

What should the European Union do In case of an opposition victory in Turkey?

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Summary

Turkish citizens will go to the ballot box on May 14th May for decisive parliamentary and presidential elections. These elections will also have an impact on the country's relations with the West. Turkey's relations with the EU have been deteriorating steadily over the last decade. Europeans attribute this to Turkey's democratic decline and foreign policy at odds with the EU and its member states. The question on the table is whether this trend could be reversed in case of an opposition win. The results of the elections are far from clear, but European – and American – decision makers should get ready for a **smart revival** in case of an opposition victory.

The Issue

There is no level playing field in Turkey's elections. There is no independent judiciary or media, state resources are used in favour of the government, electoral laws are changed in every election, and re-districting is a common practice. Political opponents are banned by means of questionable legal charges. The road to victory for the opposition is full of hurdles. However, according to the polls, the opposition – mostly united behind Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – still has a fair chance of winning the presidency. Incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's popularity has been hit because of the dire state of the economy and his governments' slow response to recent devastating earthquakes.

A continuation of the incumbent government is a script well known, so decision makers should contemplate what steps could be taken in case of an opposition win to start re-tracking relations with Turkey. The EU's future dealings with Turkey cannot be separated from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Improving relations with the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood while rethinking enlargement policy have become key for closing ranks on the continent. Europeans should focus on re-railing EU-Turkey relations in line with the recent developments in wider Europe, using this window

of opportunity to establish a stable relationship that would fit the 21st century.

With Ukraine's application for EU membership right after the start of the Russian invasion, the discussions on the future of enlargement policy and wider Europe are back on the political agenda of the European Union. The European Council has already decided to grant Ukraine and Moldova's candidacy. Georgia might be the next. After a very long wait, North Macedonia and Albania have started their accession negotiations. The European Commission has also proposed granting candidate status to Bosnia Herzegovina, and the European Council gave it a green light in December 2022. This surely is a historic moment of change in wider Europe. Furthermore, there is an active policy to "connect" wider Europe better to the EU. Turkey could also be included in these initiatives when the timing is right.

Analysis

EU-Turkey relations have been in a downward spiral over the last decade. Many in Europe think that Turkey is no longer oriented towards the West, but rather is pursuing a strategically autonomous foreign policy supported by its ever-growing defence industry. Turkish political elites have been proving them right on every occasion, from pursuing a

balancing act when it comes to Russia's war on Ukraine to non-ratification of Sweden's (and until recently, Finland's) NATO accession.

The opposition alliance [promises that](#), under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, it will reclaim Turkey's Western vocation and restart the conversation. The opposition government will re-establish democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms at home, while decreasing clashes in foreign policies abroad. The EU and its member states should be ready to match these efforts with concrete proposals that would help the new government consolidate its reforms. A democratic, predictable, pro-Western government in Turkey is clearly an asset for the EU.

It is important to underline that not all the problems will go away magically with an opposition win. There will still be many disagreements when it comes to Cyprus, the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria. Considering the existing dependencies, Turkey's relations with Russia will not change overnight. Furthermore, the personalization of foreign policy making – enforced by the transition to presidential system - has weakened the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The reconstruction of the institutional set-up will still take time. However, the opposition's three promises have the potential to make dialogue more constructive: i) reclaim Turkey's Western vocation; ii) re-institutionalize foreign policy making; iii) be ready to play a more constructive role in the region.

These promises are all based on the assumptions that there will be an electoral victory, a democratic transition of power, and a stable coalition that will immediately implement internal reforms while re-establishing bridges with the West. European leaders should be conscious that all these steps will require democratic resilience in Turkey. This is why scenario building, long-term planning, and patient implementation will be required.

What should be the next steps moving forward?

In Brussels, it is frequently heard that, in case of democratic change and an opposition government taking the torch in Ankara, a new common understanding of EU-Turkey relations will need to be re-established. After more than 20 years under

the Justice and Development Party (AKP), there is little understanding of what an alternative policy coming from an opposition party could look like, let alone the coalition of 6+ political parties that make up the opposition alliance. Many think that the ball is in Turkey's court and are tempted to stay in their wait-and-see position. However, the clever strategy would be to immediately start rebuilding trust while demonstrating good will towards each other.

For this aim, there are things that a new Turkish government could do to change this perception in Brussels. One of the quickest gestures from the Turkish side could be to unfreeze Sweden's NATO accession. Reassurance that Turkey will not help Russia to evade Western sanctions would be welcomed in Europe and the United States. Turkey's revaluation of its Russia policy will be extremely important, including its approach to the S400s and to the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant financed by Russia. Turkey should also comply with the decisions of European Court of Human Rights and free Selahattin Demirtaş and Osman Kavala, demonstrating that the government will act immediately when it comes to democracy and rule of law.

The EU, on the other hand, should begin an open and honest dialogue with a new opposition government regarding Turkey's immediate needs for reconstruction and how the EU can assist in a way that will build long term relations. In response to positive Turkish signals, the EU could respond with a series of swift steps.

The **first step** should be **ramping up political contact** between the EU and Turkey. The starting point should be at the leadership level to initiate crucial and much-needed confidence building. The EU should reaffirm that a democratic Turkey belongs in Europe – and will be welcomed in all initiatives. Turkish democrats need to hear this reaffirmation.

Secondly, the revitalization of institutional bodies – like the Association Council and other working groups - should follow. Even if many think the problem is political and not necessarily institutional, well-organized thematic encounters are at the core of dialogue and socialization. Major problems arise when the sides do not understand each other's priorities. Periodic socialization is the key to overcome that problem. This is why Turkish officials should be encouraged to join different informal configurations of the Council, whenever possible. Re-insti-

tutionalization of EU-Turkey relations, instead of ad-hoc cooperation in times of crisis, should be on the agenda for long term stability.

Thirdly, concrete proposals about improving co-operation on irregular migration, modernizing of the Customs Union, and visa free travel should be discussed openly. This will require a step-by-step approach. Currently both sides are expecting the other to move ahead and push for a revitalization. A **gradual plan** would make sense, once significant signalling from both sides take place.

When it comes to **modernization of the Customs Union**, a new mandate is necessary for this crucially important file. A more comprehensive plan that factors in new dynamics of trade and industrial policy in the EU and economic reconstruction needs in Turkey (taking into account the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes) would make more sense. This approach would align Turkey better with the EU in the long term.

Visa liberalization is one concrete area that would greatly benefit Turkish citizens. If Turkey fulfils the remaining criteria and aligns its visa policy with the EU's, a concrete roadmap for liberalization could be discussed. It is important to underline that the EU has already done this with the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. This discussion is a part of the bigger picture when it comes to the EU's relations with wider Europe. Kilicdaroglu has been using the pledge of "visa free travel in three months" during the election campaign, so expectation management will be important.

Finally, a dialogue platform that includes both the EU and the United States should be established to discuss cooperation on **irregular migration**. This surely is a key issue for any Turkish government.

Lastly, the EU should start levelling Turkey with other countries of wider Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its aftermath revitalized the EU's enlargement policy and intensified the search for better cooperation and anchoring with regards to foreign and security policy. At the moment, most of these developments do not include Turkey. In case of a democratic change, a forward-looking conversation should be established on **two interlinked tracks**: i) economy, trade, and connectivity that includes streams on energy, transport, and information; ii) foreign and security policy cooperation.

Implications

Turkey's upcoming elections may provide an opportunity to re-rail the EU's relations with Turkey. For this to happen, both sides will be required to take steps forward. They should also be aware of the consequences of their choices. If Turkey does not solidify its alliance with the EU amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, this will have consequences. If the EU leaves Turkey out of the new institutional and policy arrangements within wider Europe, this too will have consequences. Both sides should be aware of their historical responsibility.

No easy reset should be expected when it comes to EU-Turkey relations, even in the case of an opposition win. However, in such an event, immediate signalling from both sides will be required to start building confidence. Otherwise, another episode of high expectations/poor delivery may follow the initial euphoria. Concrete steps on policies and institutional set-up as well as transparent advance planning should follow. This will help Turkey to rebuild its democratic institutions and its economy while opening the way for fruitful relations that are much needed. With rising global power competition, closing the ranks on the continent – without losing the EU's values and principles from sight – is a primary task for European decision makers. Turkey policy is an important – and complex – piece of that puzzle.

Further Readings

- » Nicolas Danforth, "[A New New Turkey? What an Opposition Victory Would Mean for Ankara's Foreign Policy](#)," Working Paper, Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), April 6, 2023
- » Marc Pierini and Francesco Siccardi, "[The Strategic Consequences of a Kılıçdaroğlu Victory Over Erdoğan](#)," Carnegie Europe, April 13, 2023



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Takeaways

- » Turkey's elections present an opportunity to reinvigorate EU-Turkey relations, but much depends on the steps both sides will take.
- » The first steps should be to change perceptions about Turkey in the EU and EU in Turkey by increasing dialogue and starting to build confidence (both at the leadership level and at the working level).
- » Once the initial steps of confidence building and reassurance are taken, concrete policy areas and the discussions about the institutional set-up should be brought to the table.
- » The focus of re-railing relations cannot only be on accession negotiations. A more comprehensive approach that will stabilize relations in the short term is needed as well. In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, including Turkey in different initiatives in wider Europe has the utmost importance. That would help a new Turkish government to reclaim the country's Western vocation, while bringing the country as a –possibly - constructive contributor to continental affairs

Rekommendationer – Svenska

- » Valet i Turkiet utgör en möjlighet att blåsa nytt liv i förbindelserna mellan EU och Turkiet, men mycket beror på vilka åtgärder båda sidor kommer att vidta.
- » De första stegen bör vara att förändra synen på Turkiet i EU och EU i Turkiet genom att öka dialogen och börja bygga upp förtroendet (både på lednings- och tjänstemannanivå).
- » När de första stegen för att bygga upp förtroende har tagits bör konkreta politikområden och diskussioner om den institutionella strukturen initieras.
- » Tyngdvikten i de återupplivade förbindelserna kan inte bara ligga på anslutningsförhandlingar. Det behövs också en mer övergripande strategi som stabiliserar förbindelserna på kort sikt. I efterdyningarna av kriget i Ukraina är det ytterst viktigt att inkludera Turkiet i samarbeten med andra länder i det utvidgade Europa. Det skulle hjälpa en ny turkisk regering att återta landets västerländska kallelse, samtidigt som landet blir en – möjligen – konstruktiv bidragsgivare till kontinentala angelägenheter.

About the SUITS policy brief

This policy brief aims contribute to a broad and well-researched understanding of Turkey and Turkish affairs through presenting a variety of voices on current issues and the foundational moments that impact today. The aim is to provide policy makers and others the tools to make informed decisions.

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