

# 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.

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## **This is the third time that the Government have lost in the courts on the issue of air quality – Sue Hayman**

Responding to the Government losing its court bid to delay publication of its air quality plan, Sue Hayman MP Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said:

"Labour welcome the High Court decision today.

"This

is the third time that the Government have lost in the courts on the issue of air quality. They must now publish their air quality plan without further delay.

“A Labour government would bring forward a new Clean Air Act, setting out how we would tackle air pollution that NHS experts say contributes to 40,000 premature deaths every year.

“While the Conservatives shirk responsibility, Labour will deal with the dirty air damaging the lives of millions of British people.”

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## [News story: Armed Forces Minister attends EU meeting](#)

Minister of State for the Armed Forces Mike Penning has attended an EU informal meeting in Malta, alongside Defence Ministers from across the EU.

Ministers from the 28 EU countries discussed the EU’s operational engagement in the Mediterranean and Libya, including Operation Sophia, the mission to tackle the Mediterranean migration crisis.

The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), European Defence Action Plan (EDAP) and European Defence Fund were also due to be discussed at the meeting.

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## [Press release – EP urges Venezuela to restore democratic order and free all political prisoners](#)

**Venezuela’s government must ensure the full restoration of the democratic order and immediately release all political prisoners, urged Parliament on Thursday.**

In a resolution adopted by 450 votes to 35, with 100 abstentions, Parliament strongly condemns the “brutal repression” exercised by the Venezuelan security forces, as well as irregular armed groups, against the peaceful

protests, as a result of which more than 20 people have died and many wounded.

MEPs denounce the continuing unconstitutional violation of the democratic order in Venezuela and the lack of separation of powers and independence of the branches of government. They object to the Supreme Court's recent decision to suspend the powers of the National Assembly (controlled by the opposition), which they consider to be an undemocratic act that violates the Constitution.

The text backs mediation efforts by many countries in the region and calls on the EU's High Representative for foreign policy to explore actively with international and regional organisations "other measures that would enable the EU to restore full democracy to Venezuela".

### **Release political prisoners and allow free elections**

The European Parliament stresses that "there can be no durable peaceful solution for Venezuela in the long term if there are political prisoners". It urges the government to present an electoral calendar allowing free and transparent electoral processes and to stop side-lining opposition leaders by depriving them of their political rights.

### **Humanitarian crisis**

MEPs also ask the authorities to allow humanitarian aid into the country, and calls on the international community, and particularly EU countries, to consider the humanitarian crisis that may arise as a result of the large numbers of Venezuelans leaving the country.

**Procedure:** Non-legislative resolution

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## **[Press release – Textile imports: MEPs push for EU rules to curb worker exploitation](#)**

**EU rules are needed to oblige textile and clothing suppliers to respect workers' rights, say MEPs in a resolution adopted on Thursday.**

Textile workers around the world, many of whom are young women and children, suffer long working hours, low wages, uncertainty, violence and hazardous conditions. These practices also harm the EU industry, as they result in social dumping, MEPs note in a non-binding resolution.

In an effort to push the “flagship initiative” aimed at preventing tragedies like the April 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, MEPs suggest a series of measures:

- **due diligence obligations:** the EU Commission should table a binding legislative proposal for a due diligence system, based on [OECD guidelines](#) and similar to those for the so-called blood minerals, that covers the whole supply chain,
- **conditional trade preferences:** the EU should ensure that textile exporting countries with preferential access to the EU market comply with obligations and produce sustainable textiles, while member states should promote workers’ rights in their relations with partner countries,

#### **Quote by lead MEP**

“We cannot turn a blind eye, if our clothes are made at the cost of vast human suffering. Only binding rules could guarantee that products sold on European markets do not violate the dignity and the rights of millions of workers. The EU has the means to act and we ask the Commission to do so.” said rapporteur Lola Sánchez Caldentey (GUE/NGL, ES).

The resolution was adopted by 505 votes against 49 with 57 abstentions.

#### **Background**

*According to the World Trade Organisation, more than 70% of EU textiles and clothing imports come from Asia, with China, Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia as the largest producers. Most buyers are global brands looking for low prices and tight production timeframes and the consequences usually fall upon factory workers. After the Rana Plaza tragedy, in which over 1,100 people died when a factory building collapsed in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the EU Commission promised to bring forward an EU wide flagship initiative, but has so far failed to do so. Parliament wants to encourage the Commission to table this package of proposals.*

**Procedure:** non-legislative resolution