

Article – New beginnings: reassessing EU-Turkey relations

From trade to Nato, the EU and Turkey have enjoyed a productive relationship in many domains for decades. However, recently relations have turned frosty as concerns mount over the state of democracy in the country with media outlets being closed and journalists being jailed. MEPs also keep a close eye on developments and wonder if it may not be time to rethink how the EU cooperates with Turkey. Read on for an overview of the options.

Relations hit a new low with the referendum in Turkey on 16 April to give the president additional powers, which could disrupt the balance of powers in the country.

EU membership

Turkey has been an associate member of the European Economic Community since 1963 and applied to join in 1987. It was recognised as a candidate for EU membership in 1999, but negotiations didn't start until 2005. So far 16 out of 35 chapters have been opened and only one has been closed. Last November MEPs adopted a [resolution](#) asking for the negotiations to be temporarily suspended while repression continues in Turkey.

During a debate on the situation in Turkey on 26 April President Antonio Tajani said: "The European Union does not intend in any way to close the door to the Turkish people, who remain our friends." At the same time we cannot look the other way when events proceed in the opposite way of European construction. "Freedom of the press, freedom of expression, are vital rights for anyone wanting to join the European Union and the death penalty, similarly, is an inviolable red line."

Some MEPs proposed to go even further. Manfred Weber (EPP, Germany) said: "Turkey is going in the wrong direction. It's time for us to reassess our relationship. For the EPP full membership of the EU for Turkey is no longer realistic. We have to put an end to any form of hypocrisy. " Meanwhile

Syed Kamall (ECR, UK) said: "We need to be honest with Turkey that it may never be a member of the EU."

Dutch S&D member Kati Piri, Parliament's rapporteur on Turkey's accession progress, argued against formally ending membership talks. "There are millions of people in Turkey that do share the same European values . Millions that do want the EU to remain the anchor for reforms in their country."

Association agreement

The EU has the option of concluding association agreements with nearby countries, such as Iceland, Tunisia. These agreements set up a framework for cooperation in different fields and the EU already has one with Turkey. During the debate on 27 April Guy Verhofstadt (ALDE, Belgium) proposed creating a new association agreement with Turkey focussing on trade and restoring civil society. "I think it's critical now to go into a new cooperation and to do a new proposal to Turkey."

Customs union

Last December the European Commission proposed updating the existing customs union with Turkey and extending bilateral trade relations. Once negotiations have been completed, the agreement would still have to be approved by the Parliament before it could enter into force.

Ska Keller (Greens/EFA, Germany) said the talks on the customs union should be used to improve the human rights situation in Turkey: "We should not upgrade [the customs union] before substantial improvements on human rights."

The EU is by far Turkey's largest export market (44.5%), while Turkey is the EU's fourth largest export market (4.4%).

Other forms of cooperation

Both Turkey and most EU countries are members of Nato. In addition they work together on issues such as migration. In March 2016 the EU and Turkey concluded an agreement to tackle the migration crisis. The deal led to significantly fewer migrants reaching Europe illegally.