

Can a New Page Be Opened in Türkiye–EU Relations?

(English translation of a commentary published on 30 April 2026 in the Turkish daily digital newspaper T24)

EDAM, Chairman, (R) Ambassador Tacan İldem

The statement by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in which she likened Türkiye’s influence in the Balkans with Russia and China, has created a justified discomfort in Turkish public opinion. The subsequent efforts by the European Commission spokesperson to soften the tone and correct the expression have strengthened the impression that the issue reflects not an isolated slip of the tongue, but rather a deeper mindset problem. It is observed that this statement—undoubtedly the product of an unfortunate and distorted line of thinking—has triggered a comprehensive debate among opinion leaders both in our country and in various European countries. In this article, the said debate will be evaluated within the general course of Türkiye–European Union (EU) relations, which in recent years have increasingly taken on a transactional character.

Relations between Türkiye and the EU have long moved away from a partnership vision and have largely been replaced by a balance based on a “give-and-take” principle. Although it is said that the parties need each other in areas such as migration management, energy security, trade, and regional crises, this need gives rise not to a permanent, principled, and institutional rapprochement, but rather to a form of relationship shaped by short-term interests. The fact that accession negotiations have been effectively stalled is one of the concrete reasons for this situation.

Indeed, in the accession negotiation process launched by the EU with Türkiye on 3 October 2005, only one of the 16 chapters opened—Science and Research—has been provisionally closed. As is known, in the negotiation process, chapters are opened depending on whether candidate countries meet the opening benchmarks determined by the EU Council, and each chapter is provisionally closed depending on whether the closing benchmarks determined by the Council are fulfilled. Even a single negative opinion from a member state can prevent the opening or closing of chapters. At the General Affairs and External Relations Council meeting held on 11 December 2006, EU countries decided that negotiations could not be opened in the chapters of “Free Movement of Goods,” “Right of Establishment and Freedom to Provide Services,” “Financial Services,” “Agriculture and Rural Development,” “Fisheries,” “Transport Policy,” “Customs Union,” and “External Relations” until our country fulfills its obligations stemming from the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement; moreover, other chapters could not be provisionally closed either. Considering the 5 chapters blocked by France, the 8 chapters that could not be opened due to the Additional Protocol, and the 6 chapters that the Greek Cypriot Administration declared it would block, it remains in the memory of those following the issue that only 3 chapters could be opened if the technical opening criteria were met.

On the other hand, in addition to all these negative developments, the backsliding in recent years in our country in the fields of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law has

emerged as a significant obstacle on the fate of the accession negotiations. For member states that distance themselves from Türkiye's EU membership perspective, this situation is presented as an important justification for suspending the membership process, and they take refuge behind this "convenient pretext" that the cause of the deadlock lies with Turkey itself, which created this situation.

Another undeniable fact is that the EU, with the Lisbon Agenda in 2000, adopted a principle that a candidate country that is a party to a territorial dispute cannot join the EU without resolving this dispute, and later incorporated this into its *acquis*. Accordingly, the UN settlement known as the Annan Plan was foreseen to be submitted in 2004 to the approval of both peoples living in Cyprus through referenda. While Turkish Cypriots accepted the Annan Plan by a large majority, the rejection of the Plan by Greek Cypriots with a similar majority created an unexpected situation for the EU. Greece's reckless blackmail—declaring that it would veto the accession of the other 9 candidate countries whose membership would be finalised together with the Greek Cypriot Administration unless the latter was admitted—proved effective, and the EU accepted Nicosia as a member in the absence of a resolution of the Cyprus dispute, thereby disregarding its own normative rules. This decision negatively affected not only Türkiye–EU relations but also the overall credibility of the Union's enlargement policy. The Union also, in this way, imported a chronic problem into its agenda and made permanent a dynamic that causes blockages in decision-making processes. Thereafter, Nicosia, with the support of Athens, has not refrained from playing an obstructive role in Türkiye's relations with the EU whenever possible, and this has begun to be regarded within the EU as an "insurmountable obstacle." Undoubtedly, it must also be acknowledged that there are circles that have welcomed the emergence of such an obstacle, as in the case of France.

In this context, it is also useful to recall that Ursula von der Leyen, in her consecutive "State of the Union" speeches, has not mentioned Türkiye among candidate countries, even though it still formally holds that status. Likewise, when referring to cooperation perspectives aimed at strengthening European security, her inclusion of actors such as NATO member Iceland among non-EU countries, while not mentioning Türkiye, raises the question of whether Ankara is being deliberately excluded as a conscious strategic choice, or whether this discourse reflects the belief within the Commission—from its President to other senior officials—that the blockage posed by the Nicosia-Athens duo cannot in any case be overcome. However, the fact that some European leaders, such as German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, openly emphasise Türkiye's importance for European security demonstrates that there is no full consensus within the Union on this matter.

The current picture shows that relations between Türkiye and the EU are becoming increasingly instrumentalized and moving away from strategic depth. Although under the heading of a "positive agenda," the possibility of progress in certain areas is occasionally raised, conditioning such progress on Türkiye taking steps that would satisfy Athens and Nicosia reflects an approach far from resolving the structural problems of the relationship. This situation makes it difficult to establish mutual trust and prevents the relationship from evolving into a more balanced and mutually beneficial framework. At this point, however, the question of whether the current membership perspective is realistic also gains importance. Developments in recent years show that the goal of full membership has increasingly become part of political rhetoric and has moved away from being a concrete policy objective.

On the other hand, in a period when strategic competition in the global system is intensifying, the EU's effort to position itself as a "geopolitical actor" is also being tested by existing structural problems. An objective assessment shows that, in order to realise this ambition, the EU needs the contribution of Türkiye, which is increasingly gaining weight in its region as a middle power, particularly in the field of security. As noted in my previous article (<https://edam.org.tr/en/edam-in-the-news/can-europe-s-search-for-security-become-a-window-of-opportunity-for-turkiye>) on Türkiye's place in the European security architecture, the advancing cooperation of Türkiye with EU member states such as Italy, Spain, Romania, and Poland in the field of defense industry is in fact proof that the need for Türkiye's contribution is increasingly being recognized.

It is increasingly voiced that reform in decision-making mechanisms, in a way that would enable the EU to act in line with its claim of being a geopolitical actor, has become a necessity. In this context, as proposed by German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepful, the transition from unanimity to a qualified majority voting system in areas concerning the EU's foreign and security policy could be an important step toward faster and more effective decision-making. Otherwise, the current structure, where national vetoes are decisive, will make it difficult for the Union to respond to global crises in a timely and effective manner and will lead to geopolitical sluggishness. It is also possible to foresee that the geopolitical environment will in practice compel the EU toward more inclusive forms of cooperation.

This situation may lead the EU and Türkiye to consider a functional partnership model without eliminating the perspective of full membership. It may be useful to examine whether establishing a more flexible framework that could overcome current blockages would be a more realistic option for both Türkiye and the EU. Steps such as updating the Customs Union, advancing the visa liberalization process, and developing more institutionalized cooperation mechanisms in the field of security could constitute the indispensable foundations of such a model.

However, for such a transformation to be possible, both sides must accept that the current form of relationship is not sustainable. Turkey's revitalization of its domestic reform agenda and making tangible progress in areas such as democracy, fundamental rights and freedoms, and the rule of law would create an important basis for restructuring relations with the EU. Likewise, the EU must adopt a more inclusive and strategic perspective in its approach to Türkiye, go beyond short-term political calculations, and inject into its system a flexibility that would overcome the blockages posed by the Athens-Nicosia duo.

The key reference institutions in Türkiye's ties with the West are the Council of Europe, NATO, and the EU. If the goal is to strengthen Türkiye's relations with the West on the basis of a new understanding of realignment, this should not be limited solely to the NATO framework; it is important to make efforts to develop an approach that will also reinforce relations with the other two institutions and help halt the negative course of recent years that has damaged the fabric of these relations, allowing them to progress on a healthier footing. In other words, steps that will strengthen Türkiye's place within the Western world must be placed within a broader strategic perspective that also includes relations with the EU.

In conclusion, the debate shaped around Ursula von der Leyen's statements is, in fact, a reflection of broader structural problems within Türkiye–EU relations. Under current conditions, it does not seem easy for the relationship to shed its transactional character, which for the time being suits both sides. However, changing global balances and increasing geopolitical risks may compel the parties to reconsider a more rational and long-term adapted cooperation model, without completely removing the option of full membership from the perspective. This, in turn, will require rebuilding mutual trust and placing relations on a firmer institutional footing.