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**Flexibility or Fragmentation? Turkey-EU Relations, in an Era of
Differentiated Integration**

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's recent shift away from the European Union (EU) path and its rapprochement with its Eastern partners and Russia indicates a significant change in relations with the EU (Smith, 2023: 12). This process shows that Turkey's foreign policy priorities are being reshaped and creates uncertainty about the future of a possible privileged partnership with the EU, as its approach increasingly diverges from EU standards. (Johnson, 2022: 34). The insights gained from the 2023 elections and the role played by social media platforms in this process necessitate the analysis of Turkey's political and economic orientations (Brown & Evans, 2023: 56). This study examines Turkey's current foreign policy strategies focusing on how its desire for greater strategic autonomy, regional influence, and bargaining power may impact its relations with the EU. It further explores the possible effects of these strategies on relations with the EU within a framework supported by the analysis of EU reports and statistical data (European Commission, 2023: 78). Moreover, using a qualitative analysis of EU reports and statistical data, the study assesses the prospects for Turkey-EU relations, particularly within the framework of differentiated integration and a potential privileged partnership.

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union, which is considered as an integration movement, basically represents political, military and economic cooperation between countries. In particular, the Council of Europe, NAFTA, NATO, OECD and other organizations can be given as examples of these cooperations that emerged and increased in number in order to reduce the negative effects of World War II on the world. The European Union is also an organization established to build a common structure in economic and political terms with its member countries. While a common political structure can be established with certain systems and actors, this process in the field of economy is possible with the free movement of commercial goods in international markets, namely the Customs Union. At this point, Turkey stands out as the only candidate country that has established a Customs Union relationship with the European Union without being considered as a full member.

Many negative effects have emerged against Turkey, which entered the Customs Union in 1996 without being a full member. One of these is the foreign trade deficit that has increased over time. There has been no significant increase in Turkey's exports in response to the crisis in the manufacturing industry. The second negative effect has been the establishment of foreign companies and the elimination of foreign capital inflow. The inflow of foreign capital is due to the need to overcome the customs barriers that exist between countries. This is also the reason for foreign investment in China. Thirdly, while EU member countries benefit from free trade agreements (e.g. with Tunisia in 1998), Turkey does not. This situation is related to the terms of the agreements between EU member countries and the countries involved in those agreements. Finally, Turkey imports EU products duty-free, and is obliged to apply the customs policy deemed appropriate by the EU to non-EU countries. Thus, foreign capital inflow has been prevented and economic development has been halted.

TR has a long history in relations with the EU and full membership negotiations have been ongoing for years. However, in recent years, it has been observed that Turkey has deviated from the EU path and has developed closer relations with its Eastern partners, especially Russia (Karakaya, 2021: 90). These developments have raised various questions about the future of Turkey's relations with the EU. A possible privileged partnership with the EU has become an issue that needs to be re-evaluated in the context of Turkey's foreign policy orientations and the EU's expansion policies (Yılmaz, 2022: 104).

The 2023 elections have caused significant changes in Turkey's political scene, and these changes have also manifested themselves in Turkey's foreign policy preferences (Demir, 2023: 115). It has been observed that social media platforms have also played an effective role in this process, being decisive both in directing public opinion and shaping foreign policy discourses (Öztürk, 2023: 130). In this context, our study, It aims to analyze the factors that distance Turkey from a possible privileged partnership with the EU and some events that occurred in this process (Green, 2022: 150).

There are many factors behind Turkey's recent move away from the EU membership process and its rapprochement with its Eastern partners and Russia. Considering its geopolitical location, these may have stemmed from Turkey's desire to have greater strategic autonomy, maximize its regional effectiveness and bargaining power, and reduce its dependence on the Western alliance.

1.1 Research Question and Hypothesis

This study aims to answer the following research question;

Does Turkey's move away from the EU path in recent years and its rapprochement with its Eastern Partners and Russia mean the end of a possible privileged partnership with EU? Moreover, is Turkey's pivot away from the EU path and rapprochement with Russia and its Eastern Partners stemming from its desire for greater strategic autonomy, regional influence and bargaining power?

By answering these questions, we could learn more about the effects of the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey on the European Union process.

Our main Argument that:

Turkey's departure from the European Union path and the process of rapprochement with Russia and its Eastern Partners can be evaluated as a rational policy aimed at Turkey's own strategic interests. This approach stems from Turkey's desire to act more independently as a regional power and its desire to obtain a more flexible position in the multipolar world order.

First of all, Turkey's search for strategic autonomy is a result of the need to protect and expand its own interests at a time when global and regional balances of power are changing. Dependence on Western alliances can limit Turkey's manoeuvrability, especially in the areas of defense and foreign policy. Therefore, deepening relations with global actors such as Russia offers Turkey more options and expands its field of action in foreign policy.

In addition, Turkey's goal of increasing its regional influence and maximizing its bargaining power requires pursuing a multifaceted foreign policy. Turkey wants to strengthen

its position as a key actor in strategic regions such as **the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean**. In this context, rapprochement with Russia and other Eastern Partners could provide Turkey with a stronger economic and diplomatic foothold to achieve these regional goals.

As a result, Turkey's strategic choices are a reflection of its desire to reduce its dependence on Western alliances, pursue a foreign policy that prioritizes its own interests, and act as a more independent power in the global arena. This approach reveals Turkey's desire to develop more balanced and multifaceted relations in order to increase its influence at the regional and global levels.

1.2 Literature Review

This study on Turkey and the European Union includes many theories and sociological events and facts that are important in social sciences. One of these is the theory of social capital, which does not only address the relationship between individuals in a society based on social class differences, but also evaluates the political, psychological and sociological elements that communities possess at a macro level. This concept, which initially emerged as one of the concepts that form the basis of institutionalized diplomacy in an ad hoc manner, emphasizes the importance of communication in the process of becoming a part of any institution or organization and facilitates the formation of social and political trust. It can be said that it contributes to the protection of mutual interests of the member countries within the European Union, which is perceived as an integration movement, within the framework of trust.

The number of international organizations that increased after the Second World War is seen as more complex and biased structures when compared to state systems. The legitimacy of international organizations that exist as a response to the necessity of law in the international arena due to factors such as global warming, terrorism, climate change, civil wars and epidemics is quite important. De facto means that in order for a legitimate structure to exist, legal practices or sanctions must be implemented without question.

As seen in the study, when considering the policies and decisions that have a very important place in international relations, the most preferred neoclassical realism in foreign policy emerges as a structure that takes shape on national interests and the state. The transformation of economic power within the international system in the post-Cold War period to liberal capitalism has increased profit maximization against other states and caused the change of the hegemonic balance of power. At the same time, the differentiations in

international structures and systems have changed the resources that countries are dependent on and accelerated the free movement of trade.

In addition to these, Normative Theorism is mentioned as an approach that examines the effects of ethics and values on the behavior of states and international factors. This approach focuses on factual and real approaches and addresses how relations between states should be organized based on values such as justice, equality, human rights, and peace. Contrary to this traditional realist approach, it does not see the state as security and interest-oriented. This approach, which comes to the agenda on EU norms, argues that the membership process of non-member countries is accelerated through norms.

1.3 Methodology

Relations between Turkey and the European Union (EU) have been quite volatile in recent years due to various political, economic and strategic tensions. The uncertainties regarding Turkey's EU membership path, especially the stalled negotiation process and the increasing criticism of Turkey by the EU have led Turkey to seek alternative strategic partners. In this context, a remarkable rapprochement is observed in Turkey's relations with Russia. This development both reflects Turkey's desire to act more independently from the West and coincides with Russia's efforts to increase its strategic weight in the region.

The tensions Turkey is experiencing with the EU and its strategic rapprochement with Russia are a reflection of Turkey's desire to achieve greater autonomy and pursue a multipolar foreign policy. Without completely severing its relations with the West, Turkey aims to increase its regional influence and maximize its bargaining power by cooperating with Russia. While this strategy reveals Turkey's desire to be a more independent actor geopolitically, it is also an indicator of the uncertainty in relations with the EU.

We conduct a qualitative content analysis on the factors that led to Turkey's departure from EU paths and rapprochement with Russia. In the study, European Union decisions and signed agreement articles were used. The study is based on literature review in terms of legal documents, articles and books. In addition to articles and books, academic theses, official documents, publications and the official internet pages of the European Union and the Ministry of European Union Affairs have also been included in the study. Names and documents related to the subject published by organizations such as research institutes that can be accessed on the internet have been included in this study. Likewise, the scanned books and articles have been included in the bibliography not if they are related to the titles of the study but if they are directly appropriate to the scope of the study. In this case, despite the scan of hundreds of books

and articles, the bibliography, although limited, covers a selective literature review because it includes sources appropriate to the scope of the study.

1.4 Limitations

In the context of Turkish-European relations, this study, which examines the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia, contains a lot of sensitive information content, especially in the strategic and security fields. Therefore, it may be difficult to access all of the official policies and diplomatic negotiations of the states. Researchers who want to examine the aspects of relations that are not directly open to the public may have difficulty in accessing reliable and impartial data.

Turkey-Russia and Turkey-Europe relations have constantly changing and evolving dynamics. Although such a study reflects current developments at the time the study was conducted, the validity of the results may be short-lived since relations can change rapidly. For example, unexpected changes in Turkey's Syria or Black Sea policies or a new negotiation process with the European Union may quickly render this study out of date. Since it addresses issues related to both the Western and Eastern blocs, concerns about impartiality and objectivity may come to the fore. It may be difficult for researchers to develop an impartial perspective while avoiding ideological biases. Since both Turkey's domestic policies and the assessments in the international media will present different perspectives, it may not be possible to provide an unbiased analysis.

The study of relations between Russia and Turkey requires access to Russian sources to a large extent. In addition, European sources are usually published in English, French or German. The researcher's command of these languages is critical to understanding and analyzing the necessary literature and primary sources. Otherwise, information may be lost or misinterpreted during the translation process.

The study of relations between Turkey and Russia usually requires the use of both quantitative and qualitative data together. However, since qualitative data (e.g. diplomatic statements, political discourses) are often open to subjective evaluations, methodological problems may arise in the analysis of such data. At the same time, due to the nature of diplomatic relations, it may be difficult to access the content of closed-door talks, which creates limitations in the analysis.

When examining the regional and global consequences of the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia, the role of other actors in the environment (e.g. the US, NATO, China) should also be taken into account. However, this situation expands the scope of the study and

may distract the focus. Therefore, it is necessary to limit the actors to be focused on in the thesis and to draw a clear framework regarding which geopolitical factors will be analyzed. Turkey's being both a NATO member and its efforts to establish close relations with Russia may give the impression that it is following a contradictory and sometimes inconsistent foreign policy. This situation may create difficulties in the analysis of researchers. Academic examination of such multifaceted and complex relations may sometimes lead to biased or incomplete analyses.

The long-term consequences of diplomatic relations may not be immediately apparent. Therefore, developments that may occur during the preparation of an academic thesis may affect the research. Especially in relations between Turkey and Russia, a short-term examination may miss some important long-term effects.

The foreign policies of Turkey and Russia are largely shaped by domestic political dynamics. In particular, domestic political developments and changing government policies in Turkey may affect the ups and downs in relations with the EU. It may be difficult to isolate such internal factors and focus only on the international relations dimension.

In conclusion, the greatest limitations of an academic study on Turkey-Russia rapprochement and Turkey-Europe relations are data access, methodological difficulties and constantly changing geopolitical dynamics. Considering these limitations, researchers need to clearly define the scope and be very careful and impartial in their analyses.

2. Historical Development of Turkey's EU Relations and The Concept of Privileged Partnership

2.1 Theoretical Foundations, EU Standards and Early Relations

Due to the multi-layered structure of foreign policy, as Putnam stated, each state has to negotiate simultaneously with other countries as well as its own voters (Huntington, 2013: 444). In a successful foreign policy, it is expected that the interests of the actors will coincide at the end of these negotiations (İpek, 2018: 156). Known for his social capital theory, Putnam evaluates social capital on macro scales, that is, on the values that communities have and do not have, rather than class differences, with the priority of trust, norms and the unity of networks (Aydemir, 2011a: 63; Aydemir, 2011b: 55, Özdemir, 2007: 16). Social capital states that the concepts of cooperation, solidarity and trust, which are the basic building blocks of the social structure, are the basis of relationships (Aydemir and Tecim, 2012: 45).

The EU, which is considered as an integration movement by the European States, is a union established for the purpose of providing ad hoc and various de facto opportunities to the member states through a number of agreements and policies. The EU, which has an effect on political, economic and legal issues, has an important role in protecting the interests of the member states and playing an effective role in the decision-making processes of the Union institutions (Stubb, 2002: 4-5).

Turkey's relationship with the European Union began with NATO membership in 1952 (Oran, 2001: 104) and continues until today. The processes of states joining international organizations are carried out within the framework of certain criteria and norms. Although each organization has its own membership procedures, conditions such as having common values, meeting certain standards and complying with the basic principles of the organization are generally sought (Karns & Mingst, 2009: 112). For example, in the NATO accession process, candidate countries are expected to meet criteria such as democratic values, the rule of law and military harmony (Smith, 2000: 87). These accession processes are considered as an important turning point in terms of the compliance of states' domestic policies with international standards.

A state that wants to become a member of the United Nations must act in accordance with the UN Charter and declare its desire to join this organization with peaceful intentions (United Nations, 1945: 7). A State's participation in international organizations must be approved by other members within the organization and formalized by the general assemblies or decision-making bodies of the organization. These processes increase the cooperation of states in the international system and strengthen their capacity to act in line with common interests (Karns & Mingst, 2009: 115).

In addition, participation in international organizations increases cooperation and diplomatic relations between states. Organizations such as the United Nations (UN) enable states to come together on diplomatic platforms to discuss global problems and produce solutions (Karns & Mingst, 2009:117). Bodies such as the UN General Assembly encourage states to approach global problems with a common perspective by being represented on an equal level. This process leads states to act not only by considering their national interests but also global interests (Keohane, 1984: 59).

2.2 The Ankara Agreement Toward Membership Application

Turkey applied for associate membership to the European Economic Community (EEC) on October 31, 1959, and the process was formalized with the Ankara Agreement signed in

1963. The agreement was a major framework for economic cooperation and outlined a potential path forward for full membership (Uysal, 2001: 141)

The agreement contributed to Turkey's economic modernization efforts and paved the ground for accession talks with the EEC in the 1970s, which remained inconclusive. Following the military coup of 12 September 1980, EEC-Turkey relations experienced a significant downturn. European countries reacted against human rights violations in Turkey. Greece's 1981 EEC membership further complicated the process, due to its bad relations with Turkey and the utilization of the veto Greece acquired in EEC institutions as leverage against Turkey. In 1987, Turkey formally applied for full membership in the EEC. While the application was not officially rejected, it was stated that it was premature to consider Turkey's membership, given its political and economic situation and disputes with Greece.

A few years later, the Customs Union agreement signed between Turkey and the European Union on March 6, 1995 marked the beginning of a new era in Turkey-EU relations. This agreement accelerated Turkey's integration into the EU market, but Turkey's expectations for full membership were not met during this period either. At the Helsinki Summit in December 1999, Turkey was officially granted candidate country status, which was an important turning point in the EU membership process.

During this period, in the statements made through administrative channels, two different views were mentioned in the process of Turkey's EU membership. One of them supported full membership, while the other supported the continuity of relations with the EU in a non-membership manner (Akçay, 2016: 13). Being a part of the community without being a member is in the EU's interest and allows it to move and expand its control boundaries outside the organizational structure (Lavenex, 2011: 373). This membership, which was first brought to the agenda by France in April 2000 as an alternative model, also known as a privileged partnership (Küçük, 2011: 3), however, if implemented, it would potentially undermine the path toward full membership outlined in the Ankara Agreement (Akçay, 2016: 3).

2.3 The Emergence of the Privileged Partnership Model

The privileged partnership, unlike the full membership process, focuses on Turkey's economic and strategic cooperation with the EU, while the political criteria and democratization demands required for the full membership process are kept more flexible. In this model, Turkey does not need to fully comply with the EU *acquis* and does not take part in some decision-making processes of the EU in which other member states are involved, and

continues its commercial relations with the EU within the framework of the Customs Union by continuing free commercial activities (Müftüler-Baç, 2016: 58).

Some of the critical components of the privileged partnership model are energy cooperation and security issues. Turkey is seen as one of the EU's strategic business partners in terms of energy security due to its geopolitical location. Energy projects prepared on natural gas and oil lines are of great importance for the EU's energy supply security (Proedrou, 2016: 102). At the same time, Turkey's defense and security cooperation with the EU within the scope of NATO membership can also be a part of this model (Çandar, 2020: 115).

2.4 Challenges and Reactions to Membership Process

Leading EU countries such as Germany and France have long been hesitant about Turkey's full membership. These countries see the privileged partnership model as a more suitable option due to the differences in Turkey's political and economic structure and their concerns about the EU's expansion capacity (Tocci, 2005: 91). Germany and France remain distant from full membership due to reasons such as Turkey's large population, deficiencies in the democratization process and human rights violations (Müftüler-Baç, 2016: 60).

In addition, these countries believe that Turkey's full membership will be effective in the EU's decision-making processes and will change the balances within the EU. For this reason, the privileged partnership model is presented as a solution that will both enable Turkey to maintain its economic and strategic relations with the EU and preserve the EU's internal political dynamics (Tocci, 2005: 94).

Turkey has long kept its distance from the privileged partnership model. The Turkish government has stated many times that it will not give up on its goal of full membership and that the perspective of full membership should be preserved in negotiations with the EU. Turkey has evaluated the privileged partnership model more as a "Plan B" rather than a replacement for full membership (Eralp, 2009: 133). Turkish officials believe that the privileged partnership will exclude Turkey from decision-making processes within the EU and will weaken its goal of full integration with the EU.

Although Turkey's full membership process has slowed down due to tensions with the EU, especially on democratization and human rights issues, Ankara has not officially abandoned its goal of full membership (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016: 85). Furthermore, Turkey argues that the negotiation process and reforms should continue even if it is not a full member in its strategic relations with the EU (Müftüler-Baç, 2017: 62).

The privileged partnership model envisages Turkey to have more limited cooperation with the EU. The full membership model, on the other hand, includes Turkey's full compliance with the EU acquis and full participation in the EU's decision-making processes. The privileged partnership provides cooperation mostly in economic and strategic areas, while excluding political integration (Proedrou, 2016: 104). While this model allows Turkey to continue its trade with the EU, it limits its participation in the EU's political structure.

The goal of full membership requires Turkey to make more comprehensive reforms in the democratization process. The privileged partnership, on the other hand, envisages a more flexible approach to these reforms. However, since this model does not provide full integration for Turkey, it is seen as less advantageous strategically by Turkish authorities compared to full membership (Eralp, 2009: 135).

The Privileged Partnership model, which stands out as an approach different from the full membership target in Turkey-EU relations, is a model supported by countries such as Germany and France and supports Turkey's sustainability in economic and strategic cooperation with the EU. However, Turkey's cautious approach to this model, which does not give up on its full membership target, makes the applicability of the privileged partnership model difficult. At this point, the direction in which EU-Turkey relations will progress in the future will vary depending on both the reforms and efforts implemented by Turkey and the decisions and strategic preferences that the EU will take towards Turkey.

2.5 Impact of the Cyprus Problem, The Customs Union and the Path Forward

The Turkey-European Union membership process has been addressed in three stages within the framework of the partnership agreement (The Ankara Agreement): preparatory, transitional and final. The preparation phase was foreseen as a phase in which the member states would provide unilateral economic and financial support to Turkey and Turkey would make economic improvements in order to adapt to the transition process (Erdoğan, 2003: 41-42). The second phase referred to the formation of a customs union between the European Community and Turkey and was intended to last 12 to 22 years. It was expected that the final membership process would begin as a result of the successful completion of all phases. However, one of the most important issues on the agenda was that no valid date was specified for Turkey regarding membership in the community if these conditions were met (Öniş, 2005: 9).

During the preparation phase (1964-1972), no major progress was made in the relations between Turkey and the European Community, whose economic structure had partially

changed, but while industry progressed on a sectoral basis, agriculture regressed (Zenger, 2005: 29). In order to establish the customs union, which was envisaged to be realized in the second phase, an Additional Protocol was signed between the European Community and Turkey on 23 November 1970. With this Protocol, it was expected that Turkey would remove the tariffs and quantitative barriers applied during the import process, with some exceptions, within 12 to 22 years (Erdoğan, 2003: 42).

Due to the negative effects created by its economic and political policies during this process, Turkey had difficulty in adapting to EU conditions day by day and faced many obstacles in the processes. Particularly the Cyprus problem, human rights issues, the policies of EU member states to impose sanctions against Turkey's membership and the 1980 coup in Turkey (Salehi, 2003: 814) disrupted the relations between Turkey and the EU (Ulusoy, 2017: 59).

In order to improve the relations with the EU, which had come to a standstill with the new government elected after the coup, Turkey applied to the IMF for economic reforms. Later, Turkey made an unexpected move and made its application for full membership in the European Community on April 14, 1987, in accordance with Article 237 of the Treaty of Rome and Article 98 of the European Coal and Steel Community (Erdoğan, 2003: 42). However, the application was deferred by the European Council two and a half years later, citing the different internal dynamics of the EU member states and the inadequacies in Turkey's political and economic situation (Erdoğan, 2003: 42-43). No new membership process was initiated before 1993.

The member states of the European Community, prioritizing their own interests, made a joint decision and proposed to improve relations with Turkey under the name of the Association Agreement in 1963 and to implement the Customs Union. In order not to eliminate Turkey's commitment to the process, the European Community postponed the opening period of the accession negotiations and decided to develop a new strategy (Zenger, 2005:32).

Although the Customs Union Agreement signed between Turkey and Europe on March 6, 1995 accelerated the integration process to the EU market and encouraged rapid and stable growth for the Turkish economy (Karaosmanoğlu, 1998: 62; Morgil, 2003: 2), it fell short of meeting Turkey's expectations for full membership. An important development took place in the EU membership process and Turkey was officially granted candidate country status at the **1999 Helsinki Summit** (Özcan, 2002: 131). Thus, full membership negotiations with Turkey officially started on October 3, 2005 (Aydın S, 2011: 33).

Turkey's integration process with the West has always followed a bumpy course from the Ottoman modernization process to the present day. With the 2016 coup attempt during the negotiation process, the EU criticized democracy and human rights issues and relations came to a standstill again (Eralp, 2018: 41). EU membership, which remains uncertain today, takes shape depending on the regional and international political developments implemented in Turkey.

3. Turkey's Foreign Policy Changes in Recent Years

3.1 Early Turkish Foreign Policy, World War II, Cold War Period

After World War II, liberal approaches began to be influential in the international system, and cooperation, economic integration, and peaceful solution searches became the fundamental elements of this period (Keohane & Nye, 2001: 19). Every state in the world is seeking alliances with the changing international systems in order to maintain its current conjuncture. Conditions that change with temporal factors keep the structure of the international system quite dynamic (Current Affairs Review, 2021). It should not be forgotten that one of the characteristic features of the system is change (Kaplan, 2005: 20). Differentiation in the anarchic international system structure based on the dominant nation state structure (Yılmaz, 2015: 8) usually occurs with long-lasting wars.

The element of power occupies a very important place in the international system. The neoclassical realist approach argues that state policies (military, economic and political) are related to material power (Rose, 1998: 146). At the same time, while Waltz (1979) expresses the distribution of capabilities in the system as the international system structure, neoclassical realists express the relative distribution of capabilities among major states as polarity (Küçük, 2023: 827).

In the literature, while neoclassical realists consider the international system as an independent variable, structural realists evaluate it more comprehensively through the dynamics of the system (Gözen, 2014: 173). The foreign policy of each state is affected by the nature of the strategic environment, and if the strategic environment in which states operate is far from threats or opportunities, it will be permissive, and if it is close, it will be restrictive (Brawley, 2008: 75-98; Ripsman et al., 2016: 52).

Turkey's foreign policy during the time of Atatürk and İnönü was based on the balance of power. With its limited resources, Turkey had a say in international politics and managed to turn many issues to its advantage (Gözen, 2009: 61-64). Unfortunately, however, it could not

prevent the formation of the League of Nations revisionist bloc after the First World War. Turkey, which played a balancing game between the dominant powers during the Second World War (Deringil, 2015), declared war on Germany in 1945 in order to have a place in the Western bloc in the post-war international system (Küçük, 2023: 833).

The Cold War period, which began with the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences in 1945, led states aligned on two polar axes to form a military alliance against supranational bloc structures (Kaplan, 2005: 47) (Küçük, 2023: 833). Due to the possible nuclear threat, the conflicting states had to act in accordance with their interests and negotiated (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009: 7-8).

Turkey, which did not participate in World War II and maintained neutrality, due to the fear of being alone and the threat from the Soviet Union, was compelled to make an alliance with the United States. (Küçük, 1986: 304; Özkan, 2017: 73; Lika, 2015: 26-27). The basis of good relations between the Soviet Union and Turkey is based on the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Non-Aggression dated 1925. The Soviet Union's ceding of Kars and Ardahan to Turkey during a period when it was weak, its demand for these lands over time (Deringil, 2015: 264; Korkmazcan, 2021: 288) and its various demands on the straits from the beginning of the 1940s negatively affected the relationship between Turkey and the Soviet Union (Küçük, 2023: 834).

The first step taken by Turkey under the auspices of the United States was the declaration of the Truman Doctrine in 1947. With the Korean War, the changing perception towards Turkey and its geopolitical importance were realized. Thus, it joined NATO in 1952 (Gönlübol & Ülman, 1990: 118) and its application to the Council of Europe was accepted in 1949 (Hale, 2003: 117).

3.2 Shift Toward Eastern Partners: Energy and Trade Cooperation with Russia

The transformation Turkey has experienced in its foreign policy in recent years shows that the country has moved away from Western-centered strategies and developed its relations with its Eastern partners, especially Russia (Yılmaz, 2022: 5). Political negativities experienced with the US and the EU (Özkan, 2021: 17), problems encountered in the EU membership process, factors such as the US and **S-400 tension** have caused differences in Turkey's foreign policy (Akçay, 2021: 24). This change in Turkey's foreign policy has resulted in a desire to develop closer relations with the East (Derin, 2023: 28).

The competition between Turkey and Russia that changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union (Çakmak, 2002: 34) The increasing economic cooperation towards the end of the

1990s (Kılıç, 2021: 67-89) It has gained strategic importance in terms of energy and trade (Özsoy, 2022: 212). The majority of the cooperation on energy is on natural gas (Akçay, 2021: 78) and the trade volume between the two countries was announced as 26 billion dollars in 2019 (Derin, 2023: 102). **The Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant**, which was built as the largest joint project (Apart from Kılıç, 2021: 85), there are significant exports to Russia in agricultural products and the construction sector (Özsoy, 2022: 215).

One of the most important diplomatic steps that strengthened the changing political and diplomatic relations between Turkey and Russia is the 2020 **Karabakh** the peace talks (Astana Process) held since 2016 following the war have brought a new dimension to the relationship (Çakmak, 2022: 45). Apart from this process, which is expressed as one of the most important diplomatic steps that strengthened relations between Turkey and Russia, the 2020 **Karabakh War** is also important. In this war, the two countries acted in cooperation, ended the conflict and ensured the establishment of a joint peacekeeping force (Derin, 2023: 110). There are many views that relations between Turkey and Russia will continue to deepen in the future with developments in energy cooperation, trade and diplomacy (Akçay, 2021: 145). However, the effects of these relations on relations with NATO and the US will continue to be an important balancing element in Turkey's foreign policy (Kılıç, 2021: 89).

The transformation Turkey has experienced in its foreign policy in recent years has been shaped by the relations it has developed with its Eastern partners, moving away from Western-centered strategies. Diplomatic and economic cooperation with Russia in particular has redefined Turkey's foreign policy goals. These relations play important roles in energy cooperation, trade volume and the resolution of regional crises (Derin, 2023: 115).

3.3 AKP Period Foreign Policy: From Cooperation to Decline

During the AKP government, Turkey-EU relations initially gained positive momentum, but over time they weakened and became more complicated for various reasons. With the Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power in 2002, Turkey attached great importance to the EU membership process and took serious steps in democratization, human rights, rule of law and free market reforms (Müftüler-Baç, 2016: 50). In the early years of the AKP, the process of membership negotiations with the EU stood out as an important foreign policy goal for Turkey.

In the first years after the AKP came to power, the EU membership process gained significant momentum. Turkey officially started full membership negotiations with the EU in 2005, and many political and legal reforms were implemented to meet **the Copenhagen**

Criteria (Börzel & Soyaltın, 2012: 210). Reforms, especially in the areas of freedom of expression, judicial independence and human rights, accelerated Turkey's integration process with the EU (Eralp, 2009: 130).

In 2004, despite the Cyprus issue, the EU's acceptance of starting negotiations with Turkey was an important turning point in Turkey-EU relations. During this period, Turkey's EU membership also found broad support in domestic politics, and the reform process gained momentum (Kirişci, 2006: 78). However, there has been a stagnation in Turkey-EU relations since 2006.

Doubts about Turkey's membership within the EU have increased, and countries such as France and Germany have begun to take a more cautious approach to Turkey's full membership (Müftüler-Baç, 2016: 112). During the same period, political and democratic reforms in Turkey have slowed down, and there have been regressions in areas such as freedom of expression and judicial independence (Eralp, 2009: 136).

During this period, the EU's criticism of Turkey has intensified, particularly on the issues of human rights and the rule of law. Democratic regressions in Turkey have negatively affected the negotiation process with the EU, and membership negotiations have effectively come to a standstill (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016: 85).

Since the early 2010s, political developments and authoritarian tendencies in Turkey have further strained relations with the EU. In particular, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the 2016 coup attempt and the subsequent state of emergency have increased the EU's criticism of Turkey (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020: 213). During this period, Turkey has moved away from democratization and reforms and towards a more authoritarian approach to governance (Kirişci, 2019: 47).

The large-scale detentions, the closure of media outlets and the pressure on civil society during the state of emergency were harshly criticized by the EU, and the negotiation process has almost come to a complete standstill (Keyman, 2017: 103). During this period, Turkey's strengthening of relations with Russia and other actors in the Middle East has further weakened its ties with the EU.

Since 2017, alternative models such as "privileged partnership" have begun to be discussed within the EU instead of Turkey's full membership. Turkey's departure from the EU's democratic and legal standards has further weakened hopes for full membership (Tocci, 2015: 91). However, Turkey continues to maintain its commercial ties with the EU in economic terms and continues negotiations with the EU on issues such as updating the Customs Union (Müftüler-Baç, 2017: 138).

During the AKP government, Turkey-EU relations initially followed a positive course in terms of democratization and reforms, but in the following years they weakened due to authoritarian tendencies and democratic regressions. Turkey moved away from its goal of full membership with the EU and sought more strategic partnerships (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020: 215). During this process, although Turkey tried to maintain its economic ties with the EU, the perspective of full membership largely disappeared due to tensions in political relations.

4. The European Union and Relations with Eastern Neighbors

The EU has developed various strategies in the post-Cold War period to strengthen its relations with its eastern neighbors and to stabilize these countries (Smith, 2016: 45). Relations with eastern neighbors have been shaped by the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), a foreign policy tool developed independently of the EU's enlargement process (Delcour, 2013: 103). The main purpose of this policy has been to promote stability, security and prosperity in countries outside the EU borders (Emerson, 2011: 34).

The ENP, officially launched in 2004, aims to establish closer relations with the EU's eastern and southern neighbors. This policy aims to deepen relations with the eastern neighbors by providing economic integration, political reforms and cooperation on human rights (Popescu & Wilson, 2009: 67). The Eastern Partnership, in particular, is an initiative implemented within this framework. The Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009, is an effort to establish the EU's relations with countries such as Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan on a more institutional basis (Korosteleva, 2012: 45).

This partnership aims to establish stronger economic ties between the EU and its eastern neighbors, ensure energy security and encourage democratic reforms. These countries have gained access to the European market by making free trade agreements with the EU (Langbein & Wolczuk, 2012: 19). However, this process was also perceived as a challenge to Russia's influence in the region (Sasse, 2010: 12).

In its economic relations with its eastern neighbors, the EU has aimed to integrate these countries into the European market through free trade agreements and economic aid (Gstöhl, 2015: 88). Countries such as Ukraine and Moldova in particular have aimed to establish deeper economic ties with the EU. After the crisis with Russia in 2014, Ukraine signed an Association Agreement with the EU, aiming to achieve greater integration into the European market (Kostanyan, 2014: 59). Moldova, on the other hand, has taken similar steps to increase its exports to Europe and benefit from EU funds (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2012: 75).

In this process, the economic aid provided by the EU to its eastern neighbors has been an important tool to encourage reforms. Energy security, in particular, has been one of the key points of these relations. The EU has supported various energy projects in order to free its eastern neighbors from energy dependence on Russia (Youngs, 2011: 43). In this context, the **Southern Gas Corridor project** is an important project that aims to increase Europe's energy security and ensure closer energy cooperation with eastern neighbors (Austvik, 2016: 97).

The EU has developed various democracy and human rights programs to encourage political reforms in its relations with its eastern neighbors (Boonstra & Shapovalova, 2012: 52). In this context, one of the EU's most important tools, **the Association Agreements**, has been used to support democratization processes in these countries (Kelley, 2006: 31). Countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have sought to align their political systems with European standards by establishing closer relations with the EU (Korosteleva, 2013: 23). However, the reform processes in these countries have generally been complex and slow. In Ukraine in particular, the political and military crisis following the 2014 Maidan events has made it difficult to deepen relations with the EU (Wolczuk, 2016: 37). Georgia, on the other hand, sought to strengthen its relations with the EU after the 2008 war with Russia (Popescu, 2013: 41).

4.1 EU-Russia Conflict and Their Impact on Eastern Neighbors

The EU's relations with its eastern neighbors have been in constant conflict with Russia's interests in the region (Haukkala, 2010: 28). Russia sees the EU's influence, especially in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, as a threat to its own influence. In this context, Russia's efforts to maintain its economic and political influence in the region complicate relations between the EU and its eastern neighbors (Sakwa, 2015: 90).

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for separatist movements in Ukraine were an important turning point in the EU's relations with its eastern neighbours (Menon & Rumer, 2015: 54). This process led the EU to pursue a more cautious policy in its relations with its eastern neighbors. At the same time, Russia's influence on energy caused the EU to reshape its energy security strategies (Proedrou, 2016: 101).

The EU's relations with its eastern neighbors are a complex and dynamic process, both economically and politically. Initiatives such as the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership are an effort by the EU to strengthen its ties with these countries. However, Russia's influence in the region and the EU-Russia rivalry have been important factors that complicate relations in this process (Whitman & Wolff, 2010: 63). As a result, the EU's

relations with its eastern neighbors emerge as a critical element that shapes both Europe's enlargement policies and regional stability.

5. The Relationship Between the European Union and Russia

5.1 Historical and Economic Foundations of EU-Russia Relations

With the changing balances after the Cold War, the bipolar ideology-based international system of the superpowers USA and Russia collapsed, and the dominance of economic interests and competition gained priority (Kara, 2008: 14). With the end of the war, a new period of diplomatic and economic relations began between Russia and the EU; energy policies, trade and security issues became central to these relations (Youngs, 2011: 43). However, especially since the mid-2000s, Russia's foreign policy strategies and the EU's expansion policies have changed the nature of these relations (Haukkala, 2010: 28).

The changing balances caused the USA, which had the strongest army in the world at the time (Rahman, 2014: 4), to fail to follow an effective policy with military force in places such as Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan (Altindal, 2023: 1). With the effective role of economic power, Russia, which has efficient energy resources, started to come to the agenda with the issue of energy in foreign policy (Jaffe and Manning, 2001; Balzer, 2005; Olcott, 2004).

Many factors play an important role in the transition process of Russia from a military security focus to an energy policy. One of the most important reasons for Russia's transition from a centrally planned economy to a liberal economy with the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991 is that 45% of its import revenues and 35% of its government budget were covered by the energy sector (Kara, 2008: 15). In 1999, Russian President Vladimir Putin was also aware that the existence of natural resources played a major role in the development of the state after the crisis and in maintaining the current socio-economic conditions and power (Balzer, 2005: 219).

Therefore, action was taken to control the oligarchs in the energy sector, arrested the CEO of Yukos, one of the oil oligarchs in Russia, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and transferred the income obtained from energy exports to the state. According to Putin, with these sanctions implemented with the aim of being effective in international policies, Khodorkovsky's policies of increasing political influence and financing were prevented and the evaluation of the state's participation in Yukos' international vision was stopped (Olcott, 2004: 13). However, Yukos compensation was planning to sell 24-40% of the company's assets to two western companies called ChevronTexaco and ExxonMobil. The situation of this agreement, which reduced state

control in the energy sector, accelerated Putin's transition to an energy-focused policy. Putin emphasizes that resources should be responsible for natural resources (Balzer, 2005: 218).

5.2 Energy Trade and Political Tensions

Energy is of great importance to the EU, as Russia, one of the EU's largest energy suppliers, meets a large portion of the EU's natural gas and oil needs (Proedrou, 2016: 101). The projects that strengthen Russia's energy exports to the EU are known as **the Nord Stream and South Stream pipelines** (Siddi, 2017: 45). Energy trade is of critical importance in terms of balancing the economic interests of both parties. However, energy dependence has increased criticism of Russia's political and economic influence within the EU (Austvik, 2016: 97).

The EU and Russia have expanded their trade activities to a wide area other than energy resources. As one of the EU's largest trading partners, Russia exports large amounts of raw materials and industrial products to EU countries (Gstöhl, 2015: 88). Decisions taken due to changing conditions have disrupted trade activities. The sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia after the Ukraine crisis in 2014 are one of the best examples of this situation. (Menon & Rumer, 2015: 54).

5.3 Security and Geopolitical Rivalries

The EU's support for separatist movements in Ukraine in 2014 had a negative impact on EU-Russia relations (Sakwa, 2015: 90). At this point, the EU's economic and diplomatic sanctions on Russia have increased tensions in relations. The EU's efforts to increase its influence in Eastern Europe and Ukraine have been perceived by Russia as a threat to regional security and influence (Smith, 2016: 41).

At the same time, the increase in military presence in Eastern Europe with NATO assistance during the war and the Association Agreement signed between the EU and Ukraine have brought security issues in Russia-EU relations back to the agenda (Whitman & Wolff, 2010: 63). During this process, Russia saw the EU's policies towards its Eastern neighbors as contrary to its own interests and therefore began to pursue a harsher policy in relations with the EU (Haukkala, 2010: 28).

The EU's energy dependence on Russia has posed a significant risk for the EU in both economic and political terms. Energy security has become a strategic priority for the EU's foreign policy, and Russia's control over energy exports has become a major topic of debate within the EU (Austvik, 2016: 97). Russia has increased its ability to put pressure on the EU with its strategy of using energy resources as a foreign policy tool (Proedrou, 2016: 102).

5.4 Weakening of The EU- Russia Relations

In this context, the EU has begun to take steps to diversify its energy resources and reduce its dependence on Russia (Youngs, 2011: 47). **The Southern Gas Corridor** project and renewable energy investments have been prominent moves in the EU's energy security strategy. However, cooperation with Russia in the field of energy continues to have an indispensable dimension for both parties in economic terms (Gstöhl, 2015: 91).

In recent years, there has been no normalization process in relations between the EU and Russia; on the contrary, tensions have continued. In 2019, the European Parliament adopted resolutions condemning Russia's actions against Ukraine, and the EU's sanctions against Russia were extended (Siddi, 2017: 50). However, Russia's increasing military presence in Eastern Europe and cybersecurity threats have made EU-Russia relations even more difficult (Whitman & Wolff, 2010: 64).

In this process, Russia has strengthened its foreign policy towards Asia and the Middle East, while focusing more on its economic interests in its relations with the EU. The EU, on the other hand, continues to maintain a critical stance towards Russia regarding democratic values and compliance with international law (Menon & Rumer, 2015: 56).

The relations between the EU and Russia exhibit a complex structure that includes both cooperation and conflict elements. While energy trade strengthens the economic dimension of these relations, the Ukraine crisis and Russia's harsh foreign policy stance have caused serious tensions in relations (Haukkala, 2010: 30). The EU's energy security strategies and sanctions against Russia have weakened cooperation between the two sides, but have not completely broken it. The normalization of EU-Russia relations in the future will depend on both energy security and political developments in Eastern Europe (Smith, 2016: 44).

6. Impacts of 2023 Election Results on Turkey's Foreign Policy

The 2023 election results have had significant impacts on Turkey's foreign policy. These elections are seen as a critical turning point, especially in terms of the problems experienced in Turkey's relations with the West and its turning to the East, especially Russia (Kılıç, 2023: 45).

The election results brought about the reflections of the changes in Turkey's domestic policy and in its foreign policy. After the presidential elections, signals were given that instead of resolving the tensions Turkey had with the West, it would continue to develop closer relations with the East (Yılmaz, 2023: 10).

After the 2023 elections, the priorities in Turkey's foreign policy were determined as energy security and maintaining regional stability. At this point, as a country dependent on foreign energy imports, Turkey's relationship with Russia is strategically very important (Özsoy, 2023: 17). The Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant and TurkStream natural gas pipeline projects summarize this situation (Çakmak, 2022: 67; Yılmaz, 2020: 89). Trade between the two countries is expected to exceed 35 billion dollars by 2023 (Özsoy, 2023: 212).

Turkey's agricultural product exports and Russia's energy imports are some of the key elements in their economic relations (Derin, 2023: 78). New economic cooperation agreements, especially on defense industry and infrastructure projects, are increasing in number every day (Aksoy, 2023: 58).

The ongoing tension in Turkey's relations with NATO and the West after the 2023 elections has led to the establishment of a close cooperation with Russia in its foreign policy orientation (Çakmak, 2022: 90). While Turkey is expanding its strategic partnerships with Russia, it is trying to keep its relations with the West in balance (Kılıç, 2023: 56). Thus, it is seen that while strengthening its relations with Russia against the diplomatic crises it has experienced with the West, it is seeking a multipolar balance in foreign policy (Yılmaz, 2023: 35). How the problems experienced with the West will shape its relations with Russia in the coming period will be decisive in terms of global power balances (Aksoy, 2023: 110).

7. The Current Nature of EU-Turkey Relations: Analysis Based on EU Reports and Statistical Data; Less Value-based and More Transactional

7.1 Turkey's Compliance with EU Membership Criteria after the 2016 Coup

The decline in Turkey's relations with the European Union (EU) and the increase in relations with its Eastern partners and Russia during the same period reveal a deep transformation process in both political and commercial dimensions. Analyzing these relations based on EU reports and statistical data reveals more clearly how Turkey's strategic priorities have changed and how this affects the privileged partnership process with the EU.

There are three separate sections on the Copenhagen criteria that Turkey must comply with in the EU accession process: political, economic and the harmonization of the European Union acquis. Among these, political criteria were specified as a prerequisite for the EU accession process. Turkey, which has advanced a process in accordance with these criteria, began its accession negotiations on October 3, 2005. Turkey, which participated in the

negotiations on the necessity of all conditions, also had to comply with the Maastricht criteria defined under the name of the European Monetary Union harmonization criteria after the full membership process (Zenger, 2005: 50).

In recent years, the EU Commission's Turkey Progress Reports have observed that Turkey does not exhibit attitudes and behaviors that are in line with democratic values and the rule of law, which are among the EU membership criteria (European Commission, 2020: 9). For example, the state of emergency declared after the 2016 coup attempt and the government's repressive measures are some of these. The dismissal of thousands of public employees, the closure of media outlets and the introduction of serious restrictions on freedom of expression during the state of emergency provide strong evidence that Turkey is moving away from democratic standards and are incompatible with EU criteria (European Commission, 2020: 12). In addition, the lack of judicial independence is another issue criticized by the EU. The findings that the government control over the judiciary and the justice mechanism are under political influence show how far Turkey has moved away from the principles of the rule of law within the framework of EU membership negotiations (European Commission, 2020: 12).

The factors that have had the greatest impact on Turkey's political isolation have been stated as the absence of any change in the rule of law, judicial independence and fundamental rights (European Commission, 2018: 18). For these and similar reasons, negotiations between Turkey and the EU have been suspended as of 2018.

7.2 Economic Relations with the EU and New Eastern Partnerships

Turkey-EU relations have been negatively affected economically with the halt in negotiations. According to Eurostat data, while positive Turkey-EU relations increased trade volume by an average of 3% between 2010 and 2019, this rate decreased significantly in 2020 and even came to a standstill (Eurostat, 2020: 22). Accordingly, this point reached with the EU, which continues to exist as Turkey's largest trading partner today, is quite remarkable.

Over the past period, Turkey's trade relations with new partnerships such as Russia and China have increased, and this increase has led to strategic cooperation in the fields of energy and defense. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, the trade volume between Turkey and Russia reached 25 billion dollars in 2019 and increased by 20% in 2020 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2021: 11). At this point, moves such as the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline and the **purchase of S-400** defense systems can be considered as one of Turkey's strategies to reduce its energy and security dependency on the West (European Commission, 2019: 34).

7.3 Strategic Autonomy and Its Impact on the Privileged Partnership Process

The failure to achieve the desired results on the path progressing within the framework of harmonization with EU relations has reflected in EU reports that Turkey is seeking more independence and strategic autonomy in foreign policy. The increasing tension with the EU has threatened Turkey's regional and strategic interests and led to their reshaping. According to the report published by the EU Commission in 2021, this tension, which has caused Turkey to seek independence and strategic autonomy against Western alliances, has been evaluated as part of the policy of increasing strategic cooperation in the East (European Commission, 2021: 7).

In this context, Turkey-Russia rapprochement can also be evaluated as part of a broader strategic cooperation. In particular, the energy and defense cooperation developed with Russia is seen as an effort to reduce Turkey's dependence on the West (European Commission, 2020: 15). In addition, Turkey's trade and infrastructure investments within the scope of the Belt and Road Project with China are also part of this strategy (Eurostat, 2020: 24).

The future of the privileged partnership or strategic partnership (Akçay, 2016: 11) put forward by the EU in the 1990s after the Ankara Agreement remains uncertain at this point with this transformation process in Turkey-EU relations. This situation was reflected in the EU Commission's Progress Report for 2021 as a serious weakness in Turkey's full membership process to the EU (European Commission, 2021: 12). With the increase in strategic partnerships developed by Turkey with the East, political and economic sanctions included in the EU's harmonization package have been increased and therefore Turkey's Customs Union modernization has not made sufficient progress (European Parliament, 2021: 23).

As emphasized in EU reports, Turkey's rapprochement with its Eastern partners and Russia has a high potential to negatively affect its privileged partnership relationship with the EU. However, considering Turkey's strategic location and regional influence, a complete severance of relations with the EU is not expected. This situation is a reflection of Turkey's search for balancing its geopolitical interests between both the East and the West (European Commission, 2021: 15).

As a result, Turkey's departure from the EU path and the increase in its relations with its Eastern partners and Russia reflect Turkey's search for strategic autonomy and efforts to increase its regional bargaining power. EU reports and commercial data clearly reveal Turkey's foreign policy strategy in this process and show that the privileged partnership process with the EU is weakening.

7.4 Turkey's Democratic Regression and EU Reports

Turkey's EU membership process has been heavily influenced by the European Union's focus on democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law. The EU's normative framework places great emphasis on these principles, which are considered foundational for membership. As Turkey has faced criticism in recent years for democratic backsliding and violations of human rights, the EU's progress reports have consistently highlighted Turkey's divergence from these core norms.

Normative theorists argue that these EU norms have created what some call "**rhetorical entrapment**" or "community entrapment", where member and candidate states are compelled to align with certain values despite national objections. This approach is rooted in Normative Institutionalism, which posits that the norms governing the EU have the power to shape the behavior of states beyond pure economic or strategic interests (Çalış ve Metkin, 2017: 5). According to this perspective, the EU's emphasis on democratic principles and human rights serves not only as a condition for membership but also as a means of reinforcing the EU's identity as a normative power.

Normative theorism gained significant traction in the post-Cold War period, particularly as realist and neo-realist approaches, which focus primarily on power politics, were seen as inadequate in addressing the evolving nature of international relations. In contrast, normative theorists highlight the importance of moral responsibilities and universal values in international politics, stressing that international organizations like the EU should not merely focus on security and economic interests but also on promoting ethical standards (Linklater, 1998: 38). The EU's expansion process, which accelerated after the Cold War, was largely driven by these normative values, as evidenced by the Copenhagen Criteria, which emphasize democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights. Turkey's democratic regression has been a major point of contention in its EU accession negotiations, as EU reports regularly critique the country for failing to meet these fundamental norms. Critics of normative theory, however, argue that such an approach imposes certain Western-centric values as universal, which may not be fully applicable to all societies (Beitz, 1979: 47).

Despite these criticisms, the EU continues to apply its normative power in its dealings with Turkey. Each progress report reiterates the importance of adhering to democratic standards, signaling that the EU's approach is not purely transactional or interest-based but deeply rooted in the promotion of shared values and ethical governance.

This normative framework thus places Turkey in a difficult position: while it seeks economic cooperation and strategic ties with the EU, its internal political developments increasingly

conflict with the democratic norms required for membership. As normative theorists argue, this tension between moral obligations and national interests is central to understanding Turkey's stalled accession process and the EU's repeated emphasis on reform (Frost, 1996: 29).

8. The Role of Specific Events and Social Media

Many political, economic and social processes have taken place in Turkey-EU relations from the past to the present. This process, which is often reflected and reflected to society through news channels, has had devastating effects. Today, with the spread of social media, increasing digital platforms have significantly affected how the events are shaped on society and diplomatic relations. For example, the Gezi Park protests, the July 15 coup attempt and the refugee crisis reflected through social media have positively and negatively affected the dynamics of Turkey-EU relations (European Parliament, 2020: 35).

It is not possible to ignore the impact of the social resistance initiated under the name of **the Gezi Park protests** in Turkey in 2013 on the world public opinion through social media and community organization. In particular, the impact of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, which facilitate the dissemination of information to large masses and instant sharing of information by millions of people, is quite great (Peker, 2014: 142).

The restriction of freedom of expression and the damage done to society (psychological violence) during the Gezi Park protests caused Turkey to be criticized by the EU and the relations to deteriorate (European Commission, 2014: 23). It has been stated that Turkey, which was warned about democratic standards and human rights, which are among the basic criteria to be followed within the framework of harmonization with the EU, has completely distanced itself from the membership process (European Parliament, 2014: 19).

One of the moments when we felt the power of social media the most was the coup attempt on July 15, 2016. President Erdoğan's call on the government and the people to resist via FaceTime on the night of the coup is one of the best examples showing the effect of social media (Akgün, 2017: 98). It has been stated that Turkey, which was subjected to harsh criticism from the EU within the scope of fundamental rights and freedoms due to the democratic regression after the coup, should suspend its EU membership process (European Parliament, 2016: 27). With this process, the relationship between the EU and Türkiye has come to a breaking point (European Commission, 2017: 15).

With the refugee crisis that has continued since 2015, the relationship between Turkey and the EU has begun to be re-evaluated. Turkey has become a guarantor state by hosting refugees through agreements with the EU (European Commission, 2016: 10). However, the

refugee dramas shared on social media platforms in this crisis management have increased criticism of the EU's refugee policy (Jones, 2017: 114). While Turkey stated that the EU did not take sufficient measures against the refugee crisis and did not fulfill its commitments regarding financial assistance to Turkey, which was in a guarantor position, the EU criticized Turkey's shortcomings in terms of human rights (European Commission, 2016: 12).

It is quite clear how campaigns conducted on social media tools have turned refugee crises (for both sides) into a diplomatic problem in relations between countries (Kirişçi, 2016: 32). Studies indicate that there are multiple factors involved in changing political and diplomatic processes with developing technology (Bollier, 2002; Christodoulides, 2005). With the increasing number of actors, polarization has also increased along with cooperation between actors (Çömlekçi, 2019: 3). As stated in the policy goals of digital diplomacy shared by Hanson (2012), the management of information shared by the state should be used correctly in the international arena and disinformation should be prevented (Çömlekçi, 2019: 3).

Social media can also manipulate political and policy developments between countries through perception (Peker, 2014: 149). The influence of the increasing number of pro-government media outlets on social media has increased the dose of criticism of the EU towards Turkey (European Parliament, 2017: 30).

In summary, many past events have had a significant impact on Turkey-EU relations. At this point, the role played by social media in society and diplomatic relations has often created major ruptures in EU processes. Although social media plays a key role in disseminating domestic political developments internationally, it has often been used as a tool for manipulation. The tensions Turkey has experienced in its relations with the West have deepened further with the impact of social media on events (European Commission, 2021: 15).

9. Possible Scenarios and Future Perspectives in Turkey-EU Relations

9.1 Full Membership: A Diminishing Possibility

Relations between Turkey and the European Union (EU) have experienced many fluctuations throughout history. These relations have been shaped by both political and economic dynamics, sometimes becoming tense and sometimes experiencing rapprochement. In recent years, Turkey's domestic political developments and foreign policy preferences have brought the future of its relations with the EU to an uncertain point (European Commission, 2020: 11). In this context, possible scenarios and future perspectives in Turkey-EU relations will play a determining role in the direction of relations.

Turkey's goal of full membership in the EU is a long-term process whose foundations were laid with the Ankara Agreement in 1963. However, Turkey's democratic regression and human rights violations have greatly weakened the possibility of this goal (European Parliament, 2021: 19). The EU's 2020 Progress Report stated that Turkey had experienced regression in judicial independence, freedom of expression and fundamental rights, and that this situation had caused the suspension of membership negotiations (European Commission, 2020: 17). The full membership scenario will continue to remain a weak possibility unless these problems are resolved and Turkey makes reforms in line with EU standards (European Parliament, 2020: 25).

9.2 Privileged Partnership: A More Likely Scenario

The possibility of relations between Turkey and the EU remaining at the privileged partnership level rather than full membership in the long term seems stronger. A privileged partnership is a model in which Turkey will maintain its economic relations with the EU but will not be able to achieve full membership status in terms of political integration (European Commission, 2019: 21). The EU's efforts to modernize the Customs Union in particular and Turkey's desire to remain connected to the EU in this process make the privileged partnership scenario more likely (European Commission, 2021: 12). However, Turkey's strategic partnerships with Russia and its Eastern partners complicate this scenario (European Council, 2020: 9).

9.3 Severance of Relations: A Low Probability

The possibility of Turkey's complete severance of relations with the EU is considered a low probability considering the current political and economic dynamics. Due to its geopolitical location and strong trade ties with the EU, Turkey will not completely sever its relations with the West (Eurostat, 2020: 14). However, Turkey's democratic regression and foreign policy preferences may bring a scenario where the EU may increase sanctions against Turkey to the agenda (European Parliament, 2021: 31). This situation may cause Turkey to experience serious losses in its economic relations with the EU.

Improvement in Economic Relations Economic relations between Turkey and the EU have been built on a strong foundation over the years. The modernization of the Customs Union will provide great benefits for both parties. According to the EU Commission's 2021 report, updating the Customs Union increases Turkey's potential to increase its trade volume with the

EU and to integrate Turkey more strongly into the European market (European Commission, 2021: 18). However, this process will depend on Turkey's willingness to make political reforms (European Commission, 2020: 13).

The EU has been reshaping its foreign trade policies in line with global developments in recent years. Trade tensions with major economic actors such as China and the US in particular have led the EU to develop a strategy focused on greater independence and sustainability in its trade policies (Smith, 2020: 67). If Turkey is successful in integrating into this new EU trade strategy, it can strengthen its strategic partnership by achieving greater compliance with the EU's economic and commercial priorities.

The EU's green transformation goals, especially the new trade rules aimed at reducing carbon emissions, may also directly affect Turkey's economic relations with the EU. Turkey's compliance with the EU's environmental norms in its industrial and manufacturing sectors will provide a significant advantage in the process of updating the Customs Union. Otherwise, the new trade barriers imposed by the EU within the framework of the green economy transformation may make it difficult for Turkey to access the EU market (European Council, 2021: 30).

Challenges in Foreign Policy and Security Relations Turkey's foreign policy shift away from Western alliances and its relations with Russia and Eastern partners complicate security cooperation with the EU. In particular, Turkey's purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia has negatively affected its NATO membership and security cooperation with the EU (European Council, 2020: 14). Future developments in Turkey's security relations with the West will directly affect the direction of relations with the EU (European Commission, 2021: 19).

Social and Cultural Relations Social and cultural dynamics also play an important role in relations between Turkey and the EU. Turkey, with its young and dynamic population, is an important market and labor force for the EU. The EU continues to strengthen its ties with Turkey, especially through education and cultural programs (European Commission, 2019: 15). Programs such as Erasmus+ support Turkey's integration with the EU at a societal level and increase public support for Turkey's EU membership (European Parliament, 2020: 21). Such programs can contribute to the positive development of Turkey-EU relations in the future.

The Erasmus program helps young people integrate with the EU by gaining education, internship and cultural exchange experiences across Europe. Such programs positively affect the perception of the EU in society in Turkey and increase public support for EU membership in Turkey (European Parliament, 2020: 21). This direct interaction of young

people with the EU can ensure that Turkey-EU relations are based on a deeper and more sustainable basis in the future.

Initiatives such as **the People-to-People Dialogue Program** in particular encourage direct communication and cooperation between the Turkish and EU societies. These programs reduce cultural and social barriers between the two societies and strengthen mutual understanding. Such cooperation is considered as important steps that accelerate social integration as Turkey moves towards EU membership (European Parliament, 2020: 23).

Possible scenarios and future perspectives in Turkey-EU relations largely depend on Turkey's domestic policy reforms, its foreign policy preferences and the EU's strategies regarding Turkey. Full membership will remain a weak possibility unless Turkey makes reforms in line with EU standards. The privileged partnership scenario seems to be a more likely path for economic relations to continue. However, Turkey's developing relations with the East also complicate this scenario. In the coming years, the most important factor that will determine the direction of Turkey's relations with the EU will be how Turkey establishes its strategic balance between the West and the East (European Commission, 2021: 20).

CONCLUSION

Turkey-European Union (EU) relations have been drawing attention for many years as a process full of uncertainties and ups and downs. Today, the European Union's relations with Turkey in the age of differentiated integration raise the question of whether they are flexible or fragmented. While Turkey's full membership negotiations with the EU continue, the "privileged partnership" thesis voiced by some actors within the EU provides important clues about how relations will evolve (Tekin, 2020: 112).

While the EU's differentiated integration approach offers a flexible structure that allows for closer cooperation between member states in certain areas, it also creates certain uncertainties for candidate countries progressing towards full membership (Schimmelfennig, 2014: 87). While Turkey continues to be an important strategic partner of the EU in this process, it portrays an image that is moving away from the goal of full membership. Turkey's regression in the fields of democratization and human rights has negatively affected EU negotiations and caused the debate on the privileged partnership model to flare up (Börzel & Soyaltın, 2012: 210).

The privileged partnership is a model proposed by some EU member states for Turkey, which envisages economic and strategic cooperation instead of full membership. This model envisages Turkey continuing its trade, security and energy cooperation with the EU, but not

achieving full integration in the political arena (Müftüler-Baç, 2016: 56). Countries such as Germany and France in particular are positive about this model due to the political and economic obstacles standing in the way of Turkey's full membership in the EU (Tocci, 2005: 91). However, Turkey has stated many times that it will not give up on full membership and has seen the privileged partnership model as a "Plan B" (Eralp, 2009: 133).

Turkey-EU relations have undergone a significant transformation process, especially within the framework of harmonization packages. However, Turkey's regressions in democratization and human rights in recent years have negatively affected the EU membership process and have called into question the effectiveness of harmonization packages (Kirişci, 2019: 50). Turkey's full compliance with the EU *acquis* is of critical importance for progress in the membership process. However, under current conditions, uncertainty prevails in Turkey-EU relations, and this situation makes Turkey's EU membership goal difficult (Müftüler-Baç, 2017: 68).

The question of whether this flexibility or fragmentation in Turkey-EU relations is of critical importance, especially in terms of the future of the EU's expansion policies. While differentiated integration creates an opportunity for some countries, it increases uncertainties for candidate countries like Turkey (Kirişci, 2006: 78). Whether Turkey will remain a strategic partner or completely move away from the goal of full membership and move to a new relationship model will be shaped by the future policies of both Turkey and the EU (Aydın-Düzgit & Tocci, 2015: 67).

As a result, the future of Turkey-EU relations largely depends on the flexibility of both parties. Turkey can focus on economic and strategic cooperation by following a more pragmatic path in its relations with the EU. At the same time, the EU can provide more support to reform processes that will ensure Turkey's full integration into Europe. However, the prominence of the privileged partnership model under current conditions also brings with it the risk of fragmentation in Turkey-EU relations. Therefore, both parties need to show flexibility and develop a relationship model based on common interests (Keyman, 2017: 103).

In conclusion, Turkey's shift away from the EU and toward Eastern partners, particularly Russia, is a reflection of its pursuit of greater strategic autonomy, regional influence, and enhanced bargaining power. This foreign policy reorientation challenges the traditional pathway of full EU membership and raises the question of whether a privileged partnership is a more realistic outcome. While economic ties, particularly through the Customs Union, remain vital, Turkey's divergence from EU democratic standards and closer alignment with Russia have increased uncertainties regarding its future with the EU. As the analysis of

recent elections, social media influence, and EU reports highlights, the relationship is becoming more flexible, but also more fragmented. The study underscores that unless both Turkey and the EU find a cooperative framework that balances economic and political realities, the privileged partnership model may be the most feasible path forward. However, it comes with its own limitations and challenges. Ultimately, Turkey's future in the European integration process will depend on its ability to balance strategic autonomy with the demands of its EU relationship.

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