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MURCIR Analiz

Türkiye-EU Relations After the Russia-Ukraine War: Türkiye's Strategic Role, Policy Divergences, and Identity

“The Russia-Ukraine war has reinforced Türkiye’s strategic importance for the EU, particularly in security and energy. However, policy divergences, especially regarding Russia, have deepened its exclusion from the enlargement process. While the EU accelerates integration for Eastern European countries as a geopolitical necessity, Türkiye is still framed as a strategic partner rather than a future EU member. This is largely due to concerns over democracy, which continue to reinforce the perception of Turkish identity as a cultural and political ‘other.’”

Sezgi ERDOĞAN

The Russia-Ukraine war has fundamentally reshaped the European Union’s strategic priorities, driving shifts in foreign policy, security, and enlargement dynamics. This transformation has directly impacted Türkiye-EU relations, highlighting both cooperation and tensions. While Türkiye’s geopolitical significance has grown due to its role in security, migration, and energy, its divergence from EU policies, particularly on sanctions against Russia, has reinforced its status as a strategic partner rather than a future member. Meanwhile, the EU’s evolving identity discourse, shaped by rising nationalism and right-wing politics, continues to frame Türkiye as an outsider. As the war accelerates EU enlargement for Eastern Europe, Türkiye’s accession prospects remain stalled, exposing the growing gap between Ankara and Brussels. Understanding these developments is crucial for assessing the trajectory of Türkiye-EU relations and the broader geopolitical order. In this context, this analysis focuses on the transformations in the EU following the Russia-Ukraine war and their implications for Türkiye-EU relations.

How have the EU's foreign policy and security priorities changed after the Russia-Ukraine war?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the largest military attack in Europe since World War II, has profoundly reshaped the EU's foreign policy and security priorities. The war has driven the EU toward a more assertive and strategic approach, emphasizing defense cooperation, energy security, and geopolitical resilience. One of the most notable shifts has been the adoption of the Strategic Compass in March 2022, one month after the start of the war, outlining a shared threat analysis and plans for enhanced military capabilities, including a 5,000-soldier "rapid deployment capacity" from various Member States. EU member states have significantly increased defense spending, launched joint procurement initiatives, and strengthened cooperation with NATO. The EU has also provided over €82 billion in support to Ukraine, including military aid, marking the first time the EU has financed weapons for a third country. The war has also transformed the EU's energy policies. In response to Russia's weaponization of energy, the EU has reduced its dependence on Russian oil and gas, diversified energy sources, and prioritized energy security. Sanctions on Russia's economy and key industries have further reshaped EU-Russia relations, shifting from economic interdependence to security-driven deterrence. The Union has placed greater emphasis on security and defense policies while aiming to enhance its independence in strategic areas such as energy security, logistics, and trade. Overall, the war has pushed the EU toward a more unified, militarized, and strategically autonomous role in global affairs, blending normative influence with hard power elements to reshape the European security order.

What implications has the Russia-Ukraine war had on Türkiye-EU relations? How has Türkiye's strategic role evolved for the EU in relation to this war?

The Russia-Ukraine war has significantly reshaped Türkiye-EU relations, reinforcing Türkiye's strategic importance while exposing key policy divergences. Türkiye has pursued a balancing strategy, maintaining strong economic ties with Russia while deepening its cooperation with NATO and the EU on security matters. Although Türkiye already contributes to Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions and is a NATO ally, the EU's pursuit of a more autonomous European security strategy highlights the need for increased defense cooperation and a stronger commitment between the EU and Türkiye. Unlike the EU, Türkiye has refused to impose sanctions on Russia, making it a key trade corridor for Russian businesses and causing tensions in Brussels. At the same time, Türkiye has positioned itself as a mediator, brokering key agreements such as the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative and facilitating diplomatic efforts between Moscow and Kyiv. This role has enhanced Türkiye's geopolitical significance for the EU, which values Ankara's ability to engage both sides of the conflict. Türkiye's energy transit role has also grown in importance, as the EU seeks alternatives to Russian gas. With its pipeline infrastructure and liquefied natural gas (LNG) capacity, Türkiye has become a vital player in Europe's energy security strategy. However, challenges remain.

Despite its military contributions to Ukraine, Türkiye's security concerns regarding Sweden and Finland's NATO accession created friction with Western allies. Furthermore, while Türkiye's geopolitical leverage has increased, concerns over democratic deficits and backsliding continue to hinder deeper cooperation with the EU. In sum, the war has elevated Türkiye's strategic role, opening new opportunities for collaboration in security, energy, and diplomacy. Nevertheless, fundamental policy differences, especially regarding Russia, continue to shape the trajectory of Türkiye-EU relations.

How have the EU's enlargement discussions shifted following the war? How has it affected Türkiye's accession process?

The Russia-Ukraine war has fundamentally reshaped the EU's enlargement strategy, prioritizing security-driven expansion over traditional bureaucratic processes. The EU has accelerated accession talks for Ukraine and Moldova, granting them candidate status as part of a broader effort to counter Russian influence. This shift reflects a strategic imperative to stabilize the EU's eastern neighborhood, making enlargement a geopolitical tool. In contrast, Türkiye's accession process remains stalled, with little progress due to persistent concerns over democratic deficits, democratic backsliding, rule of law, and human rights issues. Despite Türkiye's strategic importance, particularly in regional security, migration management, and energy transit, its EU membership aspirations have been further sidelined. The bloc increasingly views Türkiye as a partner rather than a candidate, focusing on selective cooperation, such as modernizing the EU-Türkiye Customs Union and energy security initiatives. Moreover, Türkiye's refusal to align with EU sanctions on Russia and ongoing bilateral disputes with Greece and Cyprus have reinforced skepticism among key EU member states. While Ukraine's rapid integration into EU structures underscores the Union's shifting priorities, Türkiye's accession remains indefinitely stalled, exacerbating frustrations in Ankara. In response, Türkiye has sought to diversify its partnerships, exploring alternative alignments. Ultimately, the war has revitalized EU enlargement for Eastern Europe while further marginalizing Türkiye's candidacy, deepening the divide between Ankara and Brussels.

What role does identity play in Türkiye-EU relations? How has the war influenced debates on Turkish, and in turn, European identity?

Identity plays a vital role in Türkiye-EU relations, shaping both policy decisions and mutual perceptions. Türkiye has long managed its geopolitical role and its "in-betweenness," with historical and cultural ties to the continent. However, it is often framed as an "outsider," reflecting a broader debate on what constitutes European identity. This ambiguity has contributed to the stagnation of its EU accession process, reinforcing the notion that European identity is defined in exclusionary terms. At the same time, Türkiye's own identity discourse has evolved, with nationalist and Islamic narratives increasingly challenging its European aspirations.

The rise of nationalist and right-wing politics, as seen in the 2024 European Parliament elections and the elections in Germany in 2025, has further entrenched skepticism toward Türkiye's EU membership, often portraying it as incompatible with European values. The Russia-Ukraine war has intensified identity debates on both sides. The EU has sought to reassert itself as a community of liberal democracies in opposition to authoritarianism, embracing Ukraine as a European state defending shared values. In contrast, Türkiye's democratic deficits, democratic backsliding, and foreign policy choices, particularly its refusal to align with EU sanctions on Russia, have reinforced its image as a cultural and political "other." Within Türkiye, the war has also fueled debates on its own geopolitical identity, with growing discourse on strategic autonomy and alternatives to European integration. Despite Türkiye's crucial role in security, migration, and energy cooperation, its positioning during the war has deepened mistrust, reinforcing its status as a strategic partner rather than a future EU member and, thus, supporting a transactionalist and pragmatic approach to the EU-Türkiye relations. The war has, paradoxically, revitalized EU enlargement while pushing Türkiye further away from the European identity framework.

About the Author



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