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## The Shifting Drivers of the AKP's EU Policy

**Moira Goff-Taylor,**  
*National Security Fellow,  
Woodrow Wilson International  
Center for Scholars*



Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has a complicated relationship with the European Union (EU) that began with the AKP's accession to power and has been shaped by Turkey's domestic political lens. Political legitimacy, public attitudes, economic benefits, and foreign policy goals have been key drivers of the AKP's EU strategy. At the start of the AKP's rule, the party relied heavily on the goal of EU membership to push through democratic reforms and to strengthen Turkey's economic and international political standing, as well as AKP's political power. As

the party's dominance grew and Turkish confidence in the possibility of EU membership waned, the party shifted its EU policy away from strong collaboration and support to an argumentative narrative focused on EU hindrance of Turkey's accession progress. This paper examines the evolution of the drivers behind the AKP's EU policy over the last 15 years.

### EU Membership as a Central Goal

During the AKP's first legislative term (2002-2007), its EU policy focused on using the pursuit of membership to support its legitimacy, maintain its public support, and expand

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Director  
Henri J. Barkey

Associate  
Kendra Heideman

Assistant  
Julia Craig Romano

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Turkey's economy and its role as a regional and international actor. When the AKP came to power in 2002, it viewed the EU membership process as a source of legitimacy for the party and for the extensive political and economic reforms the government hoped to undertake. The AKP sought to strengthen Turkey's democracy, economy, and individual freedoms while limiting the military's power. The required EU reforms offered a path for democratic change and a strong argument for why the government needed to make them. The party's pursuit of EU membership was also likely viewed as helping to diminish some Turkish and Western fears that the AKP maintained a hidden Islamist agenda.

The AKP, formed in 2001, described itself as a conservative democrat party rather than Islamist party. The young reformers that founded the AKP learned from the closures of previous Islamist parties and from the military's ousting of democratically elected governments. They recognized that for a religiously oriented party to survive and remain in power, the best way forward was to align with the EU cause and the democratic reforms tied to it. The AKP embraced the idea of Turkish membership in the EU and campaigned on the idea during the 2002 election period. Riding a wave of voter disillusionment with the traditional parties and Turkey's economic turmoil, the AKP won over 34 percent of the popular vote and a majority of seats in parliament in November 2002. At the beginning of the AKP's rule, the EU accession process served as a buffer from the distrust and opposition of the secular establishment. The process focused on democratiza-

tion, building the market economy, and expanding human rights in a multicultural atmosphere, all of which supported the AKP's claim of being democratic reformers rather than Islamic zealots.<sup>1</sup>

While legislative harmonization packages related to the EU process began in 2001, prior to the AKP's electoral victory, the AKP further expanded reforms once in power. It passed an additional six packages between 2002 and 2006. These packages changed existing legislation to improve human rights; strengthen safeguards against torture; broaden freedom of expression and press; strengthen freedom of association, assembly, and demonstration; expand cultural rights; reinforce gender equality; and consolidate democracy.<sup>2</sup> Without the impetus of the EU accession process, it is unlikely the AKP would have been able to pass such major democratization reforms given the strong resistance of the military and nationalist political elements. These groups were inclined to view reforms as an existential threat to the unity of the Turkish state, but reforms tied to EU membership criteria and democratization made opposition more difficult for these parties.<sup>3</sup>

Turkish public attitudes also fed into the AKP's early push for EU membership and reform. In a climate of voter disillusionment with the major established political parties, the AKP's strong support for Turkey's pursuit of EU membership helped the party win over a broad swath of voters and secure victory in the 2002 elections. The AKP saw the EU process as beneficial for its desire for economic and democratic progress and for building its electoral

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base. Public support for EU membership was high in 2002, with 65 percent viewing it as a good thing for Turkey.<sup>4</sup>

Turkish support for the EU process continued to expand as the AKP pursued major reforms and an EU accession start date, which increased support to 67 percent in 2003 and 71 percent in 2004.<sup>5</sup> Extensive public backing weakened opposition to EU-related reforms and enabled the AKP to push forward with democratic and economic policy changes.<sup>6</sup> Support for EU membership in the early 2000s came from various corners of Turkish society: liberals and minorities saw it as the path to greater freedoms, human rights, and potential restraint on the military; the business community viewed it as fast-tracking economic reforms; and Islamists saw it as offering greater opportunity for individual religious freedoms.

Economic interests were a driver of Turkish public support for EU membership and helped shape the AKP's EU policy before and after the 2002 election. Economic crises between 2000 and 2001 forced Turkey to undertake major economic reforms and spurred Turks to seek political change and support for greater commitment to the EU. Supporters of EU membership believed it would benefit the Turkish economy and strengthen economic ties. Turkey's entry into a customs union<sup>7</sup> with the EU in 1995 laid a strong foundation for deeper Turkish-EU economic integration and development of Turkey's economy. Many Turkish business leaders viewed the customs union positively and hoped to further expand business opportunities through EU membership.

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The growing class of mid-sized Anatolian businessmen, who backed the AKP, helped drive the AKP's stance on the EU and economic progress. Party leaders likely viewed economic advancement as key to maintaining its voter base and growing Turkey's global role. Aydın-Düzgüt and Tocci argue that the customs union and EU accession process increased Turkey's competitiveness in the global economy, developed a culture of competition, and made Turkey a major draw for foreign direct investment (FDI).<sup>8</sup>

Similar to economic interests, the AKP's foreign policy goals also acted as a driver for the party's EU strategy. The AKP aimed to broaden Turkey's role as a regional leader and key international actor, and it viewed EU membership as supporting those goals. AKP leaders developed Turkey's proactive foreign policy around the concept of Turkey being a central country that builds diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations with all of the surrounding regions. With its EU candidacy, Turkey strengthened

its credibility as a global actor, added to its soft power capability, and made it an attractive partner and investment.

Ankara's focus on becoming a pivotal global actor and its interest in EU membership pushed AKP leaders to tackle

major foreign policy sticking points, including the Cyprus issue. In 2004, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then the Turkish Prime Minister, and other senior officials' willingness to support a UN plan for a comprehensive settlement for Cyprus, the Annan Plan, was driven by desires to join the EU and to remove a distraction from their greater foreign policy goals. Cyprus was seen as an economic and political drain by some senior AKP leaders. Erdoğan made a major



policy change on the Cyprus issue from earlier governments and pushed Turkish Cypriots to vote for the Annan Plan. The AKP recognized that the division of Cyprus created a roadblock for Turkey's relations with the EU and seized on public support for EU membership to draw backing for its Cyprus policy.

During their early years in power, AKP officials also sought a role building ties between Europe and the Middle East, which bolstered Turkey's position in both regions. The EU recognized Turkey as a strategic partner in the region, and Middle Eastern governments saw potential political and economic benefits from relations with Turkey and its links to Europe. AKP leaders highlighted Turkey's links to both the EU and the Middle East to warrant broadening Turkish diplomacy. The AKP viewed itself as a voice for democratic transformation in the Middle East and argued that Turkey's future EU membership would encourage other countries to embrace reform, modernity, and integration.<sup>9</sup> The party also saw the Middle East as an important trading region and used its economic ties with the EU to encourage expanding economic ties with Middle Eastern neighbors.

### Shifting Perspective on the EU

The AKP's focus on achieving EU membership began to wane soon after the launch of Turkey's official EU accession negotiations in October 2005. Growing Euroscepticism among Turks, the EU members' wavering support for Turkey, and European decisions contradictory to important AKP policies pushed the party to decrease its reliance on

the EU accession process for legitimacy and to reduce its championing for the cause. Turkish perceptions of unfair conditions and disingenuous European attitudes hampered the positive momentum derived from the EU's December 2004 decision to launch Turkey's membership negotiations.

The EU's declaration that Turkey's negotiations would be open-ended, suggestions by EU member states' leaders that Turkey might be offered

an alternative to full membership, and the EU Council freezing negotiations on eight chapters in 2006 caused some Turks to question if the EU actually intended to allow Turkey to join. The European Commission's 2004 report declaring that Turkish membership negotiations had no set timeline and membership could not be guaranteed drew criticism from the Turkish media and public.<sup>10</sup> Turks felt they were being treated unfairly, compared to previous candidates, and the EU's goal was not full membership for Turkey. In May 2005, 59 percent of Turks viewed EU membership as a good thing—a 12-point decrease from 2004.<sup>11</sup>

European leaders' discussions of a "privileged partnership" for Turkey rather than full membership played into the narrative of Turks who opposed EU membership and Turkish public concern that the EU did not intend to allow them into the club. The opposition of key European leaders to Turkish membership frustrated Turks who supported the process and left them feeling unfairly treated by the EU. As party chairwoman and later as Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel was a major proponent of the "privileged partnership" for Turkey.<sup>12</sup> In 2004, Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel and France's Nicolas Sarkozy, then Finance Minister,

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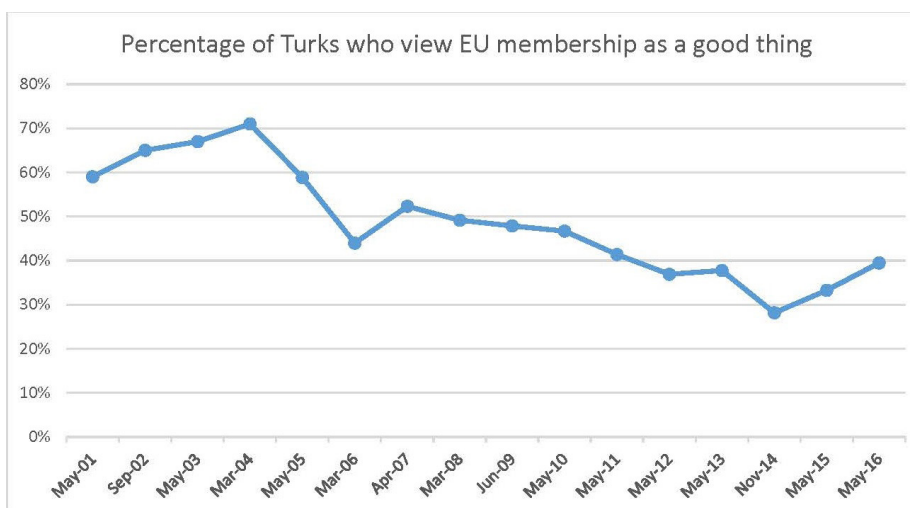
were both strident public advocates for the “privileged partnership” concept as well.<sup>13</sup>

The Cyprus issue added to Turkish frustration and furthered the perception of inequitable treatment. The 2004 referendum on the UN’s settlement plan for Cyprus failed to gain enough votes from Greek Cypriots, leaving the island divided and further complicating Turkey’s accession process. The EU’s decision to allow the Republic of Cyprus to join the Union in 2004, despite the island’s continued division, led to the blockage of 14 accession chapters and downturn in Turkish support for the EU.<sup>14</sup> In December 2006, the EU suspended talks on 8 of the 35 Turkish accession chapters because Turkey refused to implement the Additional Protocol and open its trade to vessels from the Republic of Cyprus. Cyprus, as a member of the EU, blocked the opening of six additional chapters. Turks argued the EU did not hold up its end of the bargain to end the isolation of the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and were angered by the approval of Cyprus’s membership and additional conditions placed on Turkey.

The European Court of Human Rights’ (ECHR) November 2005 decision to uphold the Turkish state’s ban on wearing headscarves at universities and

in official buildings further discouraged the AKP and Turks, who hoped the EU process would help bring about key reforms for individual rights. Despite the ECHR not being formally part of the EU, the AKP took the decision as a signal that the headscarf issue would not be included as part of the EU membership reform requirements and viewed it as diminishing the AKP’s ability to use the EU agenda to promote greater individual religious freedoms.<sup>15</sup> The ruling helped to erode the AKP’s reliance on the EU accession process to back democratic policy changes.

The AKP government continued to pursue reforms between 2006 and 2013, but the pace slowed and policies appeared more focused on shifting the balance of power in Turkey than fulfilling the accession process.<sup>16</sup> The AKP emphasized strengthening its position by increasing civilian controls and fundamental political freedoms rather than specific requirements from EU progress reports. The government could point to EU support for many of the reforms, but relied more on public backing than EU legitimacy to push forward changes. The AKP’s landslide victory in 2007, which increased its share of the vote to 47 percent, boosted AKP leaders’ confidence in their own authority and weakened their reliance on the EU for legitimacy.

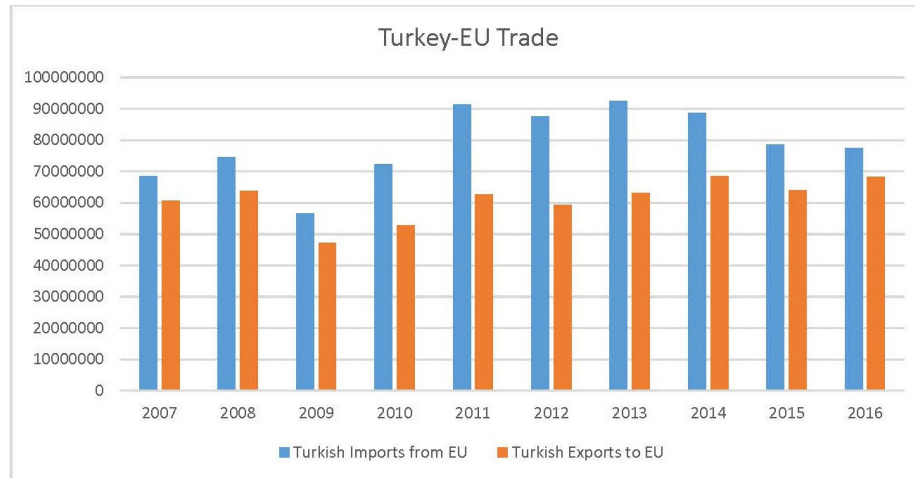


As the Turkish public grew increasingly disillusioned with the prospects for EU membership, AKP leaders adjusted their policy to maintain domestic public support and shift blame for stagnation in the accession process. Erdoğan and other officials claimed they continued to support membership but asserted the EU per-

sisted in placing hurdles in Turkey's path and treated it differently than other candidate countries.<sup>17 18</sup> The Turkish government shifted to more negative rhetoric against the EU and its treatment of Turkey to maintain public support. The appearance of standing up to the EU played well with Turks who were frustrated by

the EU and felt a strong sense of nationalism. Since at least 2010, AKP leaders have repeatedly stated that the EU needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the EU.<sup>19</sup> In a February 2013 press conference, then Prime Minister Erdoğan stated the "EU needs Turkey, not the other way around."<sup>20</sup>

The change in the AKP's perspective on EU membership also played out in its broader foreign policy decision making. As the salience of Turkey's membership hopes declined and crises worsened on its borders, Ankara became less focused on Cyprus and its role as a roadblock to the EU. The most recent Cyprus negotiations (2015-2017) have been the most positive in a decade and Turkey has been relatively supportive of the process. However, Ankara's current backing is tied more to access to a potential natural gas pipeline that will likely run through Cypriot waters than to Turkish EU hopes. The AKP also began to depend more on its growing economic clout and willingness to act as a moderator between countries and political groups in the Middle East rather than its EU ties to expand Turkey's bilateral relations in the region. Over the past six years, the Arab Spring and ensuing turmoil have played key roles in shaping the AKP's foreign policy in the region.



## Ties That Bind

Economic interests, public attitudes, and AKP's historic ties drive the party to maintain relations with the EU, despite the decline in support for membership and relevance of Turkey's EU accession to the AKP's legitimacy and foreign policy goals. Economic interests have consistently steered the AKP toward closer EU ties and discouraged the party from pulling away. The EU is Turkey's largest trading and investment partner. In 2016, 48 percent of Turkish exports went to EU members and 39 percent of imports came from the EU.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the EU accounts for around three-quarters of Turkey's FDI.<sup>22</sup>

Slowing economic growth, caused by external and internal factors, has heightened the importance of Turkey's links to Europe. Increasing unemployment and inflation as well as declining exports, currency rates, and tourism revenues have hindered Turkey's economy. According to a recent survey, two-thirds of Turks are unhappy with economic developments in their country.<sup>23</sup> In light of these vulnerabilities and public sentiments, AKP leaders

will seek to preserve Turkish-EU economic ties and protect them from political conflicts.

A diplomatic spat between the Turkish and Dutch governments in March 2017 over Turkish politicians campaigning for Turkey's presidential referendum in the Netherlands highlights AKP efforts to shield economic interests. While senior Turkish officials were condemning the Dutch government, Turkey's Minister for EU Affairs told *Reuters* that Dutch companies would not be impacted and the Dutch private sector and tourists were not part of the crisis.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, the EU-Turkey customs union encourages the AKP to maintain economic ties. In 2017, AKP officials are working with the EU on the long-awaited modernization of the customs union, despite the party's dissatisfaction with the EU process and leaders' public rhetoric against EU members for their unsupportive response to last year's failed coup attempt. In December 2016, the European Commission proposed launching talks to modernize the existing 20-year-old agreement with Turkey. Turks will work with the EU to expand the customs union to include trade in agricultural products, service sectors, and public procurement.<sup>25</sup>

Ankara also wants to be included in the decision-making process on EU free trade agreements, which Turkey is bound to uphold. The updating of the customs union represents an area for real progress in Turkey-EU relations and might lessen Turkish discontent with the accession process.

AKP leaders' interest in making Turkey a key energy hub also encourages Turkey's economic rela-

tions with the EU. European nations are working to diversify their energy sources and are a prime market for oil and natural gas transported through Turkey from northern Iraq, Azerbaijan, and potentially Israel. While EU candidacy is not necessary for the development of energy ties, it likely supports cooperation on energy security. The EU and Turkey have held two High-Level Energy Dialogues, and the 2016 meetings focused on the integration of the Turkish energy market with the EU.<sup>26</sup> Turkish officials will continue to press for


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energy cooperation and seek to insulate it from political tensions.

Turkey, as a candidate country, benefits from EU funding through the European Commission's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) appropriations. The EU uses this assistance to support reforms in the “enlargement countries” with financial and technical help. Between 2007 and 2013, the EU spent over \$5 billion funding projects tied to political reforms; socio-economic and agricultural development; and education, employment, and social policies.<sup>27</sup> IPA funds for Turkey between 2014 and 2020 are set at a total of \$4.98 billion, which averages to more than \$700 million a year.<sup>28</sup> IPA funds provide another reason for the Turkish government to maintain the accession process rather than abandon it.

The AKP's concern over alienating voters and historic links between the party's rise to power and its EU policy also feed into party leaders' hesitation to abandon the accession process. An August 2016 Metropoll revealed that 42.4 percent of Turks





believed Turkey should not be an EU member and 41.8 believed it should be. It was the first time the number of those against membership was greater than those for it. Erdoğan, often the harshest Turkish critic of the EU, and other party officials are sensitive to public attitudes. AKP politicians' mixed messages on EU relations likely reflect their efforts to avoid alienating supporters on either side. In the run up to the April 16, 2017 referendum on a presidential system, Erdoğan said Turkey may review its relations with “fascist and cruel EU.” At the same time, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said relations between Turkey and EU member states would “relatively normalize” after elections in Europe, suggesting a return to the status quo. Erdoğan’s statements often appear aimed at showing him as the strong man standing up to the West, leaving other officials to offer more conciliatory comments.

Erdoğan has repeatedly threatened to end Turkey’s accession process but appears unwilling to take the steps himself. EU membership was a central goal in his party’s original platform and the collapse of the process could be viewed as an AKP failure. Erdoğan looks to make the Turkish public or the EU the scapegoat for the demise of Turkey’s membership bid. Multiple times in the past year, he has discussed the idea of a Turkish referendum on EU membership that would place the decision in the public’s hands. Additionally, Erdoğan’s proposal to hold a referendum on reinstating the death penalty also plays into his efforts to deflect responsibility. EU leaders have clearly stated that restoring the death penalty would halt Turkey’s membership talks. Ankara would

respond angrily if the EU decided to freeze or end Turkish negotiations, but might privately welcome being able to point the finger at the EU for the collapse of the process.

### What Does the Future Hold for the AKP’s EU Policies?

Turkish-EU relations will remain complicated and tense as both sides attempt to manage disagreements and determine a way forward. Erdoğan will continue to press for progress in accession negotiations and the contentious visa liberalization issue as well as call on EU leaders to decide if they want Turkey as a member. In his recent Europe Day written statement, Erdoğan said Turkey becoming a member of the EU is a “strategic target based on mutual respect, quality, and a win-win concept.”<sup>29</sup> Despite these words, he is unlikely to make an effort to implement reforms or undertake additional required policy changes to help reinvigorate the process.

On top of Erdoğan’s intransigence, European concerns over the fairness of the April referendum on the presidential system and rule of law in Turkey leave little room for improvement in the stalled accession process. However, updating the customs union might be the best opportunity for

headway in Turkish-EU relations. It might also provide a route for Turkey to move away from full membership to a “privileged partnership” with the EU. Ankara previously saw the partnership concept as the EU treating Turkey as a second-class citizen. However, Erdoğan could warm to the idea as the

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United Kingdom moves from member to partner as part of Brexit and develops an alternative path from membership. The AKP could also use the success of an updated customs union to buffer an AKP decision to end accession negotiations. AKP leaders could look to build a partnership around economic interests that would limit EU input in Turkish domestic politics—a major irritant for Erdoğan.

Even if Turkey and the EU make progress on the customs union, it will not be a quick process and relations will remain strained. Erdoğan will maintain his negative public rhetoric against the EU to deflect criticism from his and the AKP's policies. He will continue to threaten to end the EU-Turkey migration deal unless the EU moves forward on

visa liberalization, but is unlikely to follow through because Turkey needs the economic aid provided under the agreement. Turkish demands for visa liberalization are untenable as Ankara is unwilling to meet the EU's key demand for changes to its anti-terrorism law. Talk of reinstating the death penalty through the parliament or a referendum will add to tensions and further damage Turkey's reputation with European politicians and publics. It is unclear if Erdoğan is serious about the reintroduction of the death penalty or is merely looking to placate his public. Deep political, security, and economic interests will help prevent ties from breaking but are unlikely to improve them.

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