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Turkey-EU Relations: A Historical Perspective

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Conceptual Background



- The main concept we focus on is norms/values; how we define norms?
- How different norms and policies are formed/constructed at the regional/global level, ie. environmental norms, human rights, gender equality
 - how they are transferred/diffused to the national level, and
 - the process of contestation/translation in the process of diffusion.
- Initially, studies on international organisations focused on the nature and structures of the institutions. Yet later, these studies have gone beyond this traditional focus. The impact of the organisations at many levels and in many dimensions came to be studied; such as how organisations transform the actors with whom they come into contact.
- This is especially important in terms of European studies; where the concept of 'Europeanisation' comes into play, a term often used in relation to European integration. We refer to this concept throughout our project.



Norms – Definition and Challenges



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What Are Norms?

Definition:

Shared standards of appropriate behaviour for actors in a given identity.

**Examples in
Global/Regional
Governance:**

Environmental protection

Human rights & minority rights

Gender equality

Contestation

- More recent studies have begun to shift their focus to how norms are resisted and contested, with the intention of placing more emphasis on the agency of the actors involved (norm takers) and the interaction between different levels of governance in the diffusion process.
 - For instance, is de-Europeanisation (movement away from Europeanisation) a form of contestation?
- Hence, rather than viewing the recipients of norms (norm takers) as passive, the focus has shifted to how norms are perceived and translated during the transfer process.
- The literature on contestation suggests that this process is constant. Norms are not universally accepted or easily implemented. Instead, they are often subject to interpretation, debate and resistance even after they have been formally institutionalised.
- While contestation can strengthen norms, it can also lead to their gradual erosion. It is crucial to understand how crises and contestation interact and influence each other.

Age of Polycrisis

The concept of polycrisis highlights how overlapping challenges – such as economic instability, geopolitical tensions and democratic backsliding – are testing the resilience of European integration (Juncker, 2016).

Various challenges – from the security threats in our neighbourhood and at home, to the refugee crisis, and to the UK referendum – have arrived at the same time.

Crisis: Liberal International Order?

Ex: Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents by *Rebecca Adler-Nissen & Ayşe Zarakol*

The **LIO** faces internal and external challenges driven by **recognition struggles** rather than just economic grievances.

Two Main Struggles:

1. **Within the West:** Populist movements challenge LIO's status hierarchy; led by populist politicians and their supporters
2. **Semi-Periphery:** Competitively authoritarian regimes resist LIO norms; fueled by competitively authoritarian governments and their backers

Interconnected Resistance: These movements are digitally, ideologically, and organizationally linked in their criticism of LIO institutions, amplifying each other's impact.

Outcome: LIO is weakened both internally and externally.

Implication: The crisis of the LIO is not just about power shifts but also about demands for **recognition and status**.



Values in Turkey-EU Relations



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From Westernization to Europeanization: Turkey's Strategic Shift

- **Founding Vision:** Westernization = modernization (e.g., Latin alphabet, dress codes, women's rights – Women's Suffrage in Turkey 1934), but **not** democratization.
- **Post-WWII:** Transition to multiparty politics, but democracy remained **procedural**
- **Military Coups:** Recurrent interventions to protect the regime from democratic challenges
- **Post-Cold War Shift:** EU makes **liberal democracy** a condition for membership
- **Europeanization vs. Westernization:**
 - Adds focus on **human rights & minority rights**
 - Promotes **norm diffusion** via EU conditionality
- **Strategic Recalibration:**
 - EU integration prioritized over regional balancing
 - National identity and interest redefined
- **Civil-Military Dilemma in terms of Europeanisation:**
 - Reform threatens post-coup privileges
 - Yet aligns with Atatürk's pro-Western vision
- **Role of AKP:**
 - Embraced EU agenda as part of **domestic transformation**
 - Europeanization = outcome of **external pressure + domestic agency**

From Customs Union to Candidate Status (1995–1999)



Key events:

- **1995** – Customs Union: unprecedented integration without membership.
- **1997** – Luxembourg: Turkey declared eligible.
- **1999** – Helsinki: Candidate Country status granted.

Theoretical link:

- **Why does the EU enlarge?** (*Sjursen, 2002*)
 - *Pragmatic logic of consequence*: Geopolitical and economic benefits.
 - *Ethical-political logic of appropriateness*: Turkey's role in the European community idea.
 - *Moral logic*: Support for democratisation.
- **Conditionality** (*Börzel et al.*): High credibility of rewards – membership as the “big prize.”
- **Europeanisation** (*Börzel & Risse*): Clear misfit between EU norms and Turkey's domestic structures created adaptational pressure.

Emerging Divergence (2010–2012)

Key events:

- **2010** – Constitutional changes centralising power.
- **2010–2011** – Arab Spring ends “zero problems with neighbours” policy; Syria crisis deepens divergence.
- **2012** – Declining support in EU institutions.

Theoretical link:

- **De-Europeanisation**: Reversal of earlier convergence due to reduced conditionality credibility.
- **Integration capacity**: Internal EU concerns (enlargement fatigue) reduce willingness to expand.
- **Two-level games** (*Putnam*): Domestic political needs outweigh international commitments.

Positive Agenda & Realpolitik Revival (2012–2016)



Key events:

- **2012** – *Positive Agenda* launched.
- **2015** – Refugee crisis creates political momentum.
- **2016** – EU–Turkey Refugee Deal.

Theoretical link:

- **Conditionality without credibility:** EU's shift from values to strategic interests.
- **External differentiated integration** (*Schimmelfennig, Saatçioğlu*): Cooperation in migration and security without accession orientation.
- **Logic of consequences** dominates over logic of appropriateness – interests over norms.

Democratic Backsliding (2013–2018)



Key events:

- **2013** – Gezi protests.
- **2014** – Erdoğan’s first presidential term.
- **2016** – Coup attempt → state of emergency.
- **2017** – Presidential system referendum.
- **2018** – Freedom House: “Not Free.”

Theoretical link:

- **Norm backsliding:** Withdrawal from EU norms when rewards are uncertain.
- **Post-functionalism** (*Hooghe & Marks*): Identity politics and sovereignty concerns block integration.
- **Diffusion theory** (*Börzel & Risse*): Competing norm influences (Middle East, Russia) reduce the EU’s socialisation effect.

Democratic Backsliding or New Governance Model?



Turkey has never been a perfect democracy by Western standards. However, except for brief military interruptions since 1950, when for the first time power changed hands peacefully through free and fair elections, Turkey has never been classified as authoritarian either.

In fact, with respect to universal suffrage, Turkey was ahead of a number of today's consolidated democracies.

Turkey's secular democracy was once regarded as a successful model for other Islamic countries of the Middle East to follow (Esmer, 2019). The military hold on power was temporary, and an inclusive military regime was trying rapidly to transfer power to civilian governments.

April 2017 – from the parliamentary system of government in favour of a regime, which could be described as an extraordinary presidential system with no checks or balances.

Several scholars have applied concepts such as illiberal democracy (Bechev 2014; Türkmen-Derivoğlu 2015), delegative democracy (Özbudun 2014; Taş 2015), electoral authoritarian (Konak and Özgür Dönmez 2015), and competitive authoritarianism (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016; Özbudun 2015).

Esen and Gümüşçü (2016): TR transitioned from a tutelary democracy to competitive authoritarianism in 2010

- 1) *unfair elections*
- 2) *violation of civil liberties,*
- 3) *uneven playing field*

Drivers of Regression & EU Constraints

Key events:

- Cultural acceptance of “strongman” rule in Turkey.
- EU integration fatigue and Turkoscepticism; Islamophobia (Kaya).
- Public opinion in Europe sceptical about enlargement. the activism of supranational institutional actors, the change of the Commission portfolio: from ‘Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy’ to ‘European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations’.
- Member state preferences: who supports TR’s membership? Also: “member states with clients would like to see these clients come in” (Müftüler Baç & McLaren) and “a sense of kinship-based duty” lacking (Sjursen)

Theoretical link:

- **Integration capacity** (*Börzel et al.*):
 - *External*: Limited EU influence on associated states.
 - *Internal*: Concerns over cohesion and functioning.
- **Policy diffusion & institutional isomorphism** (*Radaelli*): EU’s normative pull weakened; alternative governance models gained appeal.

Turkey–EU Relations: Between Strategic Interests and Political Disputes

(Tensions):

- Democratic backsliding & human rights concerns
- Cyprus and Eastern Mediterranean disputes
- Sanctions debates & cooling accession process

(Cooperation):

- Migration control & border security
- Trade ties through the Customs Union
- Energy cooperation & green transition dialogue
- European Defence