

*FEUTURE Voices***WHAT DO TURKEY-EU RELATIONS MEAN IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBORHOOD?****DUSTIN GILBREATH***Deputy Research Director of CRRC-Georgia*

As Justin Louis, Bennett Clifford, and I argued in [our FEUTURE Paper No 11](#), “Politics and Turkey-EU Relations: Drivers from the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods” most of the potential political drivers of the Turkey-EU relationship from the eastern neighborhood are unlikely to have much impact on these relations in the medium term. But what are the implications of the Turkey-EU relationship for the eastern neighborhood? They seem to be just as minimal as the eastern neighbourhood drivers’ on the EU-Turkey relationship. However, Turkey-EU relations do have a small, indirect impact if Turkey’s, the EU’s, and the eastern neighborhood’s relations with Russia are taken into account.

Below, I argue that if the EU-Russia relationship improves in any scenario outside of a wildcard situation such as a change of government in Russia or the EU developing a much greater tolerance for authoritarianism, then the impact for the eastern neighborhood is likely negative. The same is true of Turkey-Russia relations. However, if Turkey-EU relations improve, the result is likely a net benefit for the neighborhood, because it will likely lead to greater Turkish support of the region that balances out Russia’s influence, again assuming no wild card scenarios emerge. However, if Turkey-EU relations deteriorate, it is likely a net negative for the eastern neighborhood, because it will drive Turkey closer to Russia and hence, remove some constraints on Russia’s actions in the neighborhood.

For the eastern neighborhood, Turkey and the EU matter

Relations with Turkey in the eastern neighborhood matter. For example, Turkey is an important trade partner for most countries in the eastern neighborhood. Turkey is Georgia’s second largest export market and largest source of imports.¹ Even for Armenia, which has historically painful

¹ <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/GEO/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>

¹ This article was originally published by El País on July 17, 2017 as part of this newspaper contribution to LENA, an alliance of European newspapers including Die Welt (Germany), El País (Spain), La Repubblica (Italy), Le Figaro (France), Le Soir (Belgium), Tages-Anzeiger and Tribune de Genève (both from Switzerland).



relations with Turkey, the country is the third largest source of imports.² Many people from Georgia and Azerbaijan migrate to Turkey for work. Security relations between many countries in the region and Turkey are strong. Besides the economic and security dimensions, Turkey has moderate political power in the region. For example, the suppression of Gülen associated schools has become a near policy imperative for the governments in the region, at the Turkish government's behest.

Relations with the EU also matter for many countries from the region. The aid the EU provides Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova is critical for their development. In Georgia, the main political issue (or at least one of them) is alignment with the West (and EU) versus alignment with Russia or the stocking horse of neutrality. Ukraine and Moldova among others in the region have similar political dynamics. Following Armenia's Velvet Revolution, the importance of the EU is likely to increase in the country as well.

For the eastern neighborhood, relations revolve around Russia

Though Turkey and the EU as independent actors matter for the eastern neighborhood, foreign policy revolves around Russia. Many of the countries in the eastern neighborhood have sizable migrant counts in Russia, which is reflected in the fact that economically important amounts of remittances flow from Russia to Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Russia is also an important market for and source of goods in each of these countries. The *lingua franca* in the region is Russian. Besides having military bases in some of the countries of the Eastern Partnership, Russia is a key player in the conflicts in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (be it as a party to the conflict, through weapons sales, or otherwise).

Each country's relationship with Russia impacts its relations with Turkey. For countries within the three ideal-types scenarios for the relationship used within the FEUTURE project – convergence (moving towards political and economic integration), cooperation (working together but not moving towards economic or political union), and conflict (what it sounds like) – the implications are slightly different. With countries that are conflicting with Russia, such as Georgia and Ukraine, Turkey provides an alternative to the politically fraught Russian market and political counter-balance in the region. For countries that are converging with Russia such as Belarus, the relationship's stability matters if they want to pursue their own interests in Turkey. And for those cooperating with Russia such as Armenia, things are more complicated, as are most relationships that do not resemble the ideal-types of convergence or conflict.

The EU-Russia relationship also matters

² <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/ARM/Year/2016/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>



The EU-Russia relationship is also important for the eastern neighborhood. While it has been a long time since EU-Russia relations could be described as good, if they ever were, the relationship has been on the decline. The Russia-Georgia 2008 August War; the ongoing conflict in Ukraine; the annexation of Crimea and the creation of two *de facto* puppet states in Ukraine; Russia's extensive election interference in Europe; and attempts to sow divide and chaos in Europe more generally have all lead to a decline in the EU-Russia relationship. The relationship does not seem likely to move towards cooperation in the near future, unless there is regime change in Russia or at least Putin leaves office – both unlikely events in the near to mid-term.

While a sad reality, the conflictual relationship between the EU and Russia is likely positive for those in the eastern neighborhood attempting to pursue a pro-Western foreign policy. It also is not so bad for those leaning more towards a pro-Russian orientation. It means that the EU is more inclined towards supporting countries in the region against Russian efforts at destabilization. Even for countries like Belarus with little pretension of pursuing a democratic course, the EU has an extensive presence that at least in part aims to balance out the country's relation with Russia. In practice, this leads to support for civil society, better governance, and technical assistance that aims to improve the situation surrounding everything from developing job descriptions for bureaucrats to better animal identification systems.

Turkey-Russia relations are also important

Turkey's interaction with Russia-related security concerns in the eastern neighborhood had until recently been protective, at least to a certain extent, as it generally aligned with Turkey's interests. During the 2008 August War between Georgia and Russia, Russia likely avoided inflicting damage on Adjara, the region on the Turkish-Georgian border, because Turkey has significant investment there and there is a sizeable Turkish migrant population. During Russia's annexation of Crimea, Turkey expressed concern for the treatment of Turkey's ethnic kin on the peninsula, the Crimean Tatars.

These incidents suggest two things about Turkey's security policy in the region. First, Turkey's engagement will focus on protecting its interests (surprise!). Second, if history tells us something about the future, Turkey's interests in the region are unlikely to be strong enough to push them to attempt to stop a conflict from taking place. In practice, this of course would depend on how strong Turkey's interests were in a given conflict. However, Turkey's projection of force on the whole has been to the benefit of the region through counter-balancing Russia.

Since Turkey has generally been positive for security in the neighborhood, the recent sale of a Russian defense system to Turkey is a negative sign. It was, if not a step back from NATO, at least a threat. If Turkey eschews projecting force against Russia in the region in favor of developing their security relationship further, the security of those looking west as well as Turkey's ethnic kin in Central Asia, on the whole, is likely to suffer.



Few, Russia aside, want this outcome. Even those countries with the closest ties to Russia such as Belarus have stepped up efforts to assert independence in recent years. However, if Turkey's relationship with the EU continues to decline while its relationship with Russia continues to improve, this is likely to push Turkey further away from the West and towards Russia. As a result, it would be reasonable to expect Turkey to view Russian interventions in the region with less of a critical eye, a net loss of security for many in the neighborhood.

Given the above, Turkey-EU relations do matter (a bit) for the region

This is where Turkey-EU relations matter. If they deteriorate, it is likely to further push Turkey towards Russia. That is unlikely to be positive for security in the region. If Turkey-EU relations move towards greater cooperation, however, this has the potential to lead to cooperation on issues of mutual interest with the EU in the eastern neighborhood, particularly as relates increased trade and security surrounding the conflicts in the eastern neighborhood that Turkey has a relatively strong interest in.

The Turkey-EU relationship is not critical for the eastern neighborhood just as the eastern neighborhood is not critical to the Turkey-EU relationship. That said, it does matter indirectly, and what is bad for the Turkey-EU relationship is likely to be bad for the neighborhood, at least when it comes to security for everyone besides Russia.

Given the above, what are the implications for the EU's Turkey policy? First, what is good for the Turkey-EU relationship, will likely be good for the eastern neighborhood. Of course, this comes with caveats like the EU not significantly changing its tolerance for human rights abuses and conflict in the neighborhood. Nonetheless, barring wild card scenarios, improvements in the Turkey-EU relationship will likely benefit the neighborhood. Second, through decreasing the incentives for Turkey's turn towards Russia, security will likely be enhanced in the eastern neighborhood. In practice, that means compromise on security issues to the extent possible. Third, even though good relations between Russia and the EU could lead the EU to influence Russian policy in the neighborhood in theory, this only seems plausible in an alternative universe given the facts on the ground at the moment. Fourth, the bad relations between the EU and Russia are likely to be good for the eastern neighborhood at the moment, because they lead to increased support from the EU to the eastern neighborhood.

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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.

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