

**FEUTURE Voices****Beyond the storm in EU-Turkey relations<sup>1</sup>**

**Nathalie Tocci, IAI  
Scientific Coordinator**

When Turkey is discussed in the European Union, and vice versa, all talk is about conflict, divergence and mutual recrimination nowadays. Political tones on both sides are acrimonious, high-level contact is circumscribed, and public opposition to Turkey's EU membership stands at a staggering 77 percent in the Union. Turks too, who in the mid-2000s backed EU membership by 74 percent, today reject the proposition by a slim majority. Taken together even a staunch supporter of Turkey's European future like myself now has second thoughts.

Indeed it is difficult to imagine current dynamics culminating in Turkey's EU membership as we now know it. Turkey no longer can be reasonably described as fulfilling the Copenhagen political criteria advocating democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. On its side, Turkey understandably distrusts the EU for its lack of credibility, double standards and constantly moving goalposts particularly since the 2004 enlargement. Add to this the fact that the Cyprus peace process, premised on the goal of achieving a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation, has reached a dead end. If the last round of talks, which featured an unprecedented alignment of the political stars, failed, maybe the parties, notably the Republic of Cyprus, should plainly admit it is not interested in this kind of deal. Dulcis in fundo, is the sharp deterioration in bilateral German-Turkish ties, featuring obscene accusations from Ankara to its European partners best left unspoken. Sum this up and even the most ardent believer of Turkey's European future struggles to keep the faith alive.

Yet as the Feuture project has revealed ([www.feuture.eu](http://www.feuture.eu)), when the relationship between the EU and Turkey is gauged in its entirety, a far more complex picture emerges. True, at the political level the relationship stands at a historic low. Never has Turkey's European aspiration been so vacuous and the EU's distancing so acute. But when other dimensions of the relationship are factored in, the picture changes significantly. Political sparring notwithstanding, there has been an unstoppable convergence in trade, financial and knowledge flows. Beneath the political surface, structural economic and human indicators point towards an inexorable coming together between the EU and Turkey. Add to this, the deepening cooperation in areas such as migration, energy, foreign policy and counter-terrorism. On many of these issues, the EU and Turkey do not always see eye to eye: their cooperation is not premised on convergence, but rather on the respective awareness of mutual needs. All this suggests that the EU-Turkey relationship is actually so close and so important that it is unlikely to fall below a political threshold of no return.

How to make sense of this apparent contradiction? A mono-dimensional lens tricks us into believing that the EU-Turkey relationship will land eventually into a single organising logic – be it of conflict or of conflict. But if we wear multidimensional spectacles instead, it becomes clear that over centuries, not just years, the Europe-Turkey relationship has been marked by an ever-changing balance

between conflict and convergence. Oscillation and coexistence between conflict and convergence captures the very essence of the (un)steady state of Turkey's place in Europe.

At first glance this is of little use to political leaders who must work towards a definitive institutional relationship between the EU and Turkey. It is an observation that does not immediately answer the burning questions of whether the EU should suspend accession negotiations, upgrade its customs union, or limit itself to cooperating with Turkey transactionally on issues such as counter-terrorism, energy or migration.

But upon deeper reflection perhaps it is of some guidance. If an institutional relationship between the EU and Turkey is to capture the perennial oscillation between conflictual and convergent dynamics, then it ought to have two features. On the one hand, the institutional framework for the EU-Turkey relationship of the future should be tight enough to embed and deepen convergent trends and dynamics, most notably in the economic sphere. At the same time it should provide an overall rules-based framework to anchor Turkey's democrats and reformists, today a harassed minority but in future hopefully not. On the other hand, the future relationship should be loose enough to allow functional cooperation on areas where interests overlap while not necessarily converging or coinciding, such as migration, energy and security. Such "looseness" should also be such as to allow but containing the oscillations, and at times the conflicts, that are bound to persist in the political relationship moving forward.

What could such a relationship look like? Full membership as we know it today does not fit the bill. If moments of divergence are endemic in the contested EU-Turkey relationship, then Turkey's membership in a deepened Eurozone, a common migration and asylum policy, and a burgeoning security and defence union as outlined by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, may become a straightjacket. Yet, it would be detrimental if the relationship became purely transactional, featuring cooperation where interests overlap without any rules-based anchoring or institutional safety net preventing political dissonance from slipping into outright conflict.

Charting the middle way, an upgraded customs union would provide political anchoring and ensure a rules-based framework that would deeply transform Turkey's political economy in key sectors such as services, procurement, state aid and trade dispute settlement. It is unlikely that Turkey's current political class would be willing to embark upon such a deep transformation of Turkey's political economy. But if so, it is up to the EU to call the bluff. An upgraded customs union would also provide the launching pad for Turkey's progressive integration into the various facets of the single market and its future developments in key sectors such as energy, climate, digital, infrastructure or space. Viewed from this angle, given that approximately 30 of the 35 chapters in Turkey's accession negotiations pertain directly or indirectly to the single market, formally suspending such talks would make little long-term sense. At the same time, keeping the process alive would not imply Turkey's eventual membership in the Union's federalising core in areas such as fiscal and monetary policy, migration and asylum, and security and defence. It would therefore allow for cooperation on these areas without unrealistically assuming Turkey's inexorable political convergence with the EU.

All this would be far-fetched were it not for the fact that the EU, regardless of Turkey, will likely move towards a differentiated future. Differentiated integration has always been a European reality, be it through the Eurozone, Schengen or the upcoming Permanent Structured Cooperation on defence. Only recently though has it become a political vision for the relaunch of the European project, most explicitly espoused by French President Emmanuel Macron. If differentiation will mark the Union of tomorrow and if within it Turkey's contested relationship with Europe could find its

institutional home, not exploring, or worst still closing off today the pathway to get there would be dangerously unwise.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was initially published on <http://www.ekathimerini.com/225030/opinion/ekathimerini/comment/beyond-the-storm-in-eu-turkey-relations> and <http://www.kathimerini.gr/937623/article/k-blogs/security-bulletin/sxeseis-ee-toyrkias-meta-thn-kataigida>, January 2018.

# ABOUT FEUTURE

FEUTURE sets out to explore fully different options for further EU-Turkey cooperation in the next decade, including analysis of the challenges and opportunities connected with further integration of Turkey with the EU.

To do so, FEUTURE applies a comprehensive research approach with the following three main objectives:

1. Mapping the dynamics of the EU-Turkey relationship in terms of their underlying historical narratives and thematic key drivers.
2. Testing and substantiating the most likely scenario(s) for the future and assessing the implications (challenges and opportunities) these may have on the EU and Turkey, as well as the neighbourhood and the global scene.
3. Drawing policy recommendations for the EU and Turkey on the basis of a strong evidence-based foundation in the future trajectory of EU-Turkey relations.

FEUTURE is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Wessels, Director of the Centre for Turkey and European Union Studies at the University of Cologne and Dr. Nathalie Tocci, Director of Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome.

The FEUTURE consortium consists of 15 renowned universities and think tanks from the EU, Turkey and the neighbourhood.

*Coordination Office at University of Cologne:*

Project Director: Dr. Funda Tekin  
Project- and Financial Manager: Hanna-Lisa Hauge  
Email: [wessels@uni-koeln.de](mailto:wessels@uni-koeln.de)

Website: [www.feuture.eu](http://www.feuture.eu)

 [facebook.com/feuture.eu](https://facebook.com/feuture.eu)

 [@FEUTURE\\_EU](https://twitter.com/FEUTURE_EU)



This project has received funding from the *European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme* under grant agreement No 692976.