

The difficult task of rebuilding EU-Turkey relations

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On 24 January, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan met in Ankara with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas. During the press conference, both sides emphasised the importance of EU-Turkey relations, the untapped potential of economic cooperation, and Ankara's key role in European security. The priorities Fidan identified during the meeting included the resumption of high-level economic dialogue between Turkey and the EU, financial support from the European Investment Bank, and meetings of the Association Council, which comprises EU and Turkish representatives and addresses bilateral cooperation, trade, and political dialogue. Fidan also called for the immediate launch of negotiations on modernising the customs union, liberalising the EU's visa policy for Turkey, and even reconsidering a new approach to its membership. Kallas, in turn, focused on areas of cooperation in foreign policy, including stabilising Syria, securing a lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and ending the war in Ukraine.

Fidan's broad set of demands suggests that Ankara is not seeking selective cooperation with the EU but rather a comprehensive economic and political relationship while maintaining considerable room for manoeuvre in its foreign policy. While this aligns to some extent with the EU's efforts to improve relations with Turkey, the foreign minister's demands could, over time, increase tensions between the two partners. Achieving these ambitions would require the approval of certain member states that are reluctant to deepen ties with Ankara.

Commentary

- **Although Kallas's visit was primarily focused on cooperation in the Middle East, it is also part of the broader effort to rebuild political and economic ties between the EU and Turkey.** The attempt to reset these relations began under the previous European Commission (EC) and High Representative on 29 November 2023 (for more information, see *'Turkey and the European Union: in a maze of disputes'*), when both sides expressed their willingness to revitalise political and economic relations between Brussels and Ankara. At the time, the European Commission stressed the need to ease bilateral tensions, strengthen cooperation, and identify mutually beneficial areas of engagement. The European Council endorsed these proposals on 18 April 2024, tasking the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper) with initiating work on the recommendations from the European Commission and the High Representative in a "gradual, proportionate, and reversible" manner.

- **Fidan's rhetoric suggests that Turkey's expectations of the EU are increasing.** Ankara is likely aware that its EU membership remains an unattainable goal, not least due to criticism of its government for democratic backsliding and rule-of-law violations. However, it believes that current international conditions are favourable for pursuing more ambitious goals in its relations with the EU. This conviction is reflected in Turkey's calls to revitalise institutional ties with the bloc, including resuming high-level dialogue, initiating the process of modernising the customs union, and presenting a new vision for its membership. From Ankara's perspective, achieving even part of these aspirations would help address its economic challenges – estimates suggest that modernising the customs union alone could increase the country's GDP growth by approximately 2%.
- **The position adopted by some member states that are sceptical about cooperation with Ankara may hinder the further development of EU-Turkey relations.** For Nicosia, any discussions on closer ties between the EU and Turkey must be contingent on resolving the Cyprus issue – specifically, the reunification of the island and the withdrawal of Ankara's support for the internationally unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. This position was reflected in a decision issued by the European Council in April 2024, which made continued cooperation with Turkey conditional on the resumption of negotiations on the Cyprus issue. The stance of Greece and France will also influence the future of EU-Turkey relations. For Athens, the key issue remains the delimitation of maritime borders, which has long been a source of tensions with Ankara. Paris, meanwhile, competes with Turkey for influence in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the South Caucasus and remains sceptical of Ankara's increasingly assertive policies in these regions. Due to these disputes, France remains opposed to strengthening ties between the EU and Turkey. Improving relations with individual EU member states will therefore be crucial for Turkey as this warrants building closer ties with the entire European Union.