offshore drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet, Turkey is still an accession candidate country and remains a "key partner for the EU"<sup>3</sup> in a number of policy areas – such as migration, security and trade. Facing such contradicting trends in EU-Turkey relations, policy and decision makers in Brussels need a pragmatic perspective so as to assess opportunities and constraints for joint actions with Ankara constructively.

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1 Council of the European Union. Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process. Council conclusions. Brussels, 26.06.2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf> [23.09.2020].

2 Cf. European Parliament. EP resolutions. Brussels, 23.08.2022, <https://www.europa.rl.europa.eu/delegations/en/d-tr/documents/ep-resolutions> [23.08.2022].

3 European Union External Action. Role of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean: Remarks by the High Representative / Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP plenary. Brussels, 15.09.2020, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/role-turkey-eastern-mediterranean-remarks-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-ep\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/role-turkey-eastern-mediterranean-remarks-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-ep_en) [23.09.2020].

Aiming to shed light on the various forms and areas of interactions in EU-Turkey relations, this chapter studies European Council conclusions since the 1970s, focussing on narratives about Turkey generated by the EU Leaders' – the Heads of State or Government of the Member States. Our use of the term 'narrative' is understood as "interpretations by political actors of the evolution, drivers and actors, as well as the goal (or 'finalité') of EU-Turkey relations".<sup>4</sup> This analysis of narratives provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay between the accession process, areas of cooperation and tense conflicts that have shaped EU-Turkey relations over the past five decades. The aim is to clarify how EU Leaders' portray and communicate the EU's relationship with Turkey. This chapter takes the form of three parts. Following the introduction, there is a brief overview on the historical context of EU-Turkey relations. Then, the main part presents and discusses the empirical evidence of the European Council conclusions on Turkey. Finally, this chapter ends with a conclusion and a brief outlook on the future of EU-Turkey relations. Our analysis shows that after a period of convergence throughout the 1990s, which paved the way for Turkey's candidacy and in which the *membership narrative* predominated, there now exist two opposing narratives, one which centres on partnership whilst the other perceives Turkey as an increasingly problematic neighbour. This stems from strategic cooperation in selected policy fields such as migration and anti-terrorism on the one hand and growing divergences with regard to European fundamental values as well as foreign policy interests in the broader region (in particular: Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya) on the other. Hence, EU Leaders perceive Ankara as an important, but increasingly difficult partner.

## 2. *The European Council – The European Union's Agenda Setter and Framer of EU Narratives on Turkey*

EU narratives on Turkey have been shaped in various ways and by a number of different political actors within the Union. Previous research has examined public debates in the European Parliament and regular reports on Turkey by the European Commission.<sup>5</sup> However, little attention has so far

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4 Özbey, Ebru Ece et.al. Identity Representations in the Narratives on the EU-Turkey Relations. FEUTURE Online Paper No. 32. Cologne, March 2019, p. 4.

5 Cf. Hauge, Hanna-Lisa et. al. Narratives of a Contested Relationship: Unravelling the Debates in EU-Turkey Relations. In: Saatçioğlu, Beken/ Tekin, Funda (Eds). Turkey and the European Union. Key Dynamics and Future Scenarios. Turkey and European Union Studies. Vol 3. Baden-Baden, 2021, pp. 31–56.

been paid to the European Council's role in framing EU narratives on Turkey.<sup>6</sup> The European Council is a leading institution in the Union's political architecture.<sup>7</sup> It comprises the Heads of State or Government of EU Member States, the President of the Commission and the President of the European Council. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy "shall take part in the work".<sup>8</sup> It is the EU's club of the highest political leaders and is understood as the EU's "collective head of state".<sup>9</sup> The European Council provides "the Union with the necessary impetus for its development" and defines "general political directions and political priorities".<sup>10</sup> In political practice, it has developed a state-like agenda by focussing on several issues in the EU's policy making.<sup>11</sup> As the EU's political platform of agenda-setting, the European Council has also emerged as the EU's leading international voice and crisis manager. It is a high-level meeting place for EU Leaders, in which the Union's positions, interests and key policy concerns are negotiated, balanced and presented; this is where Heads of States or Government can find compromise on divergent interests.

The treaty foresees four regularly scheduled meetings of the European Council per year. However, the actual number including informal and extraordinary – emergency – meetings has increased over recent decades. On 29 November 2015 and on 18 March 2016, for example, the European Council gathered for two extraordinary EU-Turkey summits and identified emergency actions to cope with the migration crisis. Through the European Council's conclusions, which are published after each summit, the Heads of States or Government set the EU's policy agenda and define "issues of concern and actions to take".<sup>12</sup> The conclusions result from careful preparations over several administrative and political levels which aim at reaching consensus among Member States' political leaders and have a strong impact on the way other EU institutions prepare, implement and monitor ongoing policies. Since the tone of these documents is highly diplomatic with

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6 Ebru Turhan/ Wolfgang Wessels. The European Council as a Key Driver of EU–Turkey Relations: Central Functions, Internal Dynamics, and Evolving Preferences. In: Wulf Reiners/ Ebru Turhan (Eds): *EU-Turkey Relations. Theories, Institutions, and Policies*, Cham 2021, pp. 185–217.

7 Cf. Wessels, Wolfgang. *The European Council*. London, 2015.

8 Article 15(2), TEU.

9 Schoutete, Philipp. *The European Council and the Community Method*. Policy Paper No. 56, July 2012, p. 36.

10 Treaty on European Union. Article 15(1).

11 Cf. Wessels, European Council, 2015, p. 8.

12 European Council. *European Council conclusions*. Brussels, 23.08.2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/conclusions/> [23.08.2022].

carefully chosen wording, their conclusions provide evidence for the EU Leaders' agenda on Turkey, both in terms of key concerns and political actions, albeit their analysis often requires background and historical context information.

### 2.1. Turkey in the EU's Spotlight: Relationship Milestones

The history of EU-Turkey relations has been dominated by a number of ups and downs, contradicting trends and distinct dynamics of divergence and convergence over the last seven decades. Academic debate labels these different trends in EU-Turkey relations as the partnership's 'ebbs and flows'.<sup>13</sup> Different paths in the history of EU-Turkey relations evoke an ambiguity towards Turkey's role in EU affairs. Previous research has identified the relationship's key milestones:<sup>14</sup>

Figure 18: Milestones in EU-Turkeys Relations

Year	Milestone
1963	Ankara Agreement: Association Agreement between Turkey and EEC
1974	Turkish Intervention in Cyprus
1980	Military Coup in Turkey
1987	Turkey's Membership Application to the EU (rejection in 1989)
1996	EU-Turkey Customs Union
1997	Luxembourg Summit
1999	Helsinki Summit
2004	Failure of the Annan Plan in Cyprus & EU's Big Bang Enlargement
2005	Start of Turkey's Accession Negotiations
Since 2015	Turkey & EU Common Actions on Migration
2016	July Failed Coup Attempt in Turkey
2018	Introduction of the Presidential System in Turkey
Since 2018	Increasing Tensions over Turkey's power projection in the Eastern Mediterranean; Turkey's military activities in North East Syria and Libya

Source: based on Özbey et al., Identity representations in the Narratives on the EU-Turkey Relations, 2019.

13 Cf. Aydın-Düzgüt, Senem/ Tocci, Natalie. Turkey and the European Union. London, 2015, p. 9.

14 Cf. Özbey et al., Identity representations in the Narratives on the EU-Turkey Relations, 2019.

Both, the signing of the Ankara agreement in 1963 and Turkey's official application for membership in 1987, are often presented as initial reference points, linking Turkey to the European integration project.<sup>15</sup> Having spent more than 20 years at the EU's doorstep, Turkey's accession process with the EU has been the longest so far and is still lacking a realistic accession perspective. The history of Turkey's EU accession process has witnessed alternating phases of political progress and setbacks. In 1989, the EU rejected Turkey's membership application for the first time. Seven years later, Brussels and Ankara agreed to upgrade their economic relationship and completed the Customs Union, thereby achieving the aim of the 1963 Ankara Agreement. However, this was followed by another disappointment for Ankara: the EU's Heads of State or Government objected to granting Turkey the status of official EU candidate country at their 1997 summit in Luxembourg. Yet, only two years later in 1999 at the European Council summit in Helsinki this decision was fundamentally revised and Turkey finally obtained candidate status. Shortly after the EU's so-called big bang enlargement in 2004/2007 when ten central and eastern European countries plus Malta and Cyprus acceded to the EU, Turkey's accession negotiations started in 2005. But negotiations have so far met with little prospect of accession eventually being realised. By 2020, 16 out of 35 chapters had been opened, but only 1 provisionally closed.<sup>16</sup> In view of political developments in recent years, negotiations have been at a dead-end for some time. On 24 November 2016, the European Parliament adopted a non-binding resolution to temporarily freeze the EU's accession negotiations with Turkey. Two years later in June 2018, the EU's General Affairs Council added "that Turkey has been moving further away from the European Union. Turkey's accession negotiations have, therefore, effectively come to a standstill and no further chapters can be considered for opening or closing and no further work towards modernisation of the EU-Turkey Customs Union is foreseen".<sup>17</sup> Even though negotiations remain in a consolidated stalemate, neither the EU nor Turkey are politically willing to signal their official termination. Accordingly, Turkey's EU accession process, albeit lacking in enthusiasm and a real accession perspective for

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15 Cf. Hillenbrand, Olaf. *Europa ABC*. In: Werner Weidenfeld, Wolfgang Wessels (Eds.). *Europa von A bis Z*. Vol. 12. Baden Baden, 2011, p. 453.

16 Cf. Council of the European Union. *European Enlargement Turkey*. Brussels, 23.08.2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/turkey/> [23.08.2022].

17 Council of the European Union, *Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process*, 2018.

the time being, is still in place and as such a framework for EU-Turkey relations. In recent years, the EU's focus vis-à-vis Turkey has shifted from the accession process and domestic politics to foreign policy. In particular, Turkey's past and potential unilateral offshore drilling activities in maritime areas claimed by Greece and the Republic of Cyprus have added another layer of tension to the already contested EU-Turkey relationship.

## 2.2. Empirical Evidence: European Council Conclusions on Turkey

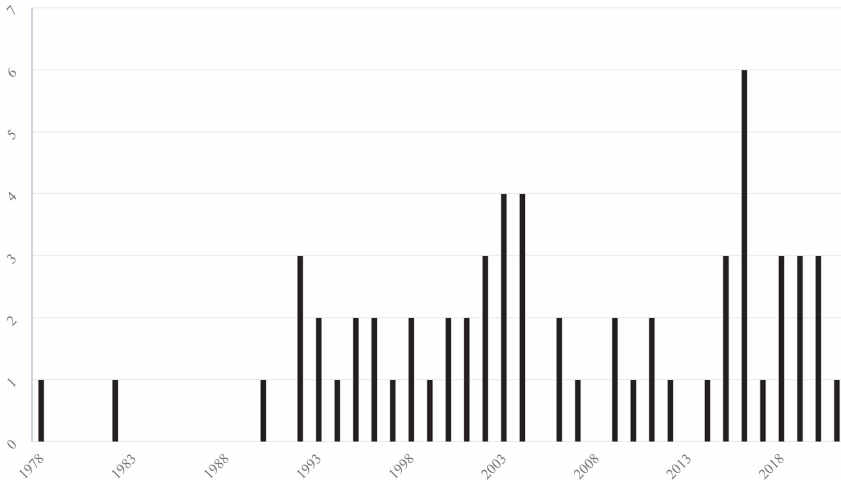
This chapter builds on qualitative data analysis, based on all European Council conclusions between 1978 and 2021 dealing with Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, there are 64 conclusions that include the term 'Turkey', which were coded and evaluated using the data analysis software MAXQDA. For the analysis, three generic categories of narratives were segmented (*membership, transactional partnership and conflict*), each of which contains a number of sub-codes. The membership category includes all text passages that deal with Turkey as a candidate state in a broader way, therefore codes such as 'adoption of *acquis*', 'political criteria' or 'candidate state' were used. Focussing on the issue of compliance to the Copenhagen Criteria the membership category also refers to the political and the economic dimension of the partnership. The normative category (political criteria) contains sub-codes such as 'human rights', 'fundamental freedoms' or 'rule of law' and the 'attempted coup in Turkey'. The cooperation category concerns all possible forms of cooperation. This means that the codes refer to both policy-related cooperation, such as 'migration' or 'the fight against terrorism', and institutional cooperation, such as 'Customs Union' or 'Association Agreement'. The conflict category reflects the EU's criticism towards Turkey identified by codes such as 'strongly condemns', 'calls upon Turkey to' or 'expects Turkey to'. The coding followed a procedural approach, meaning the creation of the code system was designed as a continuous process and constantly adjusted during the coding process.

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18 The selected period of time covers all references to Turkey in the conclusions by the European Council. Please note: The European Council has been established on 10 December 1974.

Looking first at Figure 19 below, two striking dynamics are revealed:

Figure 19: European Council Conclusions on Turkey 1978–2021



Source: own compilation.

Firstly, Turkey received practically no attention from the European Council in the 1970s and 1980s. A rare exception appeared in March 1982, with European Council comments on the 1980 military coup. Secondly, Turkey has increasingly been mentioned since the 1990s, once the EU started to discuss the country's political and economic ability to become an EU Candidate country. In recent years – especially since 2015 – Turkey has certainly been prominent on the EU Leaders' agenda. But contrary to the 1990s and the early 2000s, interest in Turkey has not been provoked by the accession process, but rather by other topical issues such as migration and the EU Leaders' unease vis-à-vis the direction of Turkey's foreign policy.

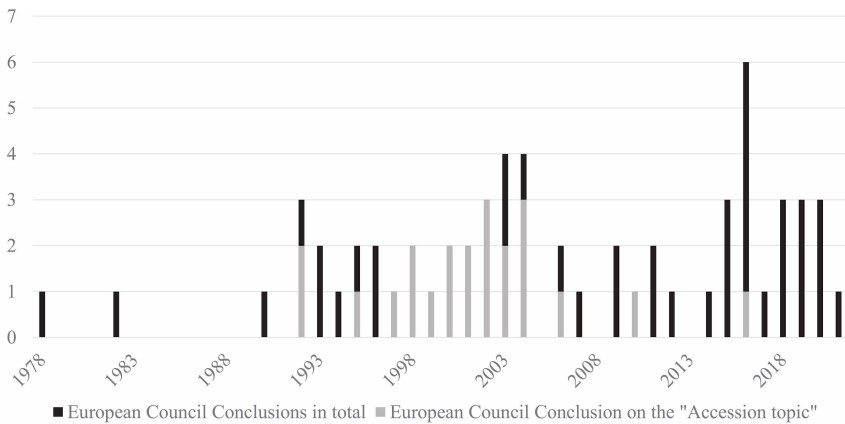
### 2.3. Narrative of Membership: Turkey as a Candidate for EU Accession

The European Council did not comment on Turkey's attempt to join the EU until early in the 1990s. Even though Turkey officially applied for membership in 1987, which was subsequently rejected in 1989, this was a decision taken by the European Commission rather than the Council. At the time major obstacles to progress were quoted as being domestic polit-

ics, the economic situation, persistent conflicts with Greece and Cyprus as well as threats to minority rights.<sup>19</sup>

The European Council then started to deal with Turkey early in the 1990s. After the end of the Cold War, in light of the EU's enlargement strategy towards Central and Eastern European states as well as the Balkan Wars, the European Council tried to find ways to deal with Turkey's new geopolitical role in the EU's neighbourhood. Consequently, demands for Turkey's EU membership began to gain more weight with EU policymakers.

Figure 20: Share of 'Accession Topic' in the European Council Conclusions on Turkey 1978–2021



Source: own compilation.

During the 1990s and the early 2000s, EU Leaders' agenda on Turkey was dominated by two themes, namely *politics* and *economics*. Paradoxically, both appeared either as driving forces or as obstacles for Turkey's EU accession process. In December 1995, the European Council commented on finalisation of the EU-Turkey Customs Union linking it to "the consolidation and strengthening of a political, economic and security rela-

19 Cf. University of Luxembourg (CVCE). Commission Opinion on Turkey's request for accession to the Community. Luxembourg, 20.12.1989, [https://www.cvc.e.eu/content/publication/2005/2/4/4cc1acf8-06b2-40c5-bb1e-bb3d4860e7c1/publis\\_hable\\_en.pdf](https://www.cvc.e.eu/content/publication/2005/2/4/4cc1acf8-06b2-40c5-bb1e-bb3d4860e7c1/publis_hable_en.pdf) [02.11.2019].



tionship crucial to the stability of that regio".<sup>20</sup> In view of the political and economic situations in Turkey, the European Council further added that, "it notes with regret that certain issues remain to be resolved in the relationship", but "emphasises the need for the observance of the highest standards of human rights" in Turkey.<sup>21</sup> According to these statements, intensified economic collaboration with Turkey was presented as a means of maintaining and reinforcing regional stability. The Council was in no doubt that the Customs Union established a new dimension of trade relations between the EU and Turkey. Yet, it also reflected EU Leaders' preference at the time for upgrading economic relations, rather than beginning accession negotiations. This approach changed between 1997 and 1999. Within this short time-span of two years, European Council thinking went through a significant turnaround in regard to Turkey. Whereas the Luxembourg Summit in 1997 rejected Ankara's membership bid, in 1999 the Helsinki Summit accepted Turkey as an official accession candidate to the EU. In 1997, the Heads of State or Government stressed that, "Turkey will be judged on the same criteria as the other applicant states".<sup>22</sup> With this statement the European Council argued that Turkey would join the EU, if it sufficiently meets the Copenhagen Criteria. Furthermore, the Council stated at that time that the "political and economic conditions allowing accession negotiations are not satisfied". In addition, EU Leaders demanded "the establishment of satisfactory and stable relations between Greece and Turkey in particular by legal process, including the International Court of Justice; and support for negotiations under the aegis of the UN on a political settlement in Cyprus on the basis of the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions"<sup>23</sup> Looking at this aspect more closely, in 1997 Turkey and Greece appeared to be on the edge of war with one another over a conflict regarding the purchase of S-300 air defence missiles. Political tensions lasted until 1998, at which point they were resolved through a massive diplomatic intervention by the US.<sup>24</sup> One year later, in 1999 following the Helsinki Summit the European Council approved Turkey as

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20 European Council. Presidency Conclusions. Madrid European Council. 15 and 16 December 1995. Madrid, 16.12.1995, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21179/madrid-european-council.pdf> [08.11.2019].

21 Ibid.

22 European Council. Presidency Conclusions. Luxembourg European Council. 12 and 13 December 1997. Luxembourg, 13.12.1997, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21114/luxembourg-european-council.pdf> [08.11.2019].

23 Ibid.

24 Cf. Hale, William. *Turkish Foreign Policy*, p. 181.

a candidate state.<sup>25</sup> Instead of denouncing economic and political criteria as creating an obstacle for Turkey to obtain candidate status, as it was done before, on this occasion it was argued that candidate status will further support Turkey in its reform process. Academic research provides three explanations for this rapid turnaround. Firstly, between 1997 and 1999 both Germany and France experienced changes of government, which gave rise to a more Turkey friendly policy approach.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, on 17 August 1999 Turkey was heavily affected by a severe earthquake near Istanbul. This led to an immediate change in the atmosphere of Turkey-Greece relations and evoked waves of sympathy and empathy within the societies.<sup>27</sup> Thirdly, Greece changed its stance on Turkey's accession, preferring to use it more as a bargaining tool. In return for accepting Turkey as a candidate country, Athens received a guarantee that the Republic of Cyprus would become an EU member, even if the island's reunification process would fail.<sup>28</sup>

After a number of political reforms including official suspension of the death penalty in Turkey, the European Council decided in December 2004 to "open accession negotiations with Turkey without delay".<sup>29</sup> In the respective statement, the Heads of State or Government praise Turkey for a "far-reaching reform process" and expressed its "confidence that Turkey will sustain that process of reform".<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the European Council set out the framework for the negotiations. It is stated that, "the shared objective of the negotiations is accession", but the "negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand".<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it is argued that in "case of a serious and persistent breach in a candidate state of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law on which the Union is founded, the Commission will, on its own initiative or on the request of one third of the Member States, recommend the suspension

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25 European Council. Presidency Conclusions. Helsinki European Council. 10 and 11 December 1999. Helsinki, 11.12.1999, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21046/helsinki-european-council-presidency-conclusions.pdf> [08.11.2019].

26 Cf. Soler I Lecha, Eduard/ Tekin, Funda/ Sökmen, Melike Janine. *It Takes Two to Tango: Political Changes in Europe and their Impact on Turkey's EU Bid*. FEUTURE Online Paper No. 17. Cologne, April 2018.

27 Cf. Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, p. 181.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

29 European Council. Presidency Conclusions. Brussels European Council. 16 and 17 December 2004. Brussels, 17.12.2004, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16238-2004-INIT/en/pdf> [08.11.2019].

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

of negotiations and propose the conditions for eventual resumption".<sup>32</sup> In light of this announcement, the current impasse of Turkey's EU accession process is in full compliance with accession procedure rules.

Overall, the respect for human rights, rule of law and fundamental freedoms in Turkey have for several generations of EU Leaders been pivotal concerns regarding the country's ability to become an EU member state. In all statements on progress towards opening accession negotiations and additional comments on this process, the Heads of State or Government have demanded implementation of these political norms, the first Copenhagen criteria, as a precondition for opening negotiations (conditionality) and for any further development of relations. This also applies to modernising the Customs Union which should be 'rules based'. Overall, the EU Leaders' conclusions on Turkey from the 80s to the early 2000s confirm a narrative which states that the Union extends well beyond an economic grouping with a single market into a community of values. More precisely these are seen as normative values, which it seeks to advance towards states within the region, in this case Turkey. Comparing the European Council's references to the Copenhagen criteria, it appears that economic criteria are considerably less frequently mentioned than this normative political dimension, while assessing Turkey's eligibility to become an EU member state.

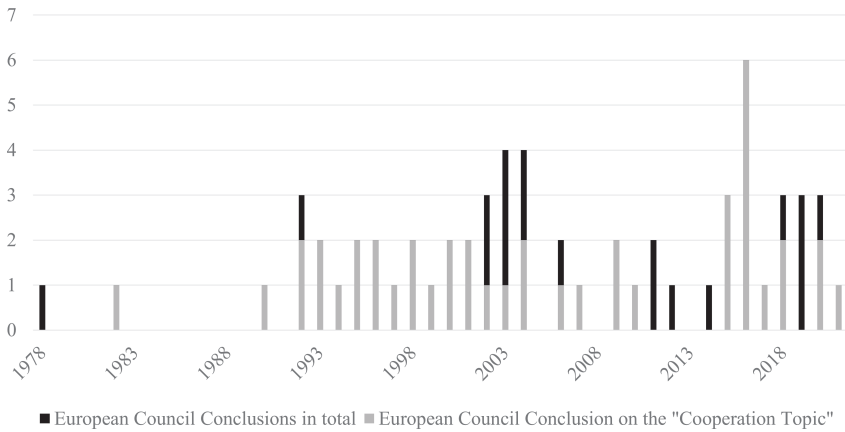
#### 2.4. Narrative of a Transactional Partnership: Forms and Areas of Cooperation

More recently the EU Leaders have attached greater importance to Turkey, but the *membership* narrative is increasingly off the agenda. This dynamic can be accounted for in two ways. Firstly, it reflects growing 'enlargement fatigue' in the EU and mounting internal challenges for the community, which in turn lead to a decreased willingness by EU institutions and Member States to integrate new members into the Union. Secondly, it results from the overall course of events in EU-Turkey relations. Instead of a *membership narrative*, EU Leaders refer to Turkey as an important partner in particular policy areas such as migration, the fight against terrorism and economic cooperation.

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32 Ibid.

Figure 21: Share of 'Cooperation Topic' in European Council Conclusions on Turkey 1978–2021



Source: own compilation.

In view of new and alternative forms of cooperation, 2015 and 2016 were pivotal years for EU-Turkey relations. During 2015, there was an overwhelming number of people, around 1.5 million, seeking to enter Europe through Turkish territory. According to FRONTEX (European Border and Coast Guard Agency), almost 900,000 people reached EU territory via the Eastern Mediterranean route throughout this period.<sup>33</sup> Responding to this political situation, Turkey appeared as a key geopolitical partner for the EU's migration regime in prioritising externalisation of the migration issue. The common agenda between Turkey and the EU at that stage of the relationship is illustrated by declaration of the EU-Turkey joint action plan on 15 October 2015, in which it is stated that “challenges are common and responses need to be coordinated”.<sup>34</sup> This action plan aimed to implement a number of collaborative actions to “supplement Turkey's efforts in managing the situation of massive influx of persons in need of temporary protection”.<sup>35</sup> Within this context, on 29 November the EU and Turkey identified 11 points of common action, following which the EU provided humanitarian aid and financial support

33 Cf. Wollscheid, Marcel. Frontex chief: ‘Turkey has delivered’ on refugee deal. In: Euractiv, 30.05.2016.

34 European Commission. EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan. Brussels, 15.10.2015, [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-15-5860\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5860_en.htm) [31.10.2019].

35 Ibid.

to Turkey. Moreover, the EU and Turkey aimed not only to improve energy and economic relations, but also to facilitate enhanced collaboration in geostrategic related issues. For that purpose, the EU-Turkey statement announced the introduction of High-Level Dialogues covering political, economic and energy issues. Moreover, it was intended that negotiations would be opened for upgrading the Customs Union and visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens in the Schengen area.<sup>36</sup> On 18 March 2016, the EU and Turkey further intensified their efforts to address the migration crisis by agreeing on terms to mobilise additional funds to facilitate the handling of refugees in Turkey.<sup>37</sup> Since then, the European Council has frequently demanded implementation of the EU-Turkey joint action plan agreements. There is one recurrent narrative behind these migration-related statements: Turkey is regarded as a key partner in dealing with challenges of vital interest for both sides. Recurrent references to the implementation of this 'joint action plan' imply that Turkey's actions are being carefully monitored in this context. Turkey is seen from a geopolitical perspective as a buffer zone for the EU. However, political changes have effectively blocked significant progress with joint action plan in regard to migration. Among other factors, political conditionality has put a brake on upgrading the Customs Union and Visa liberalisation process.

Since summer 2020, EU leaders have mainly sought to strengthen the partnership with Turkey to resolve the conflict in the eastern Mediterranean and thus to promote regional stability in the EU's immediate neighbourhood.<sup>38</sup> According to the conclusions by the European Council, Turkey is offered a positive agenda in return for mediation efforts and steps towards de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean. The envisaged positive agenda between the EU and Turkey, in addition to strengthening economic relations, aims at intensifying cooperation in the health sector as well as with regard to climate change and contacts between people and mobility.

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36 Cf. European Council. Meeting of heads of state or government with Turkey. EU-Turkey statement, 29 November 2015. Press release. Brussels, 29.11.2015, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/11/29/eu-turkey-meeting-statement/> [05.01.2021].

37 Cf. European Council. EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016. Press release. Brussels, 18.03.2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/> [05.01.2021].

38 Cf. European Council. Erklärung der Mitglieder des Europäischen Rates. SN 18/21. Brussels, 25.03.2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49005/250321-vtc-euco-statement-de.pdf> [11.08.2021].

Overall, the *transactional partnership narrative* is based on the notion of geostrategic challenges in a shared neighbourhood that require joint actions to be taken. EU-Turkey efforts to deal with the migration crisis exemplify this narrative. In the future, it can be expected that, in addition to traditional security policy interests, topics such as public health and climate change will increasingly be on the agenda of cooperation between the EU and Turkey. Moreover, cooperation is (and will) not (be) based on common values and a mutual alignment of the political agenda, but rather on transactionalism and package deals.

### 2.5. *Narrative of Conflict: Turkey as a Problematic Neighbour*

The image of Turkey as a *strategic partner* is increasingly combined with a narrative of conflict that portrays Turkey as a *problematic neighbour*. This combination is very well illustrated when EU institutions state that “Turkey is increasingly moving away from the Union” on one hand, but “is a key partner” on the other hand.<sup>39</sup> Hence, EU-Turkey relations are classified by the simultaneous paradoxical experience of disputes and cooperation, in other words a ‘conflictual partnership’. Referring to these conflictual elements, the European Council is increasingly dismayed with the general course of Turkey’s domestic politics and the calibration of Turkish foreign policy towards Syria, Libya, Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean (Figure 22).

Regarding Turkey’s domestic policies, it was after the failed coup attempt during July 2016 that EU Leaders raised their concerns about the state of democracy, rule of law and press freedom in Turkey. On 18 July 2016, the conclusions stated that, “The EU underlines the need to respect democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms and the right of everyone to a fair trial in full compliance with the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, including Protocol 13 on the abolition of the death penalty”.<sup>40</sup> This quote refers to the debate about a possible referendum on reintroduction of the death

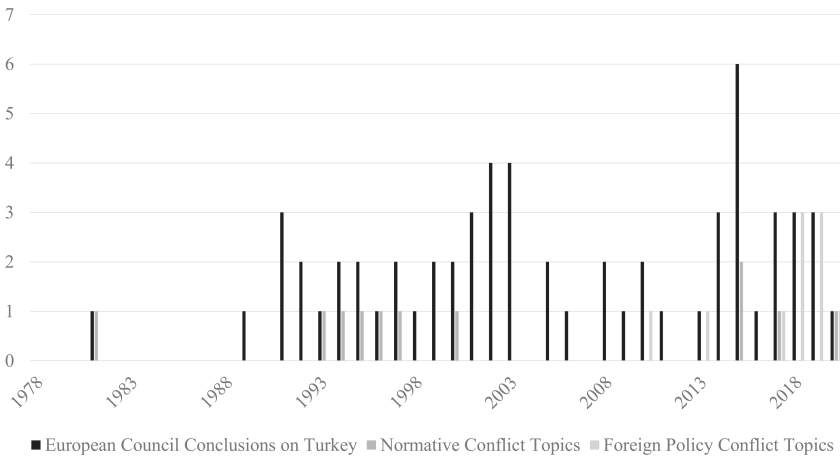
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39 Council of the European Union, Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process, 2018.

40 Council of the European Union. Council Conclusions on Turkey. Press release. Brussels, 18.07.2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/18/fac-turkey-conclusions/> [08.11.2019].

penalty in Turkey, a topic that was raised after the coup.<sup>41</sup> It was also added that, “The EU reiterates that it expects Turkey to respect the highest standards when it comes to democracy, rule of law, respect of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression”.<sup>42</sup>

Figure 22: Conflict Topics in European Council Conclusions on Turkey 1978–2021



Source: own compilation.

The EU’s foreign policy related criticism towards Turkey is a more current phenomenon. On 9 October 2019 Federica Mogherini, at that time High Representative, called “upon Turkey to cease the unilateral military action” and went on to say that, “renewed armed hostilities in the north-east will further undermine the stability of the whole region, exacerbate civilian suffering and provoke further displacements”.<sup>43</sup> In addition, she stated that

41 Cf. European Parliament. Turkish referendum on the reintroduction of the death penalty. Parliamentary Question. E-003342/2017. Brussels, 15.05.2017, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2017-003342\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2017-003342_EN.html) [08.11.2019].

42 European Council. European Council Meeting (15 October 2015). Conclusions. Brussels, 16.10.2015, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-26-2015-1-NIT/en/pdf> [08.11.2019].

43 Council of the European Union. Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on recent developments in north-east Syria. Press release. Brussels, 09.10.2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/09/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-recent-developments-in-north-east-syria/> [08.11.2019].

Turkey's actions in Northern Syria "threatens the progress achieved by the Global Coalition to defeat Da'esh". With these statements the High Representative perceives Turkey's actions in North East Syria as a source of instability for the region. In addition, she questions Turkey's role in fighting terrorism and rather sees the country's actions as creating a potential threat towards the EU's prioritised goal in Syria, namely to defeat ISIS. This becomes obvious, when it is stated that, "the EU condemns Turkey's unilateral military action in North East Syria which causes unacceptable human suffering, undermines the fight against Da'esh and threatens heavily European security".<sup>44</sup>

Another point of concern is the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular Ankara's disputes with Athens and Nicosia. The continental shelf, claimed by Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots, to a large extent overlaps with the Republic of Cyprus' exclusive economic zone as defined via bilateral agreements with Cyprus and Egypt in 2003 as well as Israel in 2010. With reference to Turkish offshore energy exploration activities, from October 2014 the European Council has on several occasions and with increasing alarm "expressed serious concern about the renewed tension in the Eastern Mediterranean and urged Turkey to show restraint and to respect Cyprus' sovereignty over its territorial sea" as well as "Cyprus' sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone". In 2019 Turkey conducted drilling activities inside the exclusive economic zone of the Republic of Cyprus. This action represented an exclusive maritime right violation and a new dimension of confrontation between Turkey and a member state of the EU. Responding to this, the European Council condemned "Turkey's continued illegal actions in the Eastern Mediterranean" and put emphasis on "its full solidarity with Cyprus".<sup>45</sup> The European Council not only sent a verbal note of protest, but also invited "the Commission and the European Union External Action Service to submit options for appropriate measures without delay, including targeted measures" to protest Turkey's activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. On 15 July 2019, the EU Foreign Affairs Council reacted to the presence of Turkey's drilling ships in Cyprus's EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) by adopting measures on Turkey. They suspended negotiations for an Air Transport Agreement, they cancelled

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44 Council of the European Union. North East Syria: Council adopts conclusions. Press release. Brussels, 14.10.2019. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/14/council-conclusions-on-north-east-syria/> [08.11.2019].

45 European Council. European Council meeting (22 March 2018). Brussels, 23.03.2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/33457/22-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf> [08.11.2019].



EU-Turkey high-level dialogues and declared a further cut in pre-accession assistance to Turkey in 2020.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the EU Foreign Affairs Council opened up opportunities for imposing restrictive measures on individuals and institutions participating in Turkish gas exploration in the Republic of Cyprus' EEZ. To date, the EU has fined two individuals with travel bans and asset freezes for their participation in Turkey's drilling activities off the coast of Cyprus. During summer 2020, Turkey's assertive foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean reached a new dimension. As the Turkish navy was in a stand-off with the Greek navy about contested maritime boundaries around the island of Kastelorizo and offshore Crete. Turkey questions Greece's exclusive economic zone as it is partly defined in bilateral agreements between Athens and Rome in 2020 and Athens and Cairo in 2020 and authorized seismic research surveys in disputed areas. This action is strongly opposed by the European Council, who "calls on Turkey to abstain from similar actions in the future, in breach of international law".<sup>47</sup> Further it "underlines that delimitation of the Continental Shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone should be addressed through dialogue and negotiation in good faith, in full respect of international law".<sup>48</sup> To prevent Turkey from continuing with their activities, the European Council threatened: "in case of renewed unilateral actions or provocations in breach of international law, the EU will use all the instruments and the options at its disposal, including in accordance with Article 29 TEU and Article 215 TFEU, in order to defend its interests and those of its Member States".<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the European Council holds out the prospect that "provided constructive efforts to stop illegal activities vis-à-vis Greece and Cyprus are sustained, the European Council has agreed to launch a positive political EU-Turkey agenda".<sup>50</sup> The concept of a positive political EU-Turkey agenda was used as an attempt to incentivise Turkey to abandon its activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, in exchange for an upgrade of the Customs Union, Visa facilities for Turkish citizens and further

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46 Council of the European Union. Turkish drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: Council adopts conclusions. Press release. Brussels, 15.07.2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/07/15/turkish-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-adopts-conclusions/> [08.11.2019].

47 European Council. Special meeting of the European Council (1 and 2 October 2020). Conclusions. Brussels, 02.10.2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45910/021020-euco-final-conclusions.pdf> [23.10.2020].

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

financial assistance to manage the refugee situation.<sup>51</sup> In December 2020, two months later, the European Council evaluated Turkey's willingness to engage within the framework of a positive agenda. It is stated that "regrettably, Turkey has engaged in unilateral actions and provocations and escalated its rhetoric against the EU, EU Member States and European leaders".<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, the members of the European Council "reaffirm the EU's strategic interest in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey" and that the offer of a "positive EU Turkey agenda remains on the table".<sup>53</sup> This approach can largely be explained by different views in European capitals about how to deal with Turkey. On the one hand countries such as Austria, France, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus demand harsher sanctions. On the other hand, countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain put emphasis on the political costs of a tougher conflict with Turkey and therefore prefer restraint from harder reactions.<sup>54</sup>

Overall, the *problematic neighbour narrative* has become increasingly dominant in the European Leaders' agenda vis-à-vis Turkey with its climax in 2020. This mainly results from Turkey's increasing power projection in the Eastern Mediterranean that spans from offshore drilling activities inside maritime areas that are claimed by Greece and the Republic of Cyprus through the unilateral partial re-opening of Varosha, the Cypriot ghost town, to military involvement in the Libyan Civil War. The EU's renewed interest in establishing a positive agenda emphasises the changed framework of EU-Turkey relations: in the past the EU aimed to implement a positive agenda in EU-Turkey relations in order to initiate progress in Turkey's EU accession process; now the positive agenda is designed to address Turkey's foreign policy direction and incentivise Ankara to seek a peaceful resolution of conflicts with EU Member States (Greece and Cyprus).

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51 Cf. Seufert, Günter. Ankara traut der EU keine Sanktionen zu. In: SWP Aktuell. Nr. 95. Berlin, Dezember 2020.

52 European Council. European Council meeting (10 and 11 December 2020). Conclusions. Brussels, 11.12.2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/47296/1011-12-20-euco-conclusions-en.pdf> [05.01.2021].

53 Ibid.

54 Cf. Seufert. Ankara traut der EU keine Sanktionen zu, 2020.

### *3. Conclusion and Outlook*

The aim of this chapter has been to examine EU Leaders' narratives on Turkey. In broad terms, the Council contextualises the EU-Turkey relationship within the realm of three narratives: potential member, transactional partner and problematic neighbour. At the outset, the domestic reform processes and the assessment of Turkey's accession eligibility on the basis of the Copenhagen criteria were central to the conclusions. By now, a mixture of pragmatism and detachment from Turkey's domestic and foreign policy policies dominates the statements of the heads of state and government. Time and again, the strategic importance of cooperation is emphasised, while simultaneously a range of differences are highlighted and an increasing distancing is evident. The tool of the 'positive agenda' illustrates the changing political parameters of EU-Turkey relations in recent years. Initially, it offered a starting point to revitalise the stalled accession process. Later, it was supposed to facilitate comprehensive cooperation on migration. Most recently, the 'positive agenda' was used as an incentive to mitigate the escalation between Turkey and the EU Member States Greece and Cyprus. A fundamental attitude, however, which is reflected in the conclusions of the European Council throughout the years, has not changed until today: regional stability in South-Eastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East can only be achieved in a cooperative and not in an oppositional relationship with Turkey. Therefore, although the accession negotiations are suspended and the stalemate appears consolidated by now, neither the EU nor Turkey are sending signals indicating official termination of the process. A re-opening of negotiations under new political conditions, nevertheless, also seems very unlikely at the moment. It remains to be seen if this state of uncertainty will change in the future as a result of shifts in political parameters. The current status quo increasingly reflects a dilemma: Brussels depends on Turkey's cooperation in migration management and the fight against international terrorist groups, yet lacks political leverage to confront Turkey's backsliding democracy and progressively more assertive foreign policy that increasingly appears to differ from the EU's external interests. This lack of political leverage vis-à-vis Turkey materialises in the observation that the European Council is stressing the same criticism again and again over a longer period of time without considerable policy modifications by Turkey. Unlike the 1990s situation, Turkey's membership process does not serve as a backbone for structuring the relationship and for encouraging Turkey to converge its policies with those of the EU. Prospectively, EU-Turkey relations will probably remain to be shaped by

political realism and pragmatism that do not result in major changes. The EU will need to find incentives to engage Turkey in meaningful cooperation and will also have to demonstrate political costs, if Turkey continues with repressive domestic policies and confrontational actions towards individual EU Member States, in particular Greece and Cyprus.