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# FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

## Italy

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## 1. History of EU-Turkey Relations<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Widespread support for Turkish EU-membership

Since the European Council in Helsinki recognized Turkey as a candidate country for EU membership in 1999, Italian governments have been generally supportive and often enthusiastic of Turkey's EU bid. Strong economic ties bond the two countries: Italy is currently Turkey's fourth biggest trade partner, while Italian investors consider Turkey an attractive market. Overall, the trade balance has been in favour of Italy, with exports rising at USD 10.6 million in 2015 and the trade surplus of Italy at USD 3.7 million for the same year. Additionally, in 2015 Italian investment continued growing, with 1,300 companies and firms operating in Turkey. Economic interests are so strong that some spoke of an "economic lobby" advocating for Turkey's accession to the EU. Moreover, Italy has traditionally looked at transatlantic and European integrations as mutually reinforcing trends. Cooperation with Turkey has been considered crucial to strengthen transatlantic ties also in the light of Ankara's contribution to Western security. As far as political stakeholders are concerned, there are some differences in the political spectrum as for the rhetoric used to advocate Turkey joining the EU. While centre-right parties have traditionally put emphasis on economic and strategic factors, centre-left parties makes use of the rhetoric on Turkey being a bridge towards the Middle East, not only in economic and strategic terms, but also culturally speaking. Another factor underlined by the Italian centre-left is that of the common "Mediterranean identity" of Italy and Turkey, combined with the fact that Turkey's accession to the EU might have the positive effect of shifting the European Union's focus from east to south.

The widespread support notwithstanding, there are still some significant sources of skepticism. On the right of the Italian political spectrum, many parties oppose Turkey's membership on the basis of cultural, identity and religious reason. The Northern Lega (Lega Nord, LN) is perhaps the most vocal in opposing Turkey's European bid: the regionalist, xenophobic, and eurosceptic party bases its argument on religious and identity matters. While firmly declaring that Turkey is not culturally, socially and geographically a European country, leaders of the LN have threatened to call for a referendum if Turkey was ever successful in completing its access negotiations. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, some left parties criticize Turkey's poor democratic record and the minority rights violations going on in the country in particular against the Kurdish minority in the south-east. Finally, the presence of the Vatican City had an influence on the Italian positions on EU-Turkey's relations. Relations between Turkey and the Vatican have been generally positive since Pope Benedict XVI's visit in 2006; however, Italy's strong ties with the Catholic Church has clear influence on the so-called "Christian public opinion" in the country.

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<sup>1</sup> The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

Although this section of the public opinion has been highly divided so far, it could be the basis for a large “no-Turkey-in-the-European-Union” movement. In recent years, polls registered a decrease in positive opinion on Turkey among both the elites and the public opinion. Turkish growing authoritarian government and religious radicalization confirmed the fears of some sectors of the public opinion; besides, opposition against Muslim migration, combined with the raise of populist movements in Europe resulted in scepticism being on the rise.

## **1.2. Cultural and identity issues dominate the public debate**

When discussing Turkey and its relations with the EU, identity issues together with value-based discussions dominate the debate in Italy. Pro-Turkey arguments, in particular the economic one, have so far kept political sceptics restrained, but could not neutralize doubts among the Italian public opinion. General sceptical patterns toward Turkey follow cultural and identity concerns: Turkey is still perceived as an important “other”, particularly when it comes to Europe alleged Christian identity. Christianity is perceived not only as a religion, but also as a cultural marker that provides with a key to interpret Europe’s political future. Cultural and religious issues are comparatively more important in Italy than in other EU countries when it comes to European enlargement. These sources of resistance and opposition from public opinion reflect on some media outlets. Information on Turkey in the Italian media is scarce, ill-informed and often influenced by stereotypical views. Numerous studies over Italian coverage of Turkey have found out that it is in the news only when something internationally relevant happens, rather than there being an ongoing debate on Turkey.

## **1.3. Interest-based discussion dominates the debate at political level**

There is a marked gap between the political elites and the public opinion – i.e. public-elite opinion cleavage when it comes to discussing Turkey’s relevance for the EU. When discussing the main policy areas key to EU-Turkey relations, an interest-based discussion dominates the debate at political and government level. Besides economic considerations, Turkey is still perceived as a strategic partner to ensure the stability and security of the Mediterranean and an important energy-hub. Increasingly more due to the instability of the Middle East, Turkey’s geo-political value has become that of a reliable partner, although this might change in the near future due to Turkey’s internal instability. On the other hand, the Italian public is keener on the cultural and identity differences between Turkey and the EU. Although utilitarian calculations of the costs and benefits of enlargement might play a role in shaping Italian public’s opinion on Turkey, identity-based concerns have a greater role in fueling Turcoscepticism.

## 2. Future of EU-Turkey relations

### 2.1. Italy is concerned with Turkey's growing authoritarianism

In recent years, the growing authoritarianism in Turkey combined with a perceived Islamic radicalization in the country contributed to exacerbate concerns among political and economic stakeholders. Particularly after the July 2016 attempted coup, the Italian government joined other European leaders in expressing solidarity with Ankara, while calling on Ankara to ensure democracy and the rule of law in the country. Notwithstanding significant differences according to political and ideological orientation, even the centre-left, historically more inclined to support Turkey's bid to the European Union, voiced concern over the deteriorated situation in Turkey. Gianni Pittella, member of the European Parliament with the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) was among the proponents of the November 2016 motion to the European Parliament to freeze accession talks with Turkey to condemn the Turkish government's disproportional repressive measures; he declared that the EU institutions could not give a blind eye anymore to violations committed by Ankara. The 5 Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) and LN expressed similar views, although in a much more radical way. The key concerns of the Italian political elites regard mainly Turkey's human rights violations in the Kurdish populated area and the growing authoritarianism of its government, in particular in the light of Ankara's efforts to pass a Presidential system. In addition, also the "economic lobby" follows with concern the deteriorating situation in the country and the political instability that could soon enough impact its economic growth. Turkey's domestic issues contributed to a centrifugal rhetoric, marking a slight convergence between the position of the political-economic elite and that of the population as a whole.

### 2.2. Turkey as a strategic partner

Italian political and economic elites consider Turkey a "strategic partner"; however, the concept of differentiated integration, which Italian scholars have debated in the past years, does not feature as an ongoing debate among political elites. Recent events in the EU might soon change this. The Brexit vote sparked off a debate in the EU and in Italy on the future asset of relations with the UK. If the UK became a model for a differentiated integration, it might pave the way for a similar arrangement with Turkey. In addition, this concept might feature in the near future should EU-Turkey relations further deteriorate.

### 2.3. A chance of a nationalistic closure and growth in Turkoscepticism

In 2015, after a long period of growing mistrust and estrangement, the migration crisis reminded the EU of the geo-strategic importance of Turkey and cooperation over migration management determined a rapprochement between the two. Although the Italian government does not have great beneficial interests in the EU-Turkey deal on migration management, Rome welcomed it as a positive step to the rapprochement between the two and to the reopening of EU-Turkey

negotiations. As far as Italy is concerned, Turkey is as a strategic partner in migration management rather than an origin country for migrants; the issue of Turkish migration is perceived in Italy less than in other countries such as Germany, where the Turkish community is much greater. However, migration from Turkey is an issue as far as Italians perceive it as a migration from a Muslim majority country. According to the 2015 Eurobarometer survey, the top important issue facing the EU according to Italian citizens is immigration and 50% is against further enlargement of the EU. Security concerns and the fear of irregular migration, in particular the Muslim one, were well played by those political forces that are opposing Turkey's bid to the European Union.

Besides the migration crisis, some Turkish domestic events affected the debate on EU-Turkey relations. The Republic of Turkey is at a crucial stage in its history: the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), trusted by the EU among others to make Turkey a trustworthy partner in the Middle East, is becoming increasingly authoritarian. After the attempted military coup of July 2016, the government implemented severe purges, jailing thousands among public servants, military personnel, members of the judiciary, academicians, and journalists. As mentioned above, these Turkish domestic developments are severely worrying the Italian political elites and public opinion. There was some tension between Ankara and Rome in the summer 2016, due to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's accusation over an Italian investigation into accusations that his son Bilal laundered money. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi reacted firmly, declaring that Italy has an independent legal system and its judges answer to the Italian constitution, not to the Turkish president.

As far as Italy is concerned, the country is still struggling to get out of the economic crisis: it is suffering from slow economic growth and high unemployment rate, in particular among younger generations. The political situation does not seem to be in a better shape, with the negative vote on the constitutional referendum and Matteo Renzi resigning, there is a high chance of early elections. The rise of populist movements in Europe has been mirrored by the raise of the M5S, which has drawn together the malcontent and might pose a serious challenge to the now-in-power Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD). These changes might result in an overall nationalistic closure of the Italian society, with a consequent growth in Turkoscepticism.

### **3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene**

#### **3.1. Italy-Turkey position in the global scene**

Turkey's strategic significance reveals energetically in times of political changes and conflict in the neighbourhood, due to its unique geopolitical position. Conflicts in Ukraine and the Caucasus did not change Italy's views on Turkey's role and its relations with the EU: Ankara and Rome condemned Russian's annexation of Crimea and recognized Georgia's territorial integrity. The warming up of relations between Moscow and Ankara in the past year did not change Turkey's

stand on these issues, or those on the security in the Black Sea. On the other hand, the position of Italy and Turkey is often – but not always – divergent for conflicts in the MENA region. As far as the Middle East is concerned, Italy has historically followed the US initiatives while Turkey responded in a much more complex way. Since the then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu elaborated the “zero problems” strategic doctrine, Turkey worked to develop positive relations with neighboring countries such as Syria, Iraq, Iran and the Arab world in general. Although the Arab springs challenged this strategy, many still see a shift in Turkey’s Middle East policy, not clearly linked, if not delinked from, its persisting Western/European strategic priorities. Turkey’s decision to intervene in the Syrian quagmire might confirm this trend. Critics of Turkey in Italy and in other European member states see this shift as a manifestation of what many call Turkey’s neo-ottomanism – i.e. a new foreign policy that allegedly promotes a greater engagement within regions formerly under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, motivated by Muslim solidarity and a re-appreciation of Turkey’s Islamic vocation. Differences in the approach to conflicts in the Middle East notwithstanding, Italian and Turkish positions converge on some conflicts in North Africa. In war-torn Libya, Ankara and Rome agree on recognizing the Government of National Accord of Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj as the sole authority in the country, and participate in the UN Support Mission.

### **3.2. A potential of strategic cooperation in the Mediterranean**

Rome and Ankara have a multidimensional cooperation relationship that many Italian politicians describe as a “strategic partnership”, based on two main pillars: Europeanism and Atlanticism. Cooperation within NATO translated into several joint missions while providing with a common strategic and political view. Another important dimension of this relationship is that of the Mediterranean. Cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean area is of extreme importance for the two countries to ensure its stability and security.

Italy and Turkey can effectively cooperate in the Mediterranean dimension to manage migration flows in particular in this period of crisis. This translates in border security cooperation to stem irregular flows of migration and target organized criminal and smuggling networks. Economy and trade is another important dimension of cooperation between Ankara and Rome; as discussed above, there is a high level of interpenetration of the two’s economies. Finally yet importantly, energy is becoming a major area of cooperation: the transport of natural gas to Italy via Turkey has increased in volume in the last years. The construction of the Trans Atlantic Pipeline will further increase the relevance of Turkey-Italy cooperation in this sector.

### **3.3. Global issues might challenge this partnership**

In the years following the Arab Spring, Turkey was considered in the EU and in Italy as a model of democracy and of a moderate Muslim country. However, this might be rapidly changing not only due to Turkey’s domestic events but also because of its alleged new foreign policy agenda. The Italian government welcomed Turkey’s renewed relations with Israel, and the warming up of

relations between Moscow and Ankara does not seem to have changed the Turkish government's stance on its alliance with NATO. However, the question on whether Turkey is saying bye to the West, and in particular to the EU, to look for other alliances is yet to be answered.

While Turkey and the EU/Italy have a strong bilateral and multilateral partnership in several neighbouring regions, a different geopolitical focus might drift their strategic projection apart. In the midst of several domestic and global challenges, EU-Turkey cooperation might be tested in the near future. The current situation in the Middle East and in particular in Syria will play a major role in shaping Turkey's relations with the EU in the near future. The war in Syria is connected to proxy issues followed with concern in Italy, such as the migrant crisis and the terrorist threat. Growing security concerns in the EU and Italy might represent an occasion for Turkey to be confirmed – or not – as a strategic partner. This making or breaking stage of EU-Turkey relations might also shape the Italian perception of it at both political-economical and public level.

### Links & Further Readings:

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