

VIADUCT Policy Paper

The EU's Attitude towards Turkey - Shift of Narratives with Limited Actions? An Analysis of the Leader's Narratives

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Executive summary

Whoever want to understand the conflictual relations between the EU and Turkey needs to look at the official position of the European Council. In the context of rising tensions, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, EU leaders have taken inconclusive dual strategies on the EU's policy towards Turkey. In their December meeting, they have strongly criticised Turkey for its actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and reaffirmed again their full solidarity with the EU member states Greece and Cyprus. On the other hand, the Heads of the State or Government are shying away from sanctions against Turkey. The European Council announced in October that they would launch sanctions if Turkey continued its "unilateral actions and provocations in breach of international law".¹ This issue is now due to return to the European Council's agenda in March 2021.

Looking back over several decades this policy brief analyses key narratives documented in the conclusions of the European Council. Our analysis shows a considerable move over the last decades from understanding Turkey as a candidate country – perhaps with some specific characteristics due to its size – via de facto partnership documented in the spring

2016 statement to a more and more dominant narrative as problematic or even hostile neighbour with a rising number of conflicts. In our set of narratives we offer descriptions and characterizations in which positions and perceptions of the members of the European Council identify the main topics of their attitudes towards the "key strategic partner"² Turkey, respective EU strategies, and instruments how to deal with them.

This policy brief aims to prevent that specific narratives become too dominant without a broader reflection. At least in academia we need to look for possibilities of another shift in the years to come.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Council President Charles Michel during a virtual conference on 22 September 2020, Source: eudebates.tv.

Introduction: The European Council as key institution and the relevance of its narratives

For understanding the complex, complicated and conflictual relations between the EU and Turkey, especially for analysing the European Union's positions and its dual strategy as put forward by its leaders on 11 December, we need to look at an already long history of Turkey related conclusions of the European Council.³

First, we need to be aware that this institution of the Heads of the State or Government and of the Presidents of the European Commission and of the European Council itself plays a key role in EU politics⁴ according to the constitutional fundamentals of the Lisbon treaty.⁵

In following this task, the political leaders in the European Council have agreed in June 2019 on a 'new strategic agenda 2019-2024'. Though Turkey is not directly mentioned in this agenda, but keywords of relevance for this relationship are: "promoting European interests and values on the global stage"⁶ with more geo-political thinking as well as "protecting our European way of life"⁷ with "upholding the rule of law".⁸

The relevance of the European Council is also high in terms of defining and the way to a full membership: This institution is the "master of enlargement",⁹ having in 1993 formulated the Copenhagen criteria as the master narratives for accession and have taking all significant decisions for all rounds of enlargement, also in the case of Turkey.

Given that salience of the European Council, it is necessary to have a closer look on their published documents. For an adequate analysis and assessment of the political positions we need to discover in the regular conclusions of the European Council formulations which identify the main topics in the relationship as

well as the strategies and instruments how to deal with these challenges. The implied narratives tell us how the Union leaders perceive certain events or developments in the past and assess the usually unsatisfactory state of real affairs and propose ways to a desired future. The formulations of their conclusions include several dimensions of constructing the Union's own identity. The messages serve both to keep the EU as unit together as to send strong signals to Turkey.

A main function the European Council's narrative is thus to legitimize current policy activities and actions especially in view of its foreign policy.

It should be noted that the conclusions of the European Council meetings are the results of a careful preparation over several administrative and political levels aiming to reach a consensus among the Heads of the State or Government. They do not only document directly or indirectly certain fundamental features in mapping the perceptions of the bilateral relations, but also have a strong impact on the way policies are prepared. These conclusions are products of a political process which explains that they apparently miss – on purpose or without further reflection – certain issues and they might even contain on purpose some taboos. To facilitate consensus, the conclusions are a result of a laboursome compromise full of ambiguities.

This policy paper claims that the conclusions of the special meeting of 1 and 2 October and of 10 and 11 December 2020 document basic, yet not unexpected shifts in the narratives framed by the Union leaders. Certain topics like references to rule of law, democratic values, and the membership perspective disappeared. The narratives stressed two aspects of both a

functional and transactional as of a geo-political nature. They offer a positive agenda to deal with challenges of a common interest and “restrictive measures”,¹⁰ i.e. negative sanctions. We take from the December document as a basic message: The Unions leaders do not only reinforce their earlier formulation “Turkey has been moving further away from the European Union”¹¹, but they also turn the narrative of a distant and increasingly hostile neighbour to a master narrative.

With regard to the conclusions of the European Council in October and December, we can observe the leaders’ dilemma between condemning the “provocations”¹² of Turkey and take restrictive measures for “defending its interests”¹³ on one side, and trying to keep and extend a “cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey”¹⁴ on the other side.

Two main narratives coexist and explain the limited reactions of the Union.

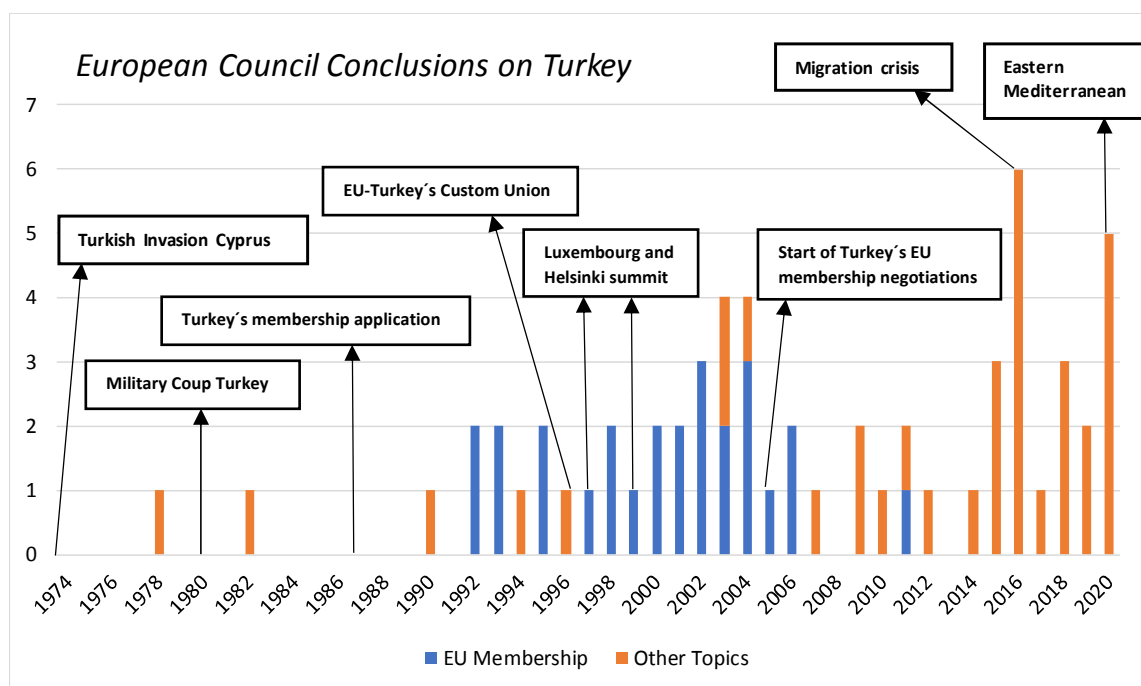
The heritage and shifts of narratives

The 2020 winter documents are so far the latest in a long row of over 50 conclusions of the European Council dealing with Turkey. It is of high interest which narratives are vanishing and which become dominant.

The normative narrative: human rights, rule of law, fundamental freedoms and the independence of the judiciary

A major narrative is based on identifying the EU as a community of values. Consequentially, the concern of several generations of the Union’s political leaders was and is the existence and stability of “democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities”¹⁵ and also the respect of “fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression”.¹⁶

Based on the first Copenhagen criteria, in all conclusions dealing with accession negotiations, the European Council sets the implementation of these political norms as a



Source: Wessels, W. (2020): *Narratives Matter: In search of a partnership strategy*, IPC-Mercator Policy Brief, April 2020, diagram updated on 16 December 2020.

political precondition for starting and pursuing membership negotiations. The respect for the Union's values was also regarded as a precondition for any further formal development of the relations – also in view of modernizing the Customs Union which should be 'rules based'. The resolution of the European Parliament from 13 March 2019 has given this narrative a high priority: "[A]ny political engagement between the EU and Turkey should be built on conditionality provisions concerning respect for democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights".¹⁷

The membership narrative: towards the status of special candidate country

Of high interest is how the Union leaders took a position with the Turkish demand for membership. The European Council did not react to the first Turkish application in 1987/89.

After the end of the Cold War, with Central and Eastern European claims for membership as well as faced with a changed geopolitical position of Turkey, e.g. in relation to the Balkan wars, the European Council tried to define new forms of memberships.

In a general statement in June 1992, the European Council "underlines that the Turkish role in the political situation in Europe is of greatest importance and that there is every reason to intensify cooperation and develop relations with Turkey in line with the prospect laid down in the Association agreement of 1964 including a political dialogue at the highest level".¹⁸

The Helsinki conclusions 1999 defined Turkey as "a candidate State destined to join the Union on the basis of the same criteria as applied to other candidate States".¹⁹

In the milestone decision in 2004, though stressing again that Turkey should be treated like other candidate states, the statements put

forward some new conditions: "These negotiations are an open ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand".²⁰ The European Council also refers to an alternative option: "[I]f the Candidate State is not in a position to assume in full all obligations of membership it must be ensured that the Candidate State concerned is fully anchored in the European structures through the strongest possible bond".²¹

Narratives of transactional and functional partnerships

Besides these narratives on a fundamental relationship, European leaders mentioned Turkey as a "key strategic partner".²² In 2016, they identified issues of shared interest for which specific instruments were envisaged. Besides references to the fight against terrorism the European Council has reacted to migration pressures. A key document is the joint EU-Turkey statement of spring 2016 with 9 points linking the migration challenge to other issues of cooperation – such as the visa liberalisation, several forms of regular dialogues and efforts to upgrade the Customs Union.²³

We discover one recurrent narrative behind these statements: The recurrent references to the implementation of this "joint action plan",²⁴ also in the October and December 2020 conclusions, shows that Turkey is repeatedly regarded as a key partner in dealing with challenges of vital interest for both sides.

Implicitly, this narrative assumes that functional and transactional cooperation is not only highly regarded but such a "solidarité de fait"²⁵ might create trust leading towards more intensified cooperation. But looking back, we cannot observe major steps to follow the objectives set in early 2016. Major changes in the political context have blocked the implementation and a positive spill over to more cooperation. The migration issue could

thus not function as a driver for deepening the relations, but currently it is leading to more tensions. In addition to that, main elements of the 18 March 2016 agreement, such as the enlargement of the Customs Union, the visa liberalisation as well as the opening of new chapters could not be implemented.

Towards geopolitical narratives: Syria, Libya, Nagorno Karabakh

It is remarkable that in spite of history changing developments after '1989' the European Council could not formulate any plans for a strategic partnership. The EU itself took some time to develop for itself geopolitical perspectives.

In relation with Turkey the issue became especially relevant with Turkish and European positions concerning the civil war in Syria. We observe a change in the European Council's geopolitical narrative from a close NATO ally in the confrontation between the two blocs to "a key partner of the European Union and a critically importing actor in the Syrian crisis and the region",²⁶ but the message of these conclusions leads to a different narrative. Regarding the Turkish actions in Syria in 2019, the European Council states 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".²⁷

Also, in relation with Turkish interventions in Libya and in the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan about Nagorno Karabagh positions of the two-sided document different geopolitical interest and perspectives.²⁸

The Cyprus issue: from an obstacle to source of conflict - the crises in the Eastern Mediterranean

From 2014 onwards, the wording of the conclusions document increasing alarm and tensions: With reference to Turkish gas drilling, the European Council at several occasions "expressed serious concern about the renewed tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and urged Turkey to show restraint and to respect Cyprus' sovereignty over its territorial sea and [its] sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone."²⁹ The issues related to Cyprus have been on the European Council's agenda since the accession of Cyprus to the Union. The Heads of State or Government have given the problems of one of their members again and again a considerable attention with increasingly strong statements on Turkey. The European Council reiterated at several occasion that progress in the accession partnership with Turkey "includes the fulfilment of Turkey's obligation under the Association agreement and under its Additional Protocol"³⁰ (that means recognition of Cyprus and open the Turkish ports for imports from Cyprus) and the "commitment to good neighbourly relations".³¹

We have seen a similar statement in March 2018 and in June 2019. The European Council "strongly condemns Turkey's continued illegal actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea"³² and underline its "full solidarity with Cyprus."³³

In summer and autumn 2019 the political leaders supported a set of limited sanctions against some Turkish citizens and companies. In both cases, the undiplomatic wordings of the leaders' conclusions confirm a strongly emerging narrative that claims that "Turkey has been moving further away from the European Union".³⁴

The conclusions of the October and December 2020 meetings

With the unprecedented challenges Corona pandemic, the European Council was absorbed by its negotiations to agree on a financial mega deal to contribute to the solution of economic and social consequences till the End of July. Only from summer 2020 the members could turn to changes in the world affairs and with that also to rising conflicts with Turkey.³⁵

The conclusions of 1 and 2 October document both a continuation of earlier statements like changed and reinforced positions. The paragraphs 16-22 of the October conclusions are under the heading of “Eastern Mediterranean” and placed before a chapter on “China”. The formulations were carefully prepared and are in comparison to usual paragraphs in the conclusions rather detailed. We can identify several narratives:

(1) Strengthening of the geo-political narrative: defending the EU member states interests threatened by Turkey's restrictive measures

The opening paragraph (16) starts with a main geo-political driven narrative: as a key topic the European Council, stating “The EU has a strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey”.³⁶ The next sentence then stresses a precondition for further actions: “Pursuing dialogue in good faith and abstaining from unilateral actions which run counter to the EU interest and violate international law and sovereign of EU Member States is an absolute requirement in this regards.”³⁷ Reinforcing this demand, the “European Council strongly condemns violations of the sovereign rights of the Republic of Cyprus which must stop.”³⁸ And to support these positions: “The European

Council reiterates its full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus, whose sovereignty and sovereign rights must be respected.”³⁹

In “recalling and reaffirming i.a. its previous conclusion on Turkey of October 2019”⁴⁰ the European Council links these positions with a threat: “in case of renewed unilateral actions or provocation in breach of international law, the EU will use all the instruments and options at its disposal (...) in order to defend its interests and those of its Member States.”⁴¹ For the instruments the European Council refers to Art. 29 TEU and Art. 215 TFEU. For “restrictive measures”⁴² the latter provision fixes the procedures for “the interruption or reduction (...) of economic and financial relations with one or more third countries”⁴³ (Art. 215, §1) or “against natural or legal persons and groups or non-State entities.”⁴⁴ (Art. 215, §2). Art. 215 TFEU entitles the European Council to take restrictive measures if it receives a qualified majority for the proposal drawn up jointly with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission. In addition, the European Council refers to Art. 29 TEU, which allows it to take “decisions, which shall define the approach of the Union to a particular matter of a geographical or thematic nature. Member States shall ensure that their national policies conform to the Union positions.”⁴⁵ It should be noted that the term sanction is not been used in the conclusions. Furthermore, the conclusions do not relate to the military defence clause (Art. 42 TEU).

(2) The cooperation and partnership narrative: launching a positive EU -Turkey Agenda

Besides the “stick” the European Council offers also a “carrot”: “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”.⁴⁶ As topic for this strategy it

identifies: "modernisation of the Customs Union and trade facilitation, people to people contacts, High level dialogues, continued cooperation on migration issues, in line with the 2016 EU-Turkey statement".⁴⁷ In comparison with the comprehensive program of the 2016 statement, the European Council does not mention the plans for visa liberalisation and for opening chapters in the accession process.

This points on the positive agenda take up concepts and proposals which have been debated in political and academic circle for some time. For assessing positive and constructive effects of these offers, we need to analyse the benefits and costs for Turkey. Negotiations on the modernisation of the Customs Union take considerable time and will not be easy, e.g. on agriculture and state aids, and their effects cannot be observed directly. Also trade facilitation might be useful, but the effects will be limited for overcoming the economic crisis of Turkey, people to people contacts might be more symbolic and useful for long term relations, unless it includes visa liberalisation. High level dialogues might open opportunities for a constructive dialogue and cooperation, however, they need to be taken serious from both sides. The most concrete point is the cooperation on migration issues.

The offers of the positive agenda are important, but they address few issues on the current agenda.

(3) The multilateral narrative: active role supporting UN negotiations on the Cyprus problem and calling for a Multilateral Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean

It belongs to the fundamental narrative on the Union's external action to "promote multi-lateral solutions of common problems, in particular in the framework of the United Nations"⁴⁸ (Art 21, §1 TEU) Consequently; "in line with principles on which the EU is founded

(...) The EU stands ready to play an active role in supporting negotiation (...) under the auspices of the UN."⁴⁹ At the same time, Turkey continues to take actions that were perceived by the EU as "provocations", such as Turkey's "unilateral policy" in the Eastern Mediterranean or the joint visit of President Erdoğan and Ersin Tatar, President of the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), in Varosha on 15 November 2020.⁵⁰

A new element of the October meeting follows the EU doctrine of effective multilateralism.⁵¹ "The European Council calls for a Multilateral Conference on the eastern Mediterranean and invites the High Representative to engage in talks about its organisation."⁵² The European Council has a long history of organising large multilateral conference also in the Mediterranean. Most of them remained rather ineffective.

(4) Missing narratives: nothing on values and on the accession process

It is relevant and telling to analyse and assess which narratives are not referred to. The European Council's formulations do not mention and identify issues of human rights and rule of law in Turkey, which are central elements of the community of values narrative, nor do they mention any steps in the accession process.

If we read the Council's statement on 18 July 2016, after failed military coup, we can observe that the formulations in October and December 2020 clearly mark a move away from the July 2016 position: "Turkey is candidate country and a key partner for the European Union. The EU remains committed to working together with a democratic inclusive and stable Turkey to address our common challenges."⁵³ Given the way these conclusions are prepared and agreed upon, these omissions cannot be explained as purely

accidental. These missing formulations lead to the assessment that the European Council has moved away from talking seriously about membership for which keeping the first Copenhagen criteria is a must. This silence can be seen as another signal that the Union leaders see Turkey moving away from Europe (see above).

A closer look at the 11 December document shows that the Union's leaders have not agreed on many changes: The conclusions of the European Council on "Eastern Mediterranean", located after a paragraph on "EU-US relations", repeat many formulations of the October meeting, though the European Council itself points at the development and events in the weeks since the October 2020 meeting: "Regrettably, Turkey has engaged in unilateral actions and provocations and escalated its rhetoric against the EU, EU Member States and European leaders".⁵⁴

The formulations again document two major co-existing narratives:

On one side, it takes up the partnership narrative and links it an adequate behaviour of Turkey: "The European Council reaffirms the EU's strategic interest in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficially relationship with Turkey. The offer for a positive agenda remains on the table, provided Turkey shows readiness to promote a genuine partnership with the Union and its Member states and to resolve differences through dialogue and in accordance with international law".⁵⁵

On the other side, we can observe a geo-politics driven narrative of a distant and perhaps even hostile neighbour. For "defending its interests and those of its Member States as well as to upholding regional stability"⁵⁶ the European Council asks the Council to take "restrictive measures in view of Turkey's unauthorized drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean"⁵⁷ by "additional listing

[of persons or companies] based on its Decision of 11 November 2019".⁵⁸

Beyond extending this limited sanction, which is already in force since December 2019, the European Council refrains from further actions but issued a warning for later actions in March 2021: "(the European Council) invites the High Representative and the Commission, to submit a report on the state of play concerning the EU -Turkey political, economic and trade relations and on instruments and options on how to proceed, including on the extension of the scope of the above – mentioned decision for consideration at the latest at the March 2021 European Council".⁵⁹

A specific paragraph is devoted to the Cyprus problem: "The European Council condemns Turkey's unilateral steps in Varosha (...) and supports the speedy resumption of negotiations, under the auspices of the UN and remains fully committed to a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem".⁶⁰

The wording follows the long-term position of the EU but also documents an increasingly negative attitude. Also, for the new initiative of a "multilateral conference on the Eastern Mediterranean"⁶¹ the High Representative is asked to "take forward (this) proposal"⁶² apparently such a strategy is not widely accepted.



Conclusion

In comparisons with earlier formulations even up to 2016 we identify a significant shift in the European Council's conclusions as a reaction to worsening relations.

The membership narrative and the community of values narrative seem to be of no relevance to be mentioned. It apparently was erased from the mental maps of the Union's leaders. The partnership narrative⁶³ with a positive agenda has gained a certain importance as a carrot, but the dominant narrative in the European Council sees Turkey as an increasingly distant and even hostile neighbour.⁶⁴ Also, in the December Document the Union's leaders do not mention developments inside Turkey – e.g. issues linked to the community of values narrative. Also, the accession narrative is not revisited. They also refrained from a decision on tougher sanctions, e.g. an arms embargo or the extension of the restrictive measures for other economic sectors.

We may explain this mix of narratives as a compromise which is typical for the European Council: France, Greece, Cyprus and Austria were apparently for more forceful strategy with more sanctions. Germany and southern member states foresee the risks of negative impacts on the existing interdependencies – even if they are asymmetrical with higher costs for Turkey.

The compromise is again postponing any main decision and asking for a new report: paralysis by analysis.

For the academic community, it is an important task to analyse the shifts of narratives. The next objective will be to assess on the state of play on relations between the EU and Turkey and

the scope of restrictive measures, which the “High Representative and the Commission [are invited] to submit a report on (...) EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations and on instruments and options on how to proceed (...) at the latest at the March 2021 European Council.”⁶⁵



End Notes

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- 60 | *Ibid.*, (33).
- 61 | *Ibid.*, (34).
- 62 | *Ibid.*,
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ABOUT VIADUCT

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.

To this end, VIADUCT builds a large network with **40 partner institutions** and one extended network partner from **36 countries**. **Represented in every EU member state, Turkey and the neighbourhood**, VIADUCT is extending its outreach in research and teaching beyond the EU.

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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