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## All eyes on Ankara

A scenario exercise focused on the 2023 elections

Over the years, foreign policy has become a source of tension in the European Union's relationship with Turkey. Although the EU has repeatedly disapproved of Ankara's (military) interventions in Syria, Libya and Iraq as well as in the Eastern Mediterranean region and the South Caucasus, it has so far not been able to counterbalance Ankara's actions. In that light, Turkey's 2023 elections serve as a crucial moment. Seen through the lens of two theoretical scenarios – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the People's Alliance win the elections, versus Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and the Nation Alliance win the elections – this policy brief provides an insight into the instruments the EU has at its disposal to influence and/or respond to Ankara's potential future foreign policy. It shows that while neither scenario will be hassle-free, the EU has most room to manoeuvre and can make best use of its instruments, ranging from diplomatic engagement to military cooperation, in a situation where Kılıçdaroğlu and the Nation Alliance win the elections in 2023.

### Introduction

Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's foreign policy made the shift from soft power to an assertive quest for autonomy where violence is not shunned – the results of which are seen in its immediate neighbourhood. In recent years, Turkey intervened in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Nagorno-Karabakh,<sup>1</sup> and pursued a more assertive approach in a dispute over maritime boundaries between Turkey, Greece and

Cyprus. The European Union watched Turkey's actions in dismay, but at the same time found itself unable to influence Ankara's decisions, let alone have a say on the conflict-ridden region's future.

All eyes are on the elections of June 2023, when Turkish voters will have the opportunity to elect a new president as well as 600 members of Turkey's Grand National Assembly. The EU hopes for a post-Erdoğan future, thereby retrieving its former ally in the region. But is it really that simple? Polls show a steady decline for Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), mainly due to a worsening economy and devaluation of the Turkish lira, while the opposition is more organised than at any other point under

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Turkey's (military) interventions in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus, see: Nienke van Heukelingen and Bob Deen, [\*Beyond Turkey's zero problem policy: motives, means and impact of the interventions in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus\*](#) (The Hague: Clingendael, 2022).

Erdoğan's rule.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, Erdoğan's conservative voting base is known to be loyal, and *even if* the opposition wins, it remains to be seen how things will unfold in reality. European policy makers would do well to prepare for both outcomes.

In this policy brief, we discuss two theoretical scenarios and the corresponding instruments available to the European Union to influence and/or respond to Ankara's potential foreign policy (actions) within these scenarios. In other words, how much leverage does the EU really have over its south-eastern neighbour should one of the two scenarios occur?

### Carrying on and Post-Erdoğan era

In a previous Clingendael publication<sup>3</sup> as well as through a survey exercise with experts,<sup>4</sup> two variables came to the fore as highly relevant in terms of influencing future Turkish foreign policy. The first is the level of *regime stability* in Turkey. Regime stability revolves around the extent that the new government enjoys public support right after the 2023 elections and is in a position to carry out its plans unhindered. The second variable is the aim for *strategic autonomy*, and comes down to the question: does the new government want to expand Turkey's influential sphere in the wider region? Based on these variables, two theoretical scenarios, 'Carrying on' and 'Post-Erdoğan era', were developed

and fleshed out<sup>5</sup> using the scenario-cross method. With the scenario-cross method, the two main variables, mentioned above, are placed on axes in order to demonstrate the relationship between the two proposed scenarios.

In the 'Carrying on' scenario, Turkey enters a phase of economic recovery, eventually leading to Erdoğan and the People's Alliance – the AKP and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – regaining the public's confidence and winning the 2023 elections. In this scenario, the new AKP-MHP government is in a position to continue its chosen path of an assertive foreign policy, due to which the scenario scores high on the axis of both regime stability and strategic autonomy (see figure below). In the 'Post-Erdoğan era' scenario, the elections form the start of a period of chaos. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and the Nation Alliance – Republican People's Party (CHP), the Good Party (İYİ), Felicity Party (SP) and Democrat Party (DP) – win the elections but struggle with a long period of government formation and are confronted with frantic attempts by Erdoğan and AKP-MHP loyalists to maintain their grip over key ministries, agencies and industry. Scoring low on the axis of regime stability, the situation leaves the new CHP-İYİ-SP-DP government no option other than to focus on domestic politics, which is also why the scenario scores low on strategic autonomy (see Figure 1).

The following section looks at each scenario in more detail, with a focus on the potential implications for Turkish foreign policy up until 2025. The instruments available to the European Union to influence or respond to Ankara's potential foreign policy actions in the two scenarios are discussed afterwards.

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2 Kemal Kirişçi and Berk Esen, "[Might the Turkish electorate be ready to say goodbye to Erdoğan after two decades in power?](#)", *Just Security*, published on 22 November 2021.

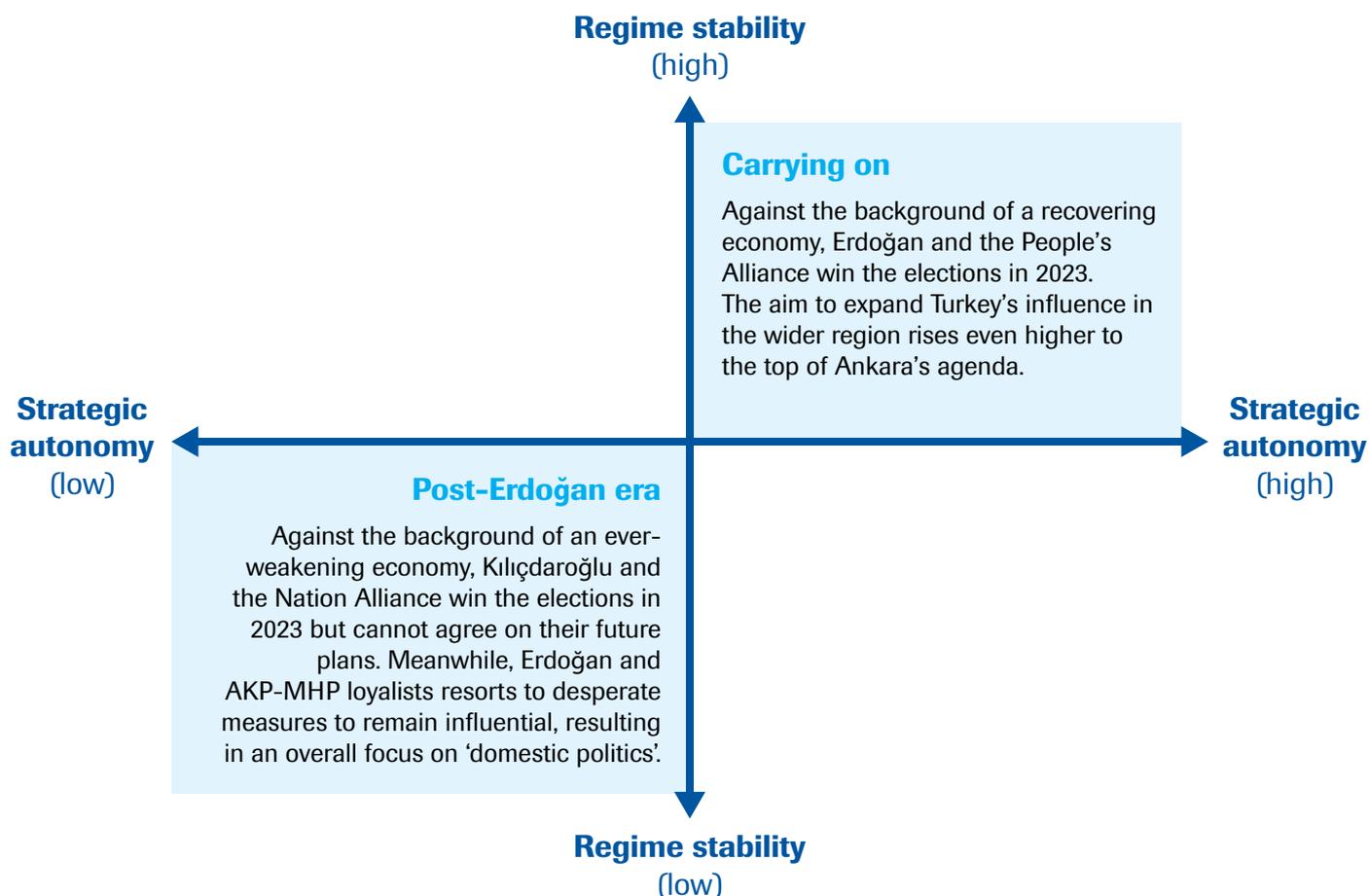
3 Van Heukelingen and Deen, *Beyond Turkey's zero problem policy*.

4 It was preceded by a survey of workshop participants (response rate: 6). The survey covered a 360-degree brainstorming exercise (following the STEEPLE methodology), gathering inputs on a wide range of factors influencing potential future developments in Turkish foreign policy.

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5 When reading these scenarios, the timing of the scenario exercise, i.e., December 2021, should be taken into account. Events taking place after this date – such as the war in Ukraine – are not reflected in the scenarios. Furthermore, it is important to note in this regard that the developed scenarios do not aim to predict the future or provide forecasts of future (geo)political developments. Instead, these scenarios are meant to be descriptions of potential future pathways.

**Figure 1 Two possible scenarios for Turkey after the 2023 elections**



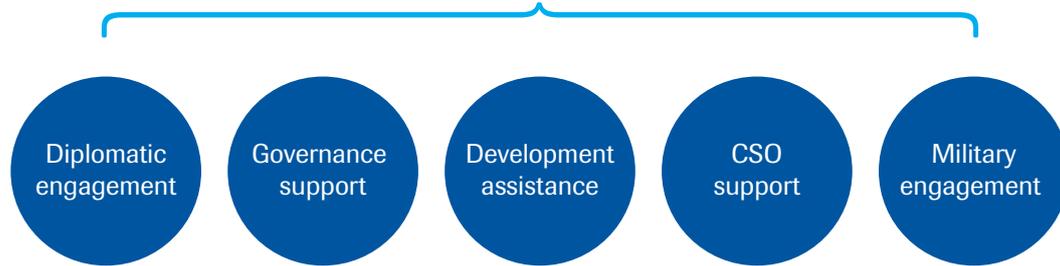
In order to limit the scope of the policy brief, we focus on the EU's five main foreign policy instruments, namely i) diplomatic engagement, ii) governance support, iii) development assistance, iv) support to civil society organisations (CSOs), and v) military engagement (see Figure 2).

**Scenario 1: Carrying on**

In the 'Carrying on' scenario, Ankara continues to maintain a strong foothold in its immediate neighbourhood in 2022, and manages to position itself as a required partner in the reconstruction of Libya. By then, the Libyan people elect a new government palatable to the international community, and significant donors line up to fund and support the country's war-ravaged cities and regions. Controlling the main ports and transport arteries, Turkish construction firms and suppliers of raw materials play a key role in the reconstruction process

– boosting Turkey's economy back home. In the same year, Turkey secures a new currency-swap agreement with Qatar, and manages to strike additional foreign direct investment (FDI) deals with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This provides Turkey with significant foreign currency reserves to arrest runaway inflation, thereby providing a sense of optimism for Turkish citizens, who have seen their livelihoods, savings and pensions depreciate in recent years. Erdoğan renews his electoral odds, positioning himself to ensure that economic gains will continue in the future, as well as successfully selling Turkey's foreign policy victories. As a result, his popularity increases and the People's Alliance win the elections with a majority in 2023. The situation overall acts as a confidence boost, and the aim to expand Turkey's influential sphere in the wider region rises to the top of the agenda. Next to keeping troops in Syria, Iraq, the South Caucasus and, of course, Libya, the new government starts to prioritise cooperation

**Figure 2 The EU's main foreign policy instruments**



with African nations further southwards to, among others, strike new energy deals with governments and public and private sector firms. The new government also resumes its gas-drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, and officially announces (once again) its opposition to further cooperating with the EU under the EU-Turkey Statement.

Within this theoretical scenario, the EU will likely face greater resistance in its relationship with Turkey. But how much leverage does the EU have here? What can it do to convince Ankara to change course? The short answer: not much. Ankara will continue to expand its influence in the wider region, as well as with its preference to cooperate with like-minded, non-Western leaders. The harsh reality is that a regionally stronger and economically more stable Turkey, as in this scenario, will probably increasingly view relations with the EU and its member states as being of secondary importance. In fact, one of the few things that have bound Turkey and the EU in recent years is economic relations,<sup>6</sup> which become less important for Ankara in this scenario, simply because Ankara manages to deepen its economic partnerships with a set of African and Gulf countries and thereby diversify its sources of income. That does not mean that the EU will cease

to be an important trading partner, but by putting itself in this position, the AKP-MHP government is expected to be less receptive to EU ideas and less willing to take the bloc's objectives and needs into account.

**Two EU instruments for positive engagement and deepening alliances**

Therefore, in this scenario, 'positive engagement' and 'deepening alliances' may well be the key words on the tongue of the EU. Of the five main instruments, two can be used to achieve that: i) diplomatic engagement, and ii) governance support.

In relation to diplomatic engagement, the EU could maintain its *positive* diplomatic engagement with Turkey, focusing on mutual interests, for instance in the field of climate. Both sides suffered from the extreme impacts of climate change last summer, and have expressed their intention to look for areas to improve climate cooperation.<sup>7</sup> Using climate as a tool for cooperation, the two parties could keep an open dialogue, and occasionally use these channels to discuss foreign policy issues. In addition, and seen from the perspective that Turkey is expected to be less receptive towards the EU in this scenario, it could be wise to intensify cooperation with countries neighbouring, and important to, Turkey, such as Azerbaijan and Armenia, in order to work with them on

6 Around 40% of all Turkish exports in goods are currently sold to EU member states, while imports from the EU countries represent 33% of all Turkish imports. Over the last decades, the EU is also by far the biggest source of foreign direct investment in Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey is the EU's 6th biggest trade partner, representing 3.6% of the EU's total trade in goods with the world in 2020.

7 In September 2021, the EU and Turkey had their first high-level dialogue on climate. Source: ["The EU and Turkey discuss climate crisis and future cooperation"](#), European Commission, published on 16 September 2021.

regional stability.<sup>8</sup> Both countries are part of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Stabilisation of the region lies at the heart of those frameworks, yet there still seems to be room for improvement when looking at that specific objective.<sup>9</sup> By scaling up cooperation with Azerbaijan and Armenia, with a focus on (enhancing) regional stability, the EU could pursue a similar strategy to that of Turkey: deepening alliances with other actors to pursue its interests.

Continuing with governance support, the European Union could use Turkey's desire to upgrade the Customs Union (CU), or even the Association Agreement (AA), as leverage. The latter forms the core of EU-Turkey relations, and in one of her latest articles, Turkey expert Ilke Toygür states that under a modernised association agreement with Turkey "*the EU's democratic leverage could actually be greater, as pressure would be linked to more realistic forms of cooperation and more achievable, tangible benefits. [...] It would institutionalize the relationship and minimize the need for ad-hoc negotiations every time a crisis arises*".<sup>10</sup> In this scenario, a modernised AA is not expected to have an immediate effect on Turkey's assertive foreign policy, but further institutionalising the framework could, for instance, form an opportunity to work towards a new, sustainable basis for migration cooperation. The foundation for current migration cooperation is laid in the EU-Turkey Statement – a good example of ad hoc negotiations – to which both blocs agreed in March 2016. However, as a result of new challenges, as well as non-compliance with certain elements of the deal, it is likely time for the statement to be reworked.

## Scenario 2: Post-Erdoğan era

In the 'Post-Erdoğan' scenario, President Erdoğan's popularity and that of the People's Alliance coalition continues to fall throughout 2022. Erdoğan's ability to keep control of the country and sideline the opposition weakens, all the while dissatisfaction, due to rising inflation and unemployment, continues to increase. In the meantime, the Nation Alliance gains ground; they are increasingly able to shape the day-to-day political agenda, start to receive support from (former) AKP cadres and continue to push for early elections. Erdoğan manages to hold this off but fails to develop salient new topics to reframe the political debate. The economic crisis worsens and in 2023 the AKP, MHP and Erdoğan lose the parliamentary and presidential elections, respectively. Kılıçdaroğlu and the National Alliance win, but a long period of governmental formation, compounded by diverging visions on managing a further-declining economy as well as the Kurdish issue, paralyzes the new CHP-İYİ-SP-DP government from the start. And as the newly formed government struggles to cooperate internally, Erdoğan, AKP and MHP loyalists resort to desperate measures to maintain a hold over key ministries, agencies and companies. The aim to withdraw Turkish troops from Syria, Libya and Northern Iraq is not carried out, but the newly elected government is close to striking a deal with Bashar Hafiz al-Assad concerning the Syrian refugees currently residing in the country.

Things initially look rosier for the EU's overall relationship with Turkey in this theoretical scenario. The two main parties in the Nation Alliance – CHP, but also the İYİ party – have been advocating for Turkey's accession to the European bloc for years, and openly proclaim that Turkey should upgrade its democratic and human rights standards to EU level.<sup>11</sup> In addition, all parties in the Nation Alliance promised to return to a full parliamentary

8 For instance, taking confidence building measures, and carrying out mediation.

9 Paweł Stawarz, "[Armenia and Azerbaijan in the ENP: missed opportunities?](#)", *Online journal modelling the new Europe*, no. 32, 2022, 11-128.

10 Ilke Toygür, "[A new way forward for EU-Turkey relations](#)" (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, 26 January 2022).

11 "[CHP calls on EU to revisit Turkey's accession process](#)", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 11 February 2021; "[İYİ Party launches election manifesto](#)", promises return to parliamentary system, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 30 May 2018.

democracy, thereby repealing the much-criticised presidential system initiated by Erdoğan.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to what many people believe, however, this scenario will not be hassle-free either. The state of the economy and fragmentation in the country remains a huge concern, as well as the CHP's and İYİ's position towards minorities. Moreover, the new government's objective to establish ties with Damascus, in order to repatriate Syrian refugees to Syria, as well as their position in the debate over maritime jurisdiction zones in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea is not something the EU would welcome, let alone cooperate on. So, again the question, is there a way for the EU to counterbalance the foreign affairs issues where Ankara and the EU are expected to disagree with one another? The short answer: it depends. The EU's willingness to pursue closer cooperation in multiple policy areas across the relationship *as well as* the alternatives it is willing to put forward will largely influence the outcome of this scenario.

#### Four EU Instruments to rebuild political trust

In that light, 'rebuilding political trust' may well be the key words on the EU side in this scenario. Out of the five EU instruments, four can be used for building political trust: i) diplomatic engagement, ii) governance support, iii) development assistance and iv) military engagement.

To start with diplomatic engagement, the transfer of power offers both blocs a fresh start in a long, troubled relationship. Trust between the EU and Turkey has gradually declined over the past decade, leading Turkey to search for other alliances (with Russia and Iran, for instance, but also Azerbaijan, Qatar and Libya). Diplomatic engagement with the newly elected government, especially during the 'honeymoon phase', could form a very important step in repairing the EU-Turkey relationship. Practically speaking, the engagement could imply high-level visits,

press statements, reviving the EU-Turkey Association Council Meetings, as well as other initiatives.

Continuing with governance support, the European Union could decide to broaden the Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) to assist Turkey on its democratic track. Under IPA I and IPA II, Turkey received billions of euros, but with IPA III the awarding of funds has changed from that of a country focus to a more performance-based approach. That means Turkey is expected to get a small(er) piece of the pie in the next cycle (2021 – 2027), with most of the funding probably going to the Western Balkan countries. Yet the European Commission also stated that should things change for the better, "*it will be sufficiently flexible to adapt to the evolving situation in Turkey*". The theoretical scenario discussed here may be the exception to the rule that the European Commission is talking about. It could, for instance, increase the IPA funding to assist the newly elected government in developing and implementing their wish to return to a full parliamentary democracy, together with the Venice Commission and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation (OSCE).

Next, the third instrument: development assistance. Whereas diplomatic engagement and governance support are mostly suitable for regaining trust and rebuilding the relationship, development assistance is a tool that can be used to improve the much-needed migration cooperation between the EU and Turkey. Over the years, economic, social and cultural concerns have significantly increased within Turkish society,<sup>13</sup> and in this scenario, the newly elected government responds to that by mending ties with Assad in order to send the majority of Syrian refugees back to war-torn Syria. Should the EU wish to change Ankara's mind on this, it really only has one realistic option: renegotiating the EU-Turkey Statement, focused on a long-term

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12 Andrew Wilks, "Turkish opposition forms plan to oust Erdogan, restore parliament's power", *AI Monitor*, 15 February 2022.

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13 Sinem Adar and Friedrich Püttmann, *Making EU-Turkey Cooperation on Migration Sustainable* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 9 February 2022).

engagement in which it agrees to i) step up its resettlement of refugees from Turkey, ii) support their local integration more proactively, iii) work together with Turkey and relevant international organisations to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria (Idlib), and iv) take actions to fulfil Turkey's visa liberalisation roadmap as well as the modernisation of the Customs Union.

Finally, military engagement forms the fourth instrument. Closer EU-Turkey cooperation in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) could be another way to improve the relationship *and* better align future defence policy decisions – for instance, through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Last year, Turkey's request to participate in one of the PESCO projects, as a third country, was rejected due to “*the country's deteriorating democratic values and relations with the EU*”.<sup>14</sup> If Turkey manages to improve its track record on Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), EU member states might be more willing to include Turkey in these types of projects. The same applies for the European Defence Fund, which focuses on collaborative research and capability development projects. That said, (at least) one caveat is in order: every EU member state has the right to veto the participation of a third country in the PESCO structure. As, under this scenario, little progress is expected with regard to the Cyprus issue, there is a significant chance that Cyprus or Greece will continue to veto Turkey's participation. To avoid that, Ankara needs to show substantial progress in other areas, especially in the field of fundamental rights and freedoms.

## Conclusion

In recent years, the European Union and Turkey have drifted apart on foreign policy. The latter made the shift from soft power to an assertive quest for autonomy – as seen in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Nagorno-

Karabakh – which the EU finds unacceptable. At the same time, the EU proved unable to influence Turkey's course, let alone have a say on the regions where Turkey is active. With the 2023 elections in Turkey around the corner, the EU hopes for a post-Erdoğan era, thereby retrieving its former ally. But is it really that simple? And what's in store for the relationship if President Erdoğan *does* win the upcoming elections?

In this policy brief, two theoretical scenarios, considering a period up until 2025, have been identified, and the instruments available to the EU to influence or respond to Ankara's potential foreign policy actions in each scenario were examined. In brief, the two scenarios can be summarised as follows:

- Scenario 1 'Carrying on': against the background of a recovering economy, Erdoğan and the People's Alliance wins the elections and the aim to expand Turkey's sphere of influence rises (even further) to the top of the agenda.
- Scenario 2 'Post-Erdoğan era': Kılıçdaroğlu and the Nation Alliance win the elections in 2023, but cannot seem to agree on their future path. Meanwhile, Erdoğan and AKP and MHP loyalists resort to desperate measures to maintain influence.

Overall, when looking at the two scenarios, the European bloc is expected to have the most room to manoeuvre in the 'Post-Erdoğan era' scenario. Due to the combination of a newly elected government that seems more willing to align itself with EU standards and shared visions (for instance, on Turkey's political system), opportunities to improve the relationship are likely to arise. Through diplomatic engagement, governance support and military cooperation, the EU could invest in the overall relationship with Turkey, focus on better (defence) alignment and thereby restore (parts of) the relationship. For the issues where the two blocs are expected to disagree, however, primarily maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea and the long-term reception of the Syrian refugees in Turkey, more effort is still needed. Here, should the EU want to change Ankara's mind

<sup>14</sup> Oliver Noyan, “[Austria opposes Turkey's bid to join EU military project](#)”, *EurActiv*, 27 July 2021.

about the latter point, for instance, it could decide to bring a serious alternative to the table, such as a drastically revised EU-Turkey Statement.

Under the 'Carrying on' scenario, the EU's opportunities are limited. Not only is Ankara less likely to be willing to cooperate with the EU on foreign affairs, there is also less need for cooperation, due to Turkey's improved economic situation. In order for the EU to be an actor in the region, it would be better off diverting its attention to surrounding countries, while at the same time keeping the (reduced) channels for *positive* diplomatic engagement open with Turkey. The EU does,

however, still seem to have one wild card in this scenario: upgrading the Customs Union or Association Agreement as a whole. The latter forms the core of EU-Turkey relations and an upgrade would institutionalise the relationship and minimise the need for ad hoc negotiations.

No one has a crystal ball, but European policy makers should be prepared for multiple outcomes. Ankara has surprised the West on more than one occasion; even scenarios that seem unlikely deserve attention.

Only one more year, before we know.

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