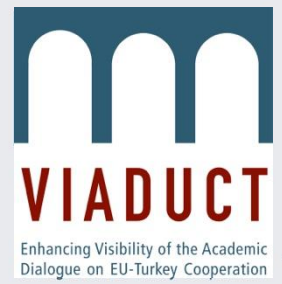


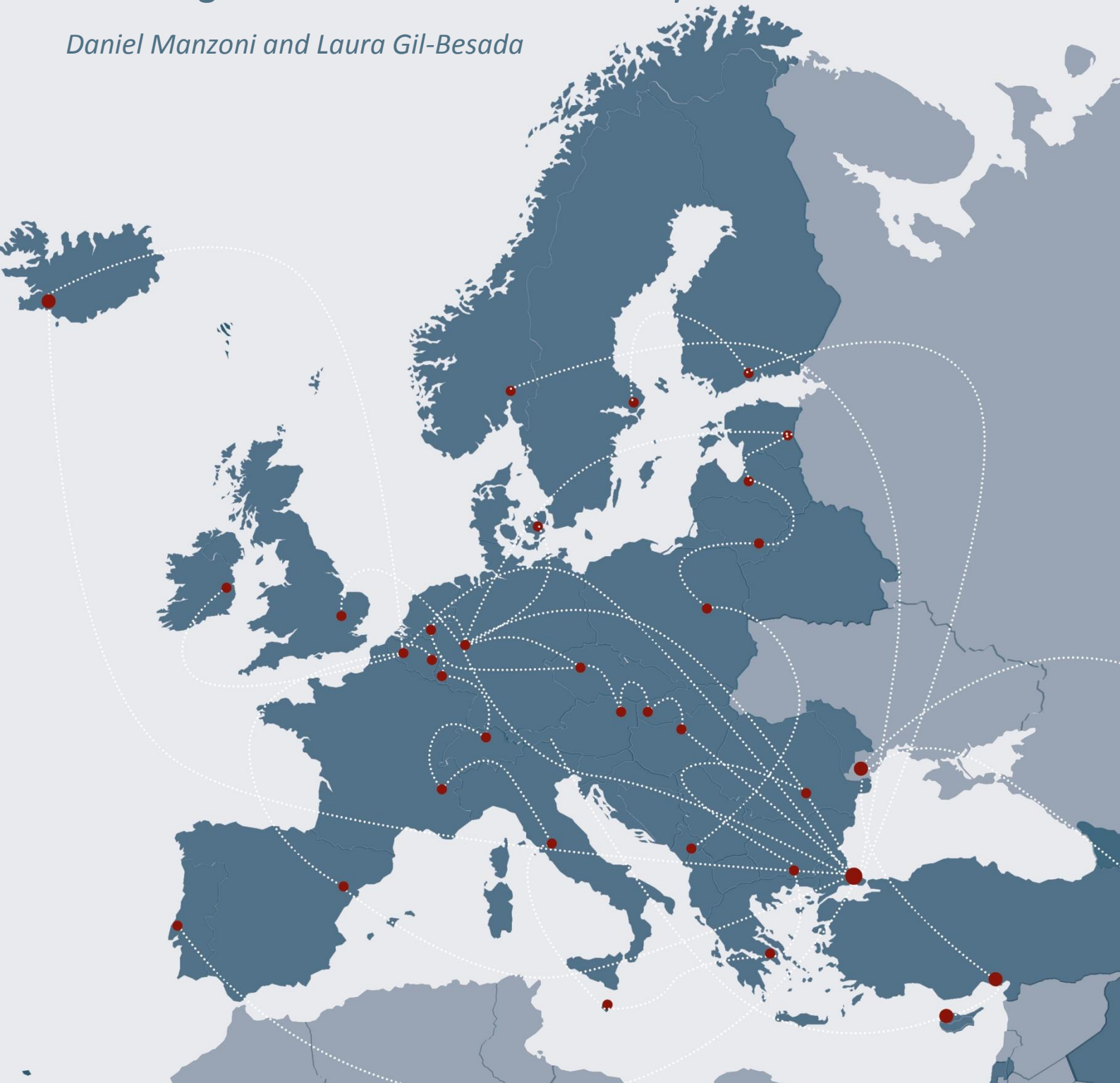
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Bridging the Bosphorus: The Future of Town Twinning between the EU and Turkey

Daniel Manzoni and Laura Gil-Besada



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Introduction

This paper tackles the subject of town twinning – also known as sister city relations – which is becoming increasingly significant in the context of the relations between the European Union (EU) and Turkey. While Turkey has maintained sister city relations with other countries since the 1960s, there has been a massive surge in popularity in the past two decades (Akman, 2016). Indeed, the total amount of active town twinning relations considerably augmented from 160 in 2000 to 1536 in 2016, out of which 583 partnerships have been established with cities from EU member states (ibid.).

Recently, both parties launched the "Town Twinning between Turkey and the EU" programme, which has the objective to sustainably improve local administrative capacity and foster cooperation between local authorities in Turkey and the EU in the context of the EU accession process. The initiative is co-financed by the EU and Turkey under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA-II) and has a total budget of 4.5 million € (Yerelde AB, 2020a). The EU is the largest stakeholder with a contribution of 1.65 million € to the technical assistance component and 2.4 million € to the grant scheme component (Delegation of the EU to Turkey, 2019).

In the following sections, this essay will present scholarly literature on sister city relations, elaborate on the significance of sister city initiatives as a mechanism for promoting European values, examine examples of town twinning projects, assess the impact of sister cities on the future of EU-Turkey relations (and vice versa) and proposes three possible scenarios.

A vehicle for promoting European values and fostering cooperation

Scholars differentiate between a narrow and a broad understanding of the term 'town twinning'. In the narrow sense, town twinning describes cooperation between two geographically connected border towns located in different countries, whereas in its broader sense, town twinning describes long-term cooperation between two geographically distant cities (Joenniemi and Sergunin, 2011). The establishment of sister city relations usually takes place because of idealistic, political or economic reasons (Buis, 2009; Gibbs et al., 2015). Further motivating factors can include capacity building and knowledge transfer (Bontenbal, 2013; Gibbs et al., 2015). Town twinning should be developed between local governments with a long-term approach, be solidified by the signing of a formal agreement, not be limited to a single project and have concrete examples of success (Clarke, 2011; Gibbs et al., 2015). Reliant on the so-called 'dual commitment', town twinning involves not only the local authorities of the sister cities but also civil society (CEMR, 2020).

Historically, town twinning experienced a surge in the post-World War II period, pursuing motives such as peace, reconciliation and reconstruction (Gibbs et al., 2015). The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), created in 1951, encouraged the sister city movement as a means of Europeanisation (ibid.). The website of the CEMR cites one of its founders, Jean Barret, defining town twinning as "the coming together of two communities seeking, in this way, to take action with a European perspective and with the aim of facing their problems and developing between themselves closer and closer ties of friendship" (CEMR, 2020). This definition follows a broad conception of town twinning, which comes as no surprise considering that European values, such as unity, cohesion and peaceful cooperation, best resonate with the wider-ranging conceptualisation of building bridges between

both geographically proximate and distant communities. The most interesting aspect of the definition is the fact that it sees the idea of town twinning as intertwined with the process of Europeanisation. In that sense, it is not surprising that town twinning in Europe is perceived as “a mechanism for advancing the European integration process and forging a sense of European identity” (Gibbs et al., 2015).

Since the early 2000s, the EU has encouraged town twinning between its member states as a method of developing common values and the sense of European citizenship (Baycan-Levent et al., 2008). The EU has established the “Europe for Citizens” programme which, among other initiatives, includes town twinning between EU member states but also candidate countries which have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Commission (European Commission, 2020). The EU also encourages numerous other town twinning initiatives between current EU member states and potential accession candidates, such as the “Town Twinning between Turkey and the EU” programme (Delegation of the EU to Turkey, 2019).

On the other side of the Bosphorus, sister city cooperation has risen both between Turkey and EU member states and between Turkey and third countries. A reason for this phenomenon can be found in the Association of Municipalities of Turkey’s encouragement of town twinning initiatives, which led to the implementation of the Municipal Act 5393 in 2005 (Akman, 2016). This Act helped to simplify and clarify the process of town twinning, for instance through the codification of the so-called ‘equivalence rule’, according to which, at the time of the establishment of cooperation, “sister cities must be equal in terms of their importance for the country, population, economic and commercial state, cultural structure and geographical features” (ibid.).

Bridging the Bosphorus in practice

This section will present empirical examples of town twinning between cities in Turkey and in EU member states. Although there are more than 500 town twinning agreements between both parties (Akman, 2016), the ones that have been chosen aim for not only geographical variety within the EU and Turkey, but also for different types of projects and outcomes.

Multiple examples of successful partnerships can be found between Greece and Turkey, which is in part due to the long history that unites both countries (Karakatsanis, 2014). The city of Egirios (Greece) received the European Commission’s 2002 prestigious Golden Star of Town Twinning for a meeting with municipalities from Turkey (Kesan, Edirne) and Bulgaria (Topolovgrad) (European Commission, 2002). The prize awards the best town twinning actions that encourage civil society’s active participation in EU issues (ibid.).

This sort of success is seen all around Greece. Another example of such prosperous relationships is Akyeniköy’s twinning agreement with a small community in Crete, which was made possible because of the strong ties that have united both communities for many years (Karakatsanis, 2014). As a result, Crete’s Muslim populations, who had been forced to leave decades ago, returned to the land of their ancestors (ibid.). Consequently, initiatives such as ‘houses of friendship’ (dostluk evi) were built, which aim to be a legacy for the cities’ inhabitants to foster cooperation and harmony (ibid.).

The “Town Twinning between Turkey and the EU” programme, which started in 2018, supports a promising initiative between Mersin (Akdeniz Municipality, Turkey) and Thessaloniki (Municipality of Delta, Greece), with the aim of ensuring “citizens’ active participation on decision-making at a local level” and of “raising public awareness on urban green spaces benefits

through communication activities” (Yerelde AB, 2020b). Tangible outcomes include workshops concerning best practices on urban green areas and study visits “within the scope of Urban Green Spaces and Urban Forestry” (ibid.).

On the flip side, unsuccessful town twinning projects must also be accounted for. One of such cases is the Istanbul-Rotterdam partnership. The two cities had a mutually beneficial town twinning agreement between 2005 and 2017 (Šimalčík and Kalivoda, 2020). However, it was unilaterally terminated by Turkey after Turkish ministers were banned “from holding rallies for diaspora communities in Rotterdam before a controversial Turkish referendum on constitutional amendments” (ibid.). In fact, this decision was made at the highest level, with the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reportedly “ordering his prime minister to tell the Istanbul mayor to end the relationship with Rotterdam” (ibid.).

This demonstrates how sister city arrangements, which are supposed to be long-lasting and independent of the current political leadership, can be terminated after a political disagreement. Indeed, the main issue that resulted in terminating this arrangement was “the way in which the Turkish government is attempting to tie the diaspora closer to its own goals” (ibid.). This raises the question of whether town twinning initiatives can be successfully implemented between the EU and Turkey in the current strained political climate and which impact they might have. This issue will be discussed in the next section.

Quo vadis? The evolution of town twinning between the EU and Turkey

Town twinning has fostered an increased level of cooperation and friendship between EU member states and Turkey since the beginning (Gezici and Kocaoğlu, 2018). Nevertheless, the current strained political climate between both parties makes it necessary to examine whether such sister city agreements will continue to flourish and, if so,

which impact they might have. This essay proposes three scenarios for future evolution.

A first possible scenario is town twinning becoming one of the vectors that leads to Turkey’s accession to EU membership. The current town twinning initiatives, alongside others that could be implemented in the next few years, could help improve Turkey’s and the EU’s political stance and increase their mutual understanding. Previously, other countries that were not EU member states until recently, such as Croatia, were part of town twinning agreements through projects that included candidate countries such as the “Europe for Citizens” programme (Central Office for Development Strategy and Coordination of EU Funds, 2009). However, relations between Croatia and the EU were not as challenging as Turkey’s and the EU’s currently are. Additionally, the scope of town twinning agreements does not seem to be wide enough to guarantee a short-term improvement in political relations. Therefore, this scenario is likely overly optimistic.

A second scenario of EU-Turkey sister city relationships is the maintenance of the status quo for the foreseeable future. The amount of town twinning agreements is likely to further increase and foster exchange and a limited degree of harmonisation between local administrations and civil society. However, such agreements would not appropriately address controversial socio-political issues dividing Turkey and the EU, possibly due to a lack of political will or to avoid repercussions. The failure to address those obstacles could potentially freeze the positive effects of town twinning agreements in relation to the overarching question of the accession process. A possible sub-scenario could then consist of a shift in priorities of existing and future sister city partnerships between Turkey and EU member states, from idealistic and political motivations to a predominance of economic motivations. In fact, scholars have found that in most cases sister city partnerships have led to a considerable increase in tourism from the partner city (Baycan-Levent et

al., 2008). Although economic motivations are already part of the overall rationale, they could become increasingly important due to a perceived stagnation of Turkey's accession process.

Finally, the increased strain on EU-Turkey political relations could lead to the dissolution of sister city agreements between both parties, like it happened between Rotterdam and Istanbul, and have a discouraging effect on the establishment of further town twinning partnerships between Turkish and EU cities. However, this does not mean that town twinning agreements in Turkey would lose their popularity. In fact, currently, 62% of Turkish town twinning agreements are concluded with cities outside of the EU (Akman, 2016). In this scenario, this percentage would further rise, as Turkish municipalities could, for example, turn to the Far East and increase town twinning agreements with Chinese cities. This could attract Chinese tourists in the process and bring in multiple economic benefits. However, Turkish decision-makers should consider that there have been cases of possible town twinning agreements between Chinese and EU cities falling through for political reasons, such as the case of Prague and Shanghai (Šimalčík and Kalivoda, 2020). Moreover, another challenge to town twinning between Turkey and the EU is the recent rise in migratory movements from Turkey to Greece, which could further strain both countries' political relations. A possible outcome of this situation could be the dissolution of their sister city agreements.

Will the bridge over the Bosphorus prove its resilience or ephemerality?

This essay compared sister city relations between the EU and Turkey to a bridge over the Bosphorus. It demonstrated that over the past decades, this bridge was erected and continuously widened, which led to a quantitative and qualitative increase in traffic. The bridge has shown promise in connecting communities, but it has yet to prove

itself in its first baptism of fire. Whether a bridge is good or not is not decided by its capacity or its visual appeal, but by its resilience and robustness – its ability to withstand times of storms.

The question that remains is whether the bridge over the Bosphorus will hold or will crumble. This essay offers no definitive answer to that question. Instead, it proposes three plausible scenarios and elaborates on the rationale and the opportunities associated with each of them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

At the time of submission, Daniel Manzoni and Laura Gil-Besada were MA students of the Master in European Governance at the University of Luxembourg.

Previously, Daniel Manzoni completed a BA in International Relations at TU Dresden and The University of Dar es Salaam.

Laura Gil-Besada completed a BSc in Economics and Management at King's College London and The University of Hong Kong.

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The **historical complexity and volatility of EU-Turkey relations** are reflected by **research and teaching** in this field. There are international research projects as well as many smaller and nationally funded studies and projects dealing with Turkey, including its relationship with the EU. Linking these different projects, diffusing knowledge on the European Integration process and exploiting synergies between international players constitutes real added-value for European Integration studies.

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The Challenge faced by the VIADUCT Partners are the **EU Turkey relations as a moving target**. On the one hand Turkey is seen as a “key strategic partner for the EU”, on the other hand several interconnected crises are profoundly affecting EU–Turkey relations. VIADUCT’s objective is, hence, to **promote research, teaching and policy dialogue on EU-Turkey relations**.

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