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# Possible Revamp in Turkey-EU Relations in the Post Covid-19 Era: Opportunities and Challenges

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## Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Opportunities for Turkey-EU Relations	5
Portuguese Presidency of the EU Council	6
Migration as a Common Issue	7
Economy and Energy	8
The Rough Road of Turkey-EU Relations: Challenges Ahead	11
Fragmented EU Political Atmosphere	11
Rise of Islamophobia in Europe	12
Maritime Jurisdiction Disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean	13
Conclusion and Recommendations	15
Recommendations for the EU:	15
Recommendations for Turkey:	16

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## Possible Revamp in Turkey-EU Relations in the Post Covid-19 Era: Opportunities and Challenges

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### Executive Summary

Turkey-EU relations have been under *de facto* suspension for the last few years. 2020 played a transformative role in international relations, bringing huge unpredictability but at the same time presenting various opportunities in Turkey-EU relations. This SAM paper discusses the future of Turkey-EU relations in light of the positive dialogue initiated by both Turkey and the EU in terms of opportunities and challenges in the post-Covid-19 era. The key highlights of this paper are as follows: First, it will touch upon three opportunities and how they are likely to be reflected in Turkey-EU relations in the months ahead. These are, **migration management and refugees as a common challenge, the effects of Covid-19 on global supply chains and the window of opportunity brought about by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU.** Second, the paper will highlight three main challenges in Turkey-EU relations: **the fragmented political atmosphere in the EU, the rise of Islamophobia in Europe and the maritime jurisdiction disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean.** In conclusion, I will touch upon the opportunities and challenges facing Turkey-EU relations in the post-Covid-19 era and offer some recommendations regarding how to warm up the relations, especially on the societal level, which plays an undeniable role in the betterment of mutual relations.

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## Introduction

The deep historical background of Turkey-EU relations plays a vital role in understanding today's dynamics; these relations have lasted more than 60 years—since the signing of the Ankara Agreement and the setting up of an association between Turkey and what was then called the European Community. The nature of this relationship has always been controversial in terms of its political, economic and social implications for both Turkey and the EU.<sup>1</sup> Starting in 2005, when Turkey's membership negotiation process began, Turkey launched a rapid and effective reform process aiming to harmonize the *acquis communautaire* contained in the 35 negotiating chapters. To date, sixteen chapters remain unopened and one chapter is temporarily closed. Although 13 chapters were opened between 2006–2010, only one chapter could be opened between 2010–2013<sup>2</sup> due to the political blockages of some member states. The stagnation in the opening up of negotiating chapters for political reasons led the Commission to come up with the idea of the 'Positive Agenda' in May 2012. According to the Commission, even if some chapters were blocked, the so-called Positive Agenda would function as a working method to enhance Turkey-EU cooperation in areas of joint interest and fulfill the technical opening and closing benchmarks of negotiation chapters through established working groups.<sup>3</sup> However, the Positive Agenda did not generate the expected impact and after several years it was quietly shelved by the EU.

Over the last seven years, both international and domestic dynamics have played a negative role in Turkey's accession process. However, the refugee crisis, sparked in June 2015, encouraged both sides to revisit a mutual relationship. Consequently, in the midst of the crises, both sides formed an agreement in 2016, now widely known as the 18 March Statement. The Statement contained several, specific steps that both sides would take to restore order to the refugee process; it is believed to have had a positive impact on relations in a way that might lead to solving the outstanding issues between the two parties and reenergizing Turkey's stalled

EU membership process.<sup>4</sup>

Accompanied by the unprecedented threat of Covid-19, 2020 is one of the cornerstones in the last decade that drove the emergence of opportunities and challenges for actors in the international system. Turkey and the EU are no exceptions. This SAM paper will discuss the future of Turkey-EU relations upon the positive dialogue initiatives undertaken by Turkey and the EU in terms of opportunities and challenges in the post-Covid-19 era.

First of all, this paper will touch upon three opportunities: migration management and refugees as a common challenge; the economy and energy in the post Covid-19 period, including issues of global supply chains; and the opportunities that Portugal's Presidency of the Council of the EU may present. Second, the paper will highlight three main challenges in Turkey-EU relations: the fragmented political atmosphere in the European Union, the rise of Islamophobia in Europe and the maritime delimitation issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. I will then evaluate how these three areas are likely to be reflected in Turkey-EU relations. In conclusion, I will assess the opportunities and challenges in store for Turkey-EU relations in the post-Covid-19 era and recommend some ways to stimulate relations, especially on the societal level, which is undeniably part of mutual relations.

## Opportunities for Turkey-EU Relations

Obviously, 2020 was not an easy year, not only because of the pandemic, but also due to various political crises that emerged between Turkey and the EU. However December 2020 became a lynchpin for new hopes in Turkey-EU relations when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that Turkey wants to turn a new page with the EU, even if some member states have been benefiting from the crisis.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this, EU High Representative Josef Borrell placed an emphasis on the positive agenda for both

sides in 2021.<sup>6</sup> These concurrent, positive declarations from both sides at the end of 2020 actually changed the negative atmosphere in Turkey toward the EU. In the first half of 2021, there are three primary opportunities for Turkey-EU relations.

### *Portuguese Presidency of the EU Council*

First, the Presidency of the EU Council, which rotates every six months, plays a relatively leading role in determining and implementing EU political priorities. Although the Lisbon Treaty limited the leadership role of the Presidency in terms of agenda setting, it remains at the helm in fixing the EU's priorities in the area of foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> 2020 began with a German Presidency, whose agenda was soon rescheduled after the outbreak of the pandemic. Yet the German Presidency made concrete steps in its efforts as a trusted counterpart of Turkey in terms of the role it played as an honest broker. Similarly, the upcoming rotating Presidencies are likely to support rapprochement with Turkey.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 2021, Portugal took over the EU Presidency from Germany. Although Portugal's 2021 agenda will most likely be busy with issues related to Covid-19, a Portugal Presidency will be a vital opportunity for Turkey-EU rapprochement. In Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's recent visit to Lisbon following Portugal's acceptance of the Presidency, the Portuguese Minister underlined his country's role regarding mutual relations during its EU Presidency as follows: "There is some disagreement between two EU member states and Turkey. As the Presidency, we think progress can be made in this conflict. We find it extremely important to the creation of positive cooperation between Turkey and the EU agenda. We have common interests such as security, the stability of the region, struggle with migration."<sup>8</sup>



Turkey and Portugal have a long-standing relationship with common interests, including those related to the Mediterranean Sea. Since Turkey's negotiation process started in 2005, successive Portuguese leaders have emphasized their support of Turkey's EU membership. However, making use of this opportunity in the first half of 2021 will require Turkey to step up efforts to eliminate irritants in relations as much as possible.

### *Migration as a Common Issue*

Second, irregular migration and the Syrian refugee crisis have been main determinant in mutual relations since 2016. Currently, Turkey is hosting around 4 million refugees within its borders.<sup>9</sup> And, for last five years, the refugee crisis in has been at the epicenter of European political crises that have triggered deep divisions between EU member states. The 2015 EU-Turkey Joint Declaration and the 18 March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement aimed to create a positive agenda, particularly in the area of preventing irregular migration and supporting the Syrians hosted by Turkey. The financial assistance offered by the EU to help meet the needs of Syrians in Turkey (Facility for Syrian Refugees in Turkey—FRIT) supported humanitarian and development projects that cost a total of €6 billion Euros.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, a 1:1 system was established, through which, for every irregular Syrian readmitted to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian from Turkey would be resettled in an EU member state. Also, under the 18 March Statement, both sides agreed on the rapid conclusion of the visa liberalization roadmap so as to lift Schengen visa restrictions for Turkish citizens. Since then, Turkey has met 66 of the total 72 criteria contained in the visa liberalization roadmap. However, these advances were not sufficient to bring about a revival in relations through trust and cooperation.

Just before the pandemic broke out and following the attack on Turkish soldiers in the North of Syria that increased the risk of additional Syrian refugees marching toward Turkish borders, Turkey

decided to open its land borders with Greece to allow voluntary Syrians and other refugees to cross the border. Greece brutally prevented the passage of refugees by force, killing several refugees at the border. The chaos at the Greek-Turkish border led the EU to support Greece and call upon Turkey to close its borders with Greece to refugees. The desperate conditions in refugee camps in Greece during the pandemic once more revealed that the problem of refugees and irregular migration can be only solved by a common sense of cooperation rather than conflict. From this perspective, renewed cooperation on irregular migration and refugees could be an opportunity for Turkey-EU relations in 2021—if the EU and Turkey can overcome the deadlock. The main and most vital issue, on which both sides can work, is ending the conflict in Syria as a permanent solution to much of the region's irregular migration. As High Representative Joseph Borrell said with regard to the EU's relationship with Turkey: “We have a common interest and that is to end the conflict in Syria. Only in this way will we be able to bring to an end the suffering of the civilian population and contribute to addressing the most significant challenges Turkey is currently facing”<sup>11</sup>

Mutual understanding, renewal of the agreement on migration and the continuation of financial support not only for Syrian refugees but for other refugee groups, along with re-energizing visa liberalization can be deemed priorities within the issue of migration, and as opportunities in Turkey-EU relations. Çavuşoğlu touched upon the same points during his visit to Brussels last month.<sup>12</sup> In light of these developments, Turkey and the EU can work on a new version of the March 2016 Agreement in the coming months, and an updated agreement can be realized within the first half of 2021.

### *Economy and Energy*

Third, Turkey and EU have interdependent economic relations. More than half of Turkey's foreign direct investment comes from

EU member states,<sup>13</sup> while Turkey is one of the few non-EU countries having a customs union with the EU. An unexpected disruption in the global supply chain from China left many EU member countries in urgent need of medical goods due to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup> This reality encouraged EU leaders to rethink the future of the single market, and to shore up the supply chains of critical sectors such as industry, medicine and pharmaceuticals to reduce dependence on China's supply chains and market.

In this struggling time, Turkey was the first and only country to extend a helping hand to EU member states such as Italy, Spain, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, supplying them with much-needed medical equipment.<sup>15</sup> Turkey's humanitarian aid diplomacy to EU member states reminded these countries of Turkey's importance in trade. Former Head of the EU Delegation to Turkey, Ambassador Christian Berger, underlined this when he stated, "Turkey and the EU (are) really two very close trading partners. The EU is the largest market for Turkey. Turkey is playing a very important role in the EU's supply-demand chain as a member of the Custom Union."<sup>16</sup> In other words, Turkey with its potential in diversity in production, human resources and logistics became a more visible actor in Europe's global supply chain in a time of crisis. In this respect, the modernization of the customs union would be beneficial for both sides. This project has already been a priority for the past few years; as underlined by Minister Çavuşoğlu, it can be deemed one of the biggest opportunities of 2021.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, energy offers another key opportunity in Turkey-EU relations. Similar policies and objectives in the field of energy between the two actors ensure that steps are taken to keep Turkey's membership process alive even in the most problematic times. In this context, on June 14, 2012, members of the EU Commission and Turkey's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources held a meeting within the framework of the Positive Agenda and decided to implement the establishment of enhanced energy cooperation. It has been officially emphasized that Turkey's role as an energy center and energy bridge will benefit both the EU and Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

The positive agenda on energy areas prevailed even during politically difficult times, although the energy chapter of Turkey's EU accession process was not opened due to the Greek Cypriot veto.<sup>19</sup> While nuclear energy, carbon markets, renewable energy and efficiency play a minor role in mutual relations, gas and electricity are the main priorities.<sup>20</sup> Turkey's gas reserve discovery in the Black Sea is a turning point for Turkey's role in the energy market and the energy aspect of the Turkey-EU relationship. Turkey's possible role as an energy hub would change the geopolitical balance of this cooperation, since Europe still desperately depends on Russian energy. In 2021 and beyond, Turkey expects to discover more gas reserves in the Black Sea, which would ensure energy's role as an indispensable element of Turkey-EU relations and as an opportunity for Turkey to become a gas exporter.

Another area of energy-related cooperation that can bring the two sides together is the European Green Deal—the EU's newly defined growth strategy whose main target is zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Within the Deal's set goals, the growth strategy is constructed based on seven policy areas: i) clean energy, ii) sustainable industry, iii) building and renovating, iv) from farm to fork, v) eliminating pollution, vi) sustainable mobility and vii) biodiversity.<sup>21</sup> Turkey can work on the Green Deal goals together with the EU in two ways: complying with the Turkish national political and action framework on greenhouse gas emissions and maintaining biodiversity.<sup>22</sup> The Green Deal can be deemed an opportunity for Turkey to upgrade its capabilities in the areas of energy transition and efficiency, digital transformation and sustainable cities, and to work together on mutual beneficial green transformation.<sup>23</sup> Thus, energy and environmental policies alike will provide a meaningful opportunity for both Turkey and the EU in 2021.

## The Rough Road of Turkey-EU Relations: Challenges Ahead

Despite the strong opportunities for Turkey-EU relations in 2021, there are also challenges; they can be categorized as follows: (i) the fragmented EU political atmosphere, (ii) the rise in Islamophobia in Europe and (iii) the maritime delimitation issues in the Eastern Mediterranean.

### *Fragmented EU Political Atmosphere*

The first and foremost challenge in Turkey's EU relationship is definitively related to the EU's own self-portrayal. Controversies over a “**divided Europe**” are not a new phenomenon; they have been a visible discussion since the Euro crisis in terms of the economic and political structure of the EU.<sup>24</sup> After the Euro crisis, two groups of member states emerged: the Eurozone core and peripheral countries. “Core countries” include the Northern Bloc: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany and Sweden, characterized by high GDP per capita, well-established industrial production, production of complex products and relatively low unemployment.<sup>25</sup> “Peripheral countries,” known as ‘PI-IGS’—Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain—suffered from high public debt and recession, and their strict austerity policies triggered even greater recession.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the EU has long faced a divided North and South picture. This division has entailed political divisions too. In last decade, far-right parties and Euroscepticism have almost completely dominated the European political sphere.<sup>27</sup>

The economic and political fallout from the Euro crisis was followed by a social-identity crisis with the Syrian refugee crisis acting like a catalyzer, when member states refused to accept the refugees who marched to the borders of Europe.<sup>28</sup> The questioning of European values as a foundation of the EU and the negative attitudes of the Eastern Europe countries dragged Union into an open-ended division.

This fragmented EU picture was inevitably reflected in Turkey's EU membership process. As mentioned above, 14 chapters have been blocked due to the political decisions of the Council, France and the Greek Cypriots. The Council Decision of December 11, 2006 made the opening benchmark for eight chapters and the closing benchmark for all chapters conditional upon the fulfillment of Turkey's commitments under the Additional Protocol. In practical terms, this means that the Council asks Turkey to recognize the Greek Cypriot Administration. At the time of writing, France, Greece and the Greek Cypriots are pushing hard for the Council to impose sanctions as a response to Turkey's drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, while another group of EU member states supports Turkey's EU membership and oppose tension in relations. Thus, the fragile structure of the EU itself is one of the obstacles facing a Turkey-EU rapprochement in 2021.

### *Rise of Islamophobia in Europe*

The decade of crisis for the EU has created a vicious circle in European politics and societies. The populist rhetoric of European politicians, directed against immigrants, became widespread after the Euro crisis. This in turn caused a sharp **rise in Islamophobia**, as Muslim minorities came to be viewed as non-belonging and unwanted. They have become separated from the rest of society, and have suffered disproportionately from unemployment, poverty, and limited civic and political rights. Throughout this time, Islamophobic incidents in France have increased 52 percent; in Austria there was a rise of 74 percent with 540 cases,<sup>29</sup> and there were 879 attacks on Muslims in Germany in 2019 alone.<sup>30</sup>

This dangerous trend has had an undeniable effect on Turkey-EU relations in two ways, particularly since European citizens who are of Turkish migrant background, known as Euro-Turks, have in many cases been targeted as the victims of these attacks.<sup>31</sup> President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan draws the attention of the EU to those attacks and the sometimes reckless attitudes displayed by some

European leaders with these words:

The Western world [does] not have the courage to face this threat that is growing like a cancer cell. Instead of confronting racism and Islamophobia in their country, those who deflect their targets do the worst thing to their own society. The problems they ignore today will face them as bigger disasters tomorrow.<sup>32</sup>

Turkey cannot accept ignorance in detention of offenders by European countries in criminal proceedings. In addition to this, political rhetoric regarding those issues of European politicians is not acceptable which create unavoidable tension in mutual relations.

The stigmatization of Muslims in Europe, including persons of migrant background, has led many to perceive Turkey's EU membership only from the perspective of an identity discourse; this one-dimensional approach to the enlargement process has had an almost poisonous effect on the ascension process in previous years. Since 2016, populist right-wing political groups have exploited the 'risks of European enlargement towards Turkey' in the Brexit campaign and in local elections in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and France, causing disillusion in EU member states, despite the multidimensional structure of Turkey-EU relations.<sup>33</sup> Thus, unfortunately, the normalization and even mobilization of Islamophobia in all segment of politics and society within EU member countries poses a threat to positive initiatives to Turkey-EU relations in the near future.

### *Maritime Jurisdiction Disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean*

The Eastern Mediterranean sea has emerged as a zone of challenge and even conflict of interest for Turkey and the EU. Turkey is a critical actor in the region, with the longest coastal line of any country in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's main goals are economic, and include the protection of Turkish and Turkish Cypriot rights and interests in keeping with the Blue Homeland

Doctrine.<sup>34</sup> In January 2019, the Greek Cypriots, Egypt, Greece, Israel and Jordan created the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) to discuss the extraction and use of the region's natural gas—without Turkey. This exclusionary attitude and the EU's adoption of the Seville Map, which confines Turkey to the gulf of Antalya, has led to high tension on the sea and in diplomacy. Turkey's countermove took the form of a deal with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya in November 2019, followed by seismic survey activities. The Navtex announcement of both Greece and Turkey brought these countries' militaries along with their survey activities in the summer of 2020.

Germany's initiative, led by Chancellor Merkel, as mediator to resolve the disputes is being undermined by other EU member states, particularly France. Greece and the Greek Cypriots, with French support, have provoked Turkey by sending warships and damaging a possible rapprochement between Turkey and Greece. In short, although Turkey seeks solution through dialogue, a "bona fide approach to decoupling initiatives" and "fair sharing," the EU has still insisted on using the illegitimate Seville Map and engaging in blind strategies that exclude Turkey from any cooperation in the region.<sup>35</sup> Unless Turkey and the EU can come together under the auspices of an international conference regarding the Eastern Mediterranean that includes the Turkish Cypriots, this dispute will continue to pose the biggest challenge to prospective relations.

Despite the significance of these challenges, they could all be overcome by the opportunities noted above and the willingness of both sides to find solutions. In this respect, policy recommendations for both sides will be listed in the concluding section below.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Using the notion of turbulence to define the international system was popular—until 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic redesigned all part of our lives, and the international system is no exception. As is widely known, the prospect of Turkey’s EU membership is a contentious issue that has seen both ebb and flow in the last decade. Complementary, positive approaches from Turkey and the EU in the last months of 2020 might signal a new opening for improved Turkey-EU relations in 2021 under the shadow of the pandemic. However, both opportunities and challenges should be kept in mind while navigating these mutual relations. Before turning to policy recommendations, it is significant to mention the opportunities and challenges once more.

The main opportunities for Turkey-EU relations in 2021 stem from Portugal’s Presidency, immigration as a cooperation area and the economy, particularly as it relates to energy. The main challenges in mutual relations are the EU’s fragmented political atmosphere, the rise in Islamophobia and the Eastern Mediterranean delimitation issue. The following recommendations for both sides aim to strengthen Turkey-EU relations as much as possible while minimizing the damaging role of the aforementioned challenges.

### *Recommendations for the EU:*

- The EU should consider the migration issue as a field of cooperation with Turkey through the principle of coexistence and *pacta sunt servanda* (agreements must be kept).
- The EU should take concrete steps to modernize existing customs union with Turkey and
- The EU should show efforts to open the associated chapters in terms of developing energy ties.

- The EU should put pressure on the elimination of racist and Islamophobic discourse both in domestic politics and in the foreign policy agendas of its member states.
- The EU and its member states should maintain a win-win approach in their relations with Turkey, rather than a zero sum game. To this end, upholding the principle of a fair share of the hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean would be the first real test.

### *Recommendations for Turkey:*

- Turkey should exchange experiences on the immigration issue through international platforms composed of NGOs, academicians and stakeholders.
- Turkey should conduct lobbying activities in Brussels to explain Turkey's immense role in the fight against terrorism. Turkey must also stand against racism and Islamophobia in Europe by creating formal platforms to bring together younger generations from Turkey and EU member states.
- Turkey should call for the establishment of an international group of the riparian states in the Eastern Mediterranean that includes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Libya in order to discuss issues of common concern in the region, including the issue of maritime delimitation.
- Turkey should put forward its potential energy capacity within the region through formal and non-formal initiatives.
- Turkey should insist on the update of its Custom Union with the EU.

Last but not least, of course it is tough to bind Turkey-EU relations to these topics; thus, in any scenario, Turkey and the EU should send a clear political message that they are always open to dialogue and willing to engage with each other to navigate the rough way ahead.

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## NOTES

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## About SAM

Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (SAM) is a think-tank and a research center which is chartered by law and has been active since May 1995. SAM was established as a consultative body to provide Turkish Foreign Policy decision makers with scholarly and scientific assessments of relevant issues, and reviews Turkish foreign policy with a futuristic perspective.

SAM conducts research, organizes scholarly events relevant to the ever expanding spectrum of Turkish Foreign Policy in cooperation with both Turkish and foreign academicians, its counterparts from around the world as well as various universities and government agencies. SAM provides consultancy to the foreign ministry departments as well as some other state institutions in foreign policy issues while also establishing regional think-tank networks.

In addition to its role of generating up-to-date information, reliable data and insightful analysis as a think-tank, SAM functions as a forum for candid debate and discussion for anyone who is interested in both local and global foreign policy issues. Increasingly, SAM has become a center of attraction since it successfully brings scholars and policy makers together for exchange of ideas in panels, in-house meetings, seminars and training programs for young diplomats.

SAM has a widening range of publications. Along with its traditional publication, Perceptions, which is a quarterly English language journal that hosts distinguished Turkish and international scholars within its pages, SAM has initiated Vision Papers which expresses the views of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, and SAM Papers that covers the current debates of foreign policy by various scholars.

With its commitment to contribution to the body of knowledge and constructive debate particularly in Turkish Foreign Policy, SAM will continue to serve as an indispensable think-tank and research center given its role promoting interaction and mutual benefits among the MFA, NGOs, other think-tanks and the broader scientific community and hence strengthen the human and intellectual capital of Turkey.



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