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Framing conditionality in times of crisis: EU institutional responses to Turkey's democratic decline (2014–2024)

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ABSTRACT

How consistent is the European Union's (EU) response to the growing democratic decline in its neighbourhood? While existing research has examined the domestic drivers of autocratisation in the neighbourhood and its impact on the EU's transformative power, the variability and contestation within the EU's institutional response remain underexplored. In this article, we aim to address this gap by analysing how the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council have framed and operationalised conditionality toward Turkey over the past decade (2014–2024). Through a systematic frame analysis of official EU documents and approximately 7,000 coded statements, we reveal diverging views on Turkey among EU institutions rooted in competing normative and strategic logics, alongside agreement on the use of punitive conditionality combined with sustained dialogue with Turkey. Our core argument is that while these dynamics reveal differences of views on Turkey among EU institutions, they reflect an evolving hybrid model of the EU's engagement style with Turkey. This is shaped and constrained by geopolitical conditions and Turkey's regime change, and mixes the EU's enlargement policy tools, namely political conditionality with new foreign policy conditions, and normative considerations with geopolitical interests in dealing with rapidly de-democratising candidates.

KEYWORDS

Enlargement; Turkey; EU-Turkey relations; conditionality; democratic decline; framing

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long relied on political and acquis conditionality as a central instrument of the enlargement policy. By linking political and economic benefits to compliance with democratic norms and governance standards, conditionality has served as a tool of influence and a marker of the EU's normative identity. However, this approach has come under increasing strain in recent years. Nowhere is this more evident than in the EU's relationship with Turkey, a longstanding candidate country experiencing a pronounced democratic decline. In this article, we ask: How consistent is the European Union's (EU) response to the growing democratic decline in its neighbourhood? How do different EU institutions frame and apply conditionality in response to Turkey's de-democratisation during a period of geopolitical turmoil for the EU?

By examining nearly 7,000 official statements¹ issued between 2014 and 2024, we uncover significant differences in perspectives, but also similarities, in how the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament have defined the core challenges of the EU-Turkey relationship and articulated the appropriate instruments of engagement. We argue that the EU has increasingly adopted a hybrid engagement model with Turkey, shaped by geopolitical pressures and Turkey's regime change. This model combines the asymmetrical logic of enlargement policy with the cooperative logic of foreign policy between equals. It also blends strategic interests² with normative concerns³ in responding to a rapidly de-democratising candidate.

We situate this institutional analysis within the broader context of overlapping challenges to both Turkey and the EU. During the period under study, scholars observed a significant democratic decline and illiberal turn in Turkey with backsliding from defective democracy to competitive authoritarianism in a very short

period (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016, p. 1582; 2019). Around the same period, the EU navigated internal challenges through numerous crisis situations, including the refugee challenge, Brexit, COVID-19, and dissensus over liberal democracy within the Union (Brack & Gürkan, 2021). Externally, the EU encountered a more volatile geopolitical landscape shaped by great power rivalry, rising polarisation, and declining multilateralism, culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These internal and external pressures prompted a significant reassessment of the EU's international role (Costa et al. 2025, p. 1). These challenges on both sides provide the backdrop for our analysis of shifting institutional framings and allow us to assess how they have influenced EU perspectives on foreign policy tools, particularly conditionality, in responding to democratic decline in neighbouring states.

We build our argument by taking three analytical steps. First, we systematically map EU institutions' perspectives on Turkey's democratic backsliding. Here, our aim is to understand whether the institutions speak with one voice and are aligned in their positions, interests, or values they promote vis-à-vis Turkey, what we refer to as convergence, or whether they differ in their preferences, strategies, or use of EU instruments towards Turkey, which we refer to as divergence. Second, we go beyond the traditional normative/strategic dichotomy by disaggregating how institutions define policy problems, formulate responses, and construct different logics of cooperation, including their relative reliance on punitive or negative conditionality, i.e. sanctions versus positive conditionality in the form of rewards (Becker, 2025). Third, we trace how these frames have evolved over time, with particular attention to key turning points such as the refugee challenge leading to the conclusion of the EU–Turkey statement in March 2016,⁴ Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum, and the broader shift in the EU's geopolitical environment following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Drawing on secondary literature on EU conditionality and Turkey-EU relations, we develop propositions on institutional behaviour in the EU's enlargement policy in an increasingly geopolitically turbulent neighbourhood. We draw on and test intergovernmentalist assumptions (Bickerton et al., 2015; Moravcsik, 1993), which highlight the European Council's growing role in defining EU policy outcomes at the expense of supranational agenda-setting. Therefore, we seek to empirically extend (to 2024), further expose and deepen understanding relating to the hitherto well-documented ideational struggles between the supranational institutions and intergovernmental institutions in terms of preferences over how to frame the EU's approach to Turkey in a triple crisis context. Supranational bodies, given their formal role in monitoring accession, are likely to adopt a normative stance. By contrast, in a context of geopolitical turmoil, we expect the European Council to prioritise strategic interests over normative concerns, due to Turkey's geopolitical importance for the Union and its Member States. Furthermore, under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) which regulates enlargement, in accordance with institutions' formal competences, we expect supranational institutions ultimately align with intergovernmental actors in shaping the EU's engagement with Turkey.

While existing scholarship has addressed intra-institutional inconsistency among EU institutions in the EU's external action or the weakening of the enlargement framework, few studies have examined how conditionality itself is re-framed across different institutional sites. Prior work has highlighted diverging institutional positions within the EU on Turkey (Reiners & Turhan, 2021) or pointed to the rising influence of intergovernmental bodies such as the Council and especially the European Council, often at the expense of the Commission and the European Parliament (Gürkan & Coman, 2021; Turhan & Wessels, 2021), but these analyses tend to adopt varied conceptual lenses and remain fragmented focusing either on a single EU institution or a specific policy domain in EU-Turkey relations. By adopting a framing approach, we offer a more fine-grained and comparative analysis of how EU institutions narrate and frame conditionality in practice and over time. This allows us to uncover the political work that framing performs: legitimising certain tools (such as sanctions), sidelining others (notably rewards), and, in some cases, redefining the purpose of cooperation itself.⁵

In order to articulate our argument, we draw on the case of EU–Turkey relations between 2014 and 2024. This timeframe was chosen for three main reasons. First, for methodological reasons, this decade corresponds to two full legislative terms of the European Parliament and two terms of the European Commission. This allows us to analyse a coherent dataset that spans the entire duration of two political cycles, capturing institutional positions before significant changes in parliamentary groups and bureaucratic leadership occur. Second, this period represents a phase of continuous and heightened challenges in EU–Turkey relations. On the Turkish side, the country's illiberal turn accelerated following the failed coup attempt in 2016 under the

state of emergency (2016–2018), and with Turkey's transition to an executive presidential system following a 2017 referendum, which was formally implemented with the July 2018 elections. The EU strongly criticised all of these developments. On the EU side, institutions faced simultaneous crises, including Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Syrian refugee challenge (2015–2016), and a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment. These developments prompted EU institutional actors to reassess the nature of their engagement with Turkey, making this period a particularly revealing case for examining how institutional framings evolve in times of uncertainty and turbulence. Third, the ten-year timeframe offers a sufficiently broad yet analytically manageable horizon for capturing longitudinal trends and patterns in institutional approaches. It is sufficiently long to trace broader trends and patterns in institutional approaches, while remaining concise enough to allow for qualitative coding and in-depth frame analysis. While the objective of this article is not to establish direct causal links between every step in Turkey's democratic backsliding and the EU's response, this timeframe enables us to systematically identify key moments of inter-institutional convergence and divergence and to situate them within their broader political context.

The Turkish case is particularly valuable for addressing our research questions. First, it serves as a critical stress test for the EU's engagement with illiberal states, allowing us to observe how this process affects the EU's use of engagement tools, especially conditionality. Second, alongside democratic decline, Turkey has pursued a more assertive regional foreign policy, prompting the EU to adopt new tools. For instance, during this period, the EU strongly criticised Turkey's illegal drilling⁶ in the Eastern Mediterranean and the weaponisation of Syrian refugees, leading to the construction of a 'positive agenda' to improve relations in 2021 (Anghel & Fusiek, 2021).

As such, this research speaks directly to current debates about the future of enlargement, the credibility of EU foreign policy, and the resilience of conditionality as a governance tool. With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, enlargement has regained prominence as a foreign policy instrument (Koval & Vachudova, 2024). Yet member states remain divided on the pace and scope of enlargement towards the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova (Buras & Morina, 2023). The Turkish case provides a valuable setting to trace how geopolitical shifts and inter-institutional divergences have shaped the EU's foreign policy tools and framing. In doing so, the article contributes to the Special Issue by offering Turkey as a critical lens through which to assess the EU's ability to act and potentially effect change in its neighbourhood.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the conceptual and theoretical literature on EU conditionality in enlargement policy, particularly regarding institutional roles, to situate our contribution. Second, we outline our methodological approach, focusing on how we operationalise our frame analysis. Third, we examine how EU institutions have framed their responses to Turkey's de-democratisation amid an increasingly geopolitical and volatile security environment in the Eastern neighbourhood. The final section reflects on the key implications for the EU's capacity to frame and respond to democratic decline, both in Turkey and the wider neighbourhood, as the Union seeks to redefine itself in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

EU's conditionality in the enlargement process

The literature on the EU's conditionality has evolved as part of the vast literature on the Europeanisation of candidate countries. Europeanisation refers to a 'process in which states adopt EU rules' (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, p. 7). The Europeanisation literature has deepened our understanding of when, why and how the EU impacted on Central Eastern European Countries (CEECs) and beyond (Börzel & Risse, 2012, 2017; Dimitrova, 2002; Grabbe, 2001, 2006; Jacoby, 2004; Kelley, 2006; Pridham, 2005; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Sedelmeier, 2011; Vachudova, 2005). These studies, drawing on the debate between constructivism and rational institutionalism, sought to deepen our understanding and provide explanatory factors for analysing the EU's impact on candidates. The constructivist strand sought to elaborate on the relevance of learning and socialisation processes through EU accession within the reform process of candidate countries (Braun, 2016) whilst the rationalist strand focused on the EU's use of the conditionality tool and domestic veto players to explain the main patterns of candidate country Europeanisation (Sedelmeier, 2011).

In this respect, a number of studies suggested that conditionality has played a key role and was the EU's main policy tool in driving post-communist democratisation and the acquis compliance of the CEECs (Grabbe, 2006; Kelley, 2004). Here, scholars analysed the factors – international (EU-level) and domestic –

enabling or limiting the change in candidates' or neighbours' policy or politics (Kubicek, 2003; Pridham, 2005; Schimmelfennig, 2003b; Schimmelfennig et al., 2003; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Vachudova, 2005; Whitehead, 2001; Zielonka & Pravda, 2001). Domestic factors determining successful Europeanisation related mainly to the size of domestic adoption costs of EU rules for the target government, whilst EU-level (international) factors influencing successful EU rule adoption included the clarity⁷, timing of rewards⁸, the EU's monitoring capacity⁹ and the size of the EU's rewards¹⁰ as well as the credibility of conditionality.

The credibility of conditionality is a key factor determining the effectiveness of the EU's conditionality and refers to the EU's credibility to deliver the reward in case of rule adoption; and conversely, the credibility of the EU to withdraw rewards in case of non-compliance (Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2010, p. 445; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, p. 665; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, p. 13). Credibility also depends on the EU's consistency in applying conditionality. If the EU member states or EU institutions give conflicting messages on a condition, or on the allocation of rewards or sanctions, this negatively impacts rule adoption. As the accession process includes several EU institutional actors, if EU institutions do not speak with a single voice about the conditions or reform priorities, this can lead to confusion among candidates and acceding countries might abuse any disagreement among EU institutions. In this respect, divergence among EU members or EU institutions on how to approach Turkey, including the offer of incentives in case of compliance as well as sanctions in case of non-compliance, might damage the credibility, and consequently the effectiveness of the EU's conditionality vis-à-vis Turkey. This inter-institutional consensus on the conditions and their relative importance is the central focus of this article.

The early literature on Europeanisation and the de-Europeanisation literature which addressed post-accession non-compliance and setbacks of Europeanisation in Southeast Europe and Turkey, studied at length the EU's (in)ability to allocate rewards and sanctions in case of compliance. Subsequent studies confirmed these findings. While conditionality remains the EU's main instrument for preparing candidates, the absence of a membership perspective weakens the EU's conditionality (Börzel et al., 2017). In the case of Turkey-EU relations, scholars have already shown that the absence of a credible membership perspective resulted in an ineffective conditionality, and coupled with the government's domestic interests, led to Turkey's de-Europeanisation (Gürkan & Tomini, 2021; Yilmaz, 2016).

In addition to the credibility of a membership perspective, scholars have also studied the consistency of EU conditionality. In this regard, the impact of the refugee crisis on the conditionality, namely the EU's policy to externalise migration to Turkey in return for material incentives (mainly financial assistance and the revitalisation of the accession process) has been studied in the literature (Gürkan, 2023; Soler i Lecha, 2023). However, (in)consistent conditionality, in terms of diverging views among EU institutions, has remained under-studied. To fill this gap in the literature, we use frame analysis to unpack the EU's approach to Turkey and specifically, to interrogate differences and similarities in inter-institutional perspectives in setting the EU's policy priorities, approach and conditions vis-à-vis Turkey.

EU institutional actors in the enlargement process: prior expectations on ideational struggles

In this section, we map the main EU institutional actors involved in framing conditionality, clarify their respective roles in the enlargement process, and develop theoretical expectations to be studied empirically. The institutional division of labour concerning the accession of a new member state indicates a formal hierarchy of authority in decisions related to admitting new members. According to Article 49 of the TEU, the Council/European Council is the ultimate decision-maker on enlargement, while the Commission's role is limited to drafting recommendations to the Council, and the European Parliament's (EP) consent to the accession of a new member appears to be a bureaucratic step.

In practice, however, all the institutions play a role in shaping the EU's enlargement strategy. Member states, acting mainly through the European Council, set the strategic agenda and define conditions, typically based on Commission recommendations, while making critical decisions at summit level. The Commission is the main interlocutor for candidates, advising the Council on readiness through Opinions, Regular Country Reports, and Negotiating Frameworks. It thus oversees compliance and allocates rewards. The EP holds the final vote on a new member's accession and influences domestic actors through direct engagement with parliamentarians and public debate. Thus, during the accession process, while the European Council and

the Council, upon the recommendation of the Commission sets the conditions (what needs to be done by the candidate), the Commission, together with the EP, is in charge of the close monitoring of the candidate (with the purpose of evaluating the compliance of the candidate with membership conditions), and rewards (carrots), which are allocated according to the degree of compliance under normal circumstances (see Figure 1). In this way, the EU's conditionality is expected to lead to a reform process and rapid democratisation in cases when a credible commitment by the EU vis-à-vis the candidate is maintained, as was the case during the 'golden age of Europeanisation' in Turkey between 1999 and 2004 (Oniş 2007). This is how, in theory, EU conditionality is meant to create a virtuous circle in relations through which the EU generates change in the candidate.

In this inter-institutional interaction, although the Council remains influential, providing the framework for member states to oversee and scrutinise the Commission's activities through the Council of Ministers, Coreper, and its subcommittees throughout the enlargement process, European Council summits provide essential political guidance for the process (O'Brennan, 2006, pp. 55–73), enabling it to act as 'master of enlargement', 'external voice and crisis manager', and 'agenda and direction setter' (Turhan & Wessels, 2021, p. 188).

In this article, we focus exclusively on the European Council (as opposed to the Council), due to its increasingly prominent role within the EU's institutional architecture. Furthermore, as the institution that reflects the highest level of strategic consensus on critical foreign policy issues, the European Council has consistently served as the main agenda-setter in determining the pace and direction of enlargement. In the specific case of Turkey, the country has featured regularly on the European Council's agenda, especially in relation to migration, Turkey's military operations in Northern Syria, and its illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean (Anghel & Fusiek, 2021). With regard to Turkey, the European Council has not only set the strategic agenda but has also issued highly detailed instructions to both the Council and the Commission, thereby sidelining these institutions. These conclusions often shape the EU's overall approach to Turkey – particularly when decisions involve significant shifts, such as offering a positive agenda or freezing accession talks – and, in doing so, effectively constrain or empower other institutions, notably the Commission and the Parliament (Turhan & Wessels, 2021, p. 190).

Against this backdrop, how are EU institutions expected to frame the EU's approach, in particular its conditionality vis-à-vis a strategically important but de-democratising 'candidate'? Over the last two decades, the EU's self-narrative shifted from transformative, normative, civilian power to a geopolitical, hard security actor (Dimitrova et al., 2025). In parallel to this, several scholars recognise that regional dynamics and a 'preference for stability' and security rather than meritocracy of candidates weakened the EU's conditionality (Džankić et al., 2019). Taking these discussions into account, and drawing on new intergovernmentalism (Bickerton et al., 2015; Fabbrini, 2013; Fabbrini & Puetter, 2016) that highlight the European Council's

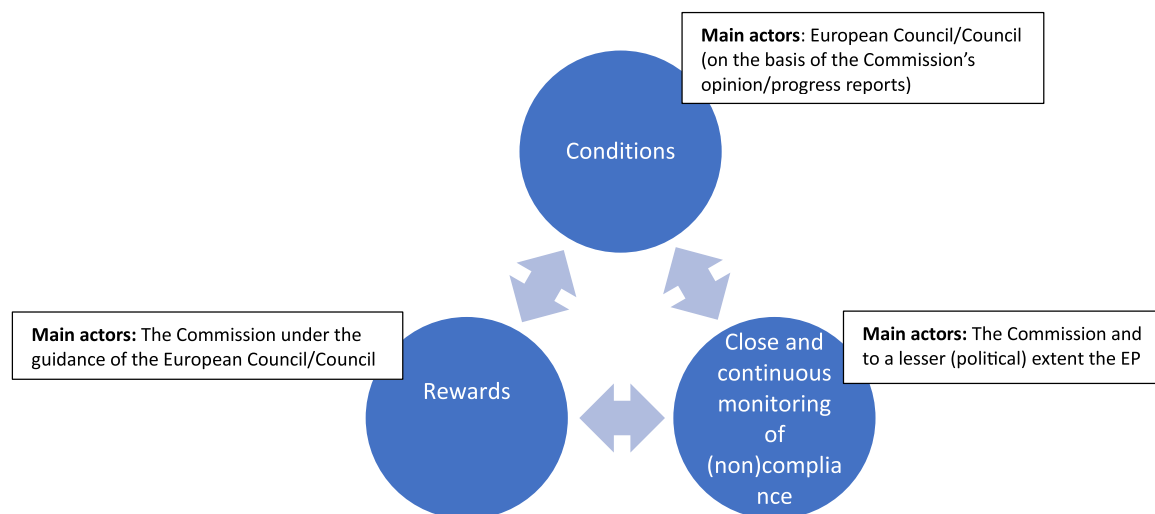


Figure 1. EU's conditionality: Who are the main actors and how does it work?

dominant role in EU day-to-day decision-making process at the expense of supranational institutions' agenda-setting and policy entrepreneurship, we expect ideational struggles between supranational (the European Parliament and the European Commission) and intergovernmental institutions (the European Council) over how to frame the EU's approach to Turkey.

Given its increasing role in the EU's enlargement process, and rapidly changing context of EU foreign policy, we expect the European Council:

- (a) *to make political decisions on accession based on the strategic significance of the candidate for the EU and its Member States to protect core EU interests.*
- (b) *to frame the EU's relationship with candidate countries in strategic terms, often limiting the scope for more normative or procedural framings by other institutions.*

Turning to the Commission, although Article 49 of the TEU formally limits its role to an advisory function in the enlargement process, it has significantly enhanced its political role since the EU's enlargement to the CEECs due its agenda-setting and candidate's compliance monitoring powers. In the case of the Eastern enlargement, the Commission effectively exercised its agenda-setting power to the extreme, taking advantage of the cleavages among member states. It set the agenda, proposed pro-enlargement initiatives, and secured Council endorsement through alliances with like-minded member states or with the Presidency, depending on the issue (Sedelmeier & Wallace 2000, p. 445). Furthermore, throughout the process, the Commission emerges as the primary agent of conditionality, through its role in managing capacity-building measures in candidate states and monitoring compliance with accession conditions (O'Brennan, 2006, p. 87). More recently, under President von der Leyen, while the Commission has embraced a geopolitical turn, it increased its leadership role in the enlargement agenda (Koval & Vachudiva, 2024).

Therefore, given its role as the norm entrepreneur and key agent in monitoring candidates' compliance with the accession criteria, namely the Copenhagen criteria:

- (a) *the Commission is expected to evaluate the candidate based on the compliance of the candidate with pro-democracy norms.*

However, because of its geopolitical turn and its limited prerogatives under the Article 49 of the Treaty, we expect:

- (b) *the Commission to ultimately align with the European Council's geostrategic interests in terms of the EU's engagement policy with Turkey.*

The EP plays a dual role: Formally, it must approve any accession treaty, granting it a *de facto* veto at the final stage of accession. This makes the EP a pivotal player throughout the process, as neither the Council nor the Commission can ignore its views (Gürkan, 2019). Informally, it monitors candidate countries through its resolutions, reports and plenary debates. Considering that the EP has become the flagbearer of the EU's fundamental values, such as human rights and pro-democracy norms (Feliu & Serra, 2015), and given its monitoring role in the accession process, we expect the EP, to be fair but critical in upholding the normative basis for accession to the EU. Combined with its normative leadership among all EU institutional actors, it can take a 'competence maximiser' stance (Pollack & Slominski, 2015, p. 246), even in areas where it has a marginal formal (constitutional) role, such as foreign policy. We therefore expect:

- (a) *The EP to prioritise normative assessments over geopolitical calculations, placing emphasis on compliance with democratic standards.*

However, the EP also acts pragmatically. As seen during Eurozone crisis, the Russian annexation of Crimea or Brexit (Gómez et al., 2019), the EP has at times supported intergovernmental leadership in the face of major external challenges. Therefore, while it may align normatively with the Commission, it is not immune to strategic compromise.

- (b) *Despite normative divergence from the European Council, the EP may ultimately converge on broader policy outcomes, such as alternative forms of engagement with Turkey especially in crisis contexts such as the refugee challenge to the EU.*

The following section will expand on our methodology for testing these expectations.

Methods: data and frame analysis

Major disruptive emergencies present critical junctures where framing contests unfold, shaping interpretations of events, their causes, and future policy directions (Boin, 2009). This study explores primary European Union (EU) documents on Turkey to understand how the European Council, the Commission, and the Parliament responded to Turkey's increasing de-democratisation in a turbulent geopolitical environment, from 2014 to 2024. This enables us to trace, empirically, (a) how EU institutions framed conditionality amid democratic backsliding in Turkey, and (b) where points of convergence and divergence emerged between them.

We adopt a framing approach grounded in Entman's (1993) definition: frames involve selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and amplifying them within a communicative text. This process serves to promote a particular definition of the problem, an interpretation of its causes, a moral evaluation, and/or a recommended course of action. A frame, therefore, encompasses multiple elements: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. In our analysis, we identify and code actor statements that contain at least one of these frame elements.

Framing plays a pivotal role in the EU policy process, offering substantial analytical insight. As Dudley and Richardson (1999, p. 226) note, frames help actors navigate complex or ill-defined issues, while Harcourt (1998, p. 370) highlights their role in shaping power dynamics within EU governance. Although the analytical potential of framing has been acknowledged (e.g. Daviter, 2011), empirical applications within EU studies remain limited. Responding to this gap, we contribute to the work of Eising et al. (2015), who show how institutional contexts and strategic framing interact in shaping EU-level debates.

Our analysis focuses on European Council conclusions, the European Commission's annual reports on Turkey, and European Parliament resolutions concerning Turkey. We also include two European External Action Service (EEAS) reports on EU-Turkey relations (2021–2024), categorised under Commission documentation due to their formal designation. Notably, while the Commission did not publish reports on Turkey in 2017,¹¹ it issued seven reports between 2016 and 2017 on the EU-Turkey Statement, mainly addressing the so-called migration crisis. These have been excluded to avoid overrepresenting Turkey as a strategic partner solely in the context of migration.

We acknowledge that the official documents issued by EU institutions are the product of extensive internal negotiations and therefore do not necessarily reflect the positions of different cleavages within each institution. For instance, European Parliament resolutions are political documents negotiated over a long period among various political groups, as well as within the same group across different national delegations. In the same vein, European Council conclusions are the result of preparatory work carried out by the Council, particularly the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and its bodies. Moreover, these documents reflect the formal division of competences among the institutions. While European Parliament resolutions are primarily political texts focusing on domestic affairs, Commission documents adopt a more technocratic language centred on the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria, and European Council declarations are high-level statements with an emphasis on international and strategic dimensions.

This represents a twofold methodological challenge for the present study. First, we expect the frames to mirror each institution's specific area of competence. Second, the analysis of these documents does not reflect inter-institutional (informal) negotiations or intra-institutional cleavages. Despite these methodological limitations, systematically analysing the ultimate position of these institutions remains important for several reasons. First, these documents reflect the formal positions of the institutions and together shape the EU's official stance vis-à-vis the candidate country. Thus, contradictions or differences between these positions can lead to overall inconsistency in the EU's approach. Second, mapping how different EU institutions address the same issues – such as democratic backsliding or the Cyprus question – sheds light on broader patterns in the EU's engagement with Turkey, including, for example, how geopolitical

considerations may override normative concerns. Third, identifying areas of divergence among institutions allows us to open the black box of conditionality, illustrating how different institutional priorities shape and sometimes pull the EU's approach in different directions.

In coding these documents, we followed the framework outlined in Table 1. The central question guiding our study is how the three EU institutions present and justify their approach in relation to Turkey. To explore this, we split the overarching question into sub-questions (see Table 1 research questions) in order to systematically trace where the institutions converge or diverge in defining problems, applying rational or normative assessments, and proposing solutions. Our coding also captures instances where one institution echoes another's position. While this may amplify certain perspectives, we view such reiterations as part of the EU's institutional framing and include them accordingly.

Using this framework, we coded roughly 7000 statements across documents from the three institutions: the Commission (4,873), the Parliament (1,831), and the Council (239). This distribution highlights the Commission's central role in shaping and implementing conditionality. Over time, the highest number of statements occurred in 2021 (1,221), followed by 2023 (942), 2019 (878), 2022 (826), 2020 (684), 2018 (610), 2015 (609), 2016 (590), 2014 (481). The rise in recent years reflects increased institutional engagement amid Turkey's democratic decline and foreign policy assertiveness. We examine these trends further in the following sections.

Empirical findings: how do institutions frame the EU's approach to Turkey?

We proceeded in two ways to analyse the data. First, we examined inter-institutional differences and similarities among EU institutions, with the aim of opening the 'black box' of the EU's approach to Turkey and demonstrating that these institutions may frame Turkey's accession in markedly different ways. By mapping these diverging perspectives, we show how the democratic decline in Turkey triggered competing frames regarding a candidate country. This approach sheds light on the complexity of the EU's response to Turkey's accession, revealing the divergent priorities, but also convergence points among the institutions involved. Second, our analysis incorporates the temporal dimension, focusing on how institutional engagement and framing evolved over a ten-year period. This dimension enables us to systematically consider the impact of a challenging context on the EU's approach and to trace how institutional perspectives shifted during such periods. The following subsections will first elaborate on inter-institutional divergence and convergence, before turning to the evolution of institutional frames over time.

Table 1. An overview of research questions, frames and number of coded statements.

Research questions	Specific frames	Number of coded statements
How do EU institutions differ in defining what Turkey's problems are in terms of its negotiations and accession progress?	problems of progress rooted in Turkey (e.g. democratic decline) problems of progress rooted in the EU (e.g. public opinion)	3583
How do EU institutions differ in defining the conditions for EU accession?	conditions for membership (e.g. Copenhagen criteria)	1779
Do EU institutions differ in the way they discuss rewards and sanctions?	rewards for membership (all kinds of carrots) Sanctions (all kinds of sticks, and withdrawal of carrots)	238
Do EU institutions differ in the way they refer to interests or norms? Do some refer to one category than others?	Pragmatism (e.g. mutual interests, geopolitics, crises, strategic priorities, AND any specific policy area that is mentioned) Norms (e.g. EU norms, values, rule of law, human rights AND any specific policy area that is mentioned)	718
Do EU institutions differ in their logic of cooperating with Turkey?	Inclusion (support for full membership) Exclusion (support for alternatives, not full membership)	396
Do EU institutions mention awareness of internal tensions/ inconsistencies between themselves?	internal divisions of the EU	228

EU institutions: inter-institutional divergence/convergence

The data indicate four major findings regarding institutional convergence/divergence. First, EU institutions have different perspectives and priorities vis-à-vis Turkey as seen in Figure 2. They diverge in terms of which issues they consider most important in creating divergence between Turkey and the EU. Each of the three institutions emphasises distinct types of challenges in the Turkish accession process. Here, we identify three primary frames: domestic issues, regional dynamics, and accession-related concerns. While the Commission frames the problems primarily around domestic concerns, the European Council is more focused on regional issues. From the Commission's perspective, domestic issues¹² (50% of the coded statements for the Commission) are followed by problems directly related to specific accession process-related matters, such as refusal/failure to implement ECtHR rulings, GRECO, and Venice Commission Recommendations (30% of all the coded statements), and regional problems (20% of all the coded statements). From the perspective of the European Council, the most often cited obstacle or challenge clouding the EU-Turkey relationship has been regional problems (84%), particularly Cyprus, and Turkey's illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, the EP discussion of Turkey's problems predominantly concerns domestic issues¹³ (51%) and regional issues¹⁴ (38%). The security situation was also heavily emphasised regarding migration, border security, and the resumption of the Kurdish peace process. Regarding accession problems (11%), similar to the Commission, the Parliament highlighted Turkey's refusal/failure to implement ECtHR rulings, GRECO, and Venice Commission Recommendations.

We acknowledge here that this divergence in institutional perspectives is expected given the competences of the institutions and not just limited to Turkey – and that it is further supported by the observation that there is a similar pattern in relation to the definition of conditions. When referencing the conditions for Turkey's accession to the EU, the European Commission emphasises the need for domestic improvements, including resolving human rights issues (9% of conditions), addressing corruption (5%), implementing legal and constitutional reforms (11%), and fostering a politically engaged civil society and media (11%). Similarly, the EP also demonstrates the importance of domestic reforms, particularly in the areas of human rights (23.5%) and legal and constitutional changes (17%), as essential for EU accession.

Calls to align with specific policies (13%), such as visa liberalisation, and appeals to adhere to EU and international standards (15%), including the EU acquis, are also frequently mentioned by the Commission. In comparison, the European Parliament places greater emphasis on alignment with EU and international standards (31%). The European Council, on the other hand, focuses more on foreign policy issues. Among the areas where it expects additional efforts (38% of all statements) the top subcategory is the implementation of

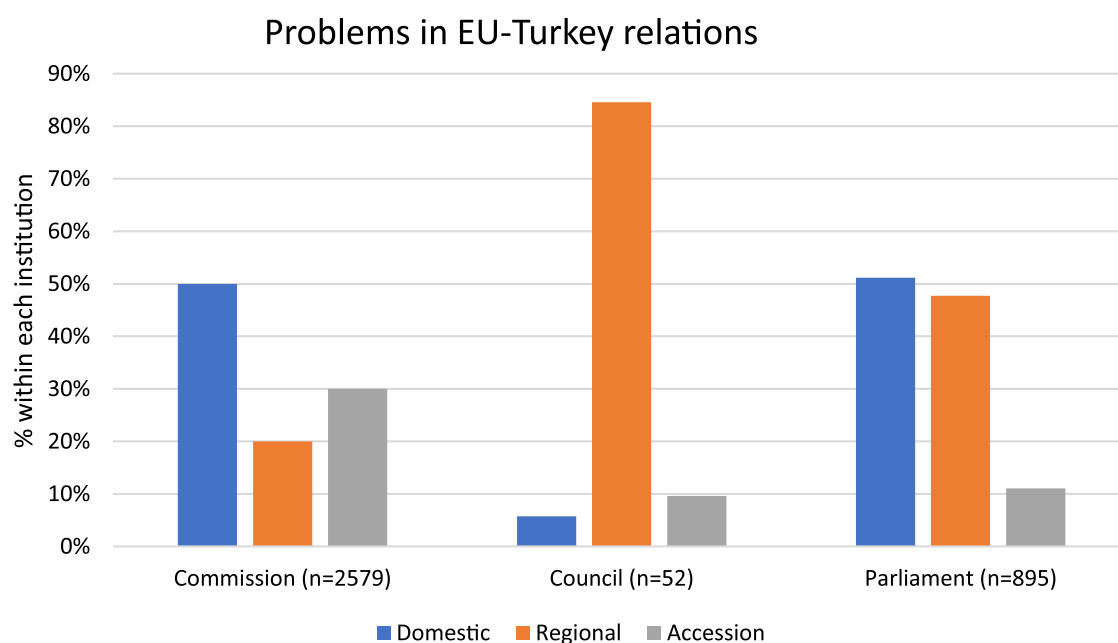


Figure 2. Problems in EU-Turkey relations.

the EU-Turkey statement and Action Plan in stopping irregular migration via Turkey to the EU (6 statements out of 8 statements in total pertain to the implementation of the EU-Turkey Action Plan). This is followed by the importance of socio-economic convergence (1 statement out of 8) and recommendations to step-up the reform process in the area of rule of law (1 statement out of 8). Furthermore, under the category of 'reiteration of expectations and commitments', that is, areas where Turkey has fallen short of expectations, the European Council almost exclusively refers to foreign policy (80% of all the statements under this category relate to foreign policy), including the settlement of the Cyprus problem (20%); de-escalation of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean (20%); and Turkey's lack of implementation of EU-Turkey Action Plan (40%). And only 20% of European Council statements fall under the category of criticisms related to democracy, rule of law, respect of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression.

Second, as seen in Figure 3, the institutions also differ in their approach to the nature of relations. While the European Council and Commission appear to be more strategic (particularly in migration and economic matters), the EP is instead driven by normative concerns. Both the Council (53%) and the Commission (31%) are focused on interests, and refugees/migration as a primary basis for EU accession.

Indeed, from the European Council's perspective, the role of Turkey in migration collaboration (53%) coupled with its value as a strategic partner (18%) attest to the importance the European Council attaches to an interest-driven relationship with Turkey (both refugee and strategic partnership equal to 71% of all the coded statements under this category). While one might expect intergovernmental organisations to be primarily interest-driven, reflecting member states' strategic priorities, the data reveal unexpected scores for the Commission: from the Commission's perspective, refugee/migration (31%), economic interests (29%), and security/stability (25%) emerge as the most frequently mentioned interests upon which the EU-Turkey relationship should be based. This overemphasis on interests (99% of overall frames) in the Commission's documents on Turkey might be interpreted as a sign of the Commission's geopolitical turn also in the enlargement process – at least vis-à-vis Turkey. On the other hand, as expected, the European Parliament remains a norm-driven institution in its stance toward Turkey, with 54% of its focus falling on normative concerns. It is particularly vocal about democratic, humanitarian, and rule of law principles, using language such as 'upholding the highest standards of democracy,' 'respect for the rule of law and human rights,' and asserting that 'a free and pluralistic press is the core principle of any democracy.' The European Council (2%) and the Commission (1%) are significantly less driven by values and norms in their references to Turkey's accession and EU-Turkey relations. However, even in the case of the European Parliament, various interests – such as security and stability (16%), economic concerns (10%), strategic partnership (9%), refugee/migration issues (8%), and border cooperation (2.5%) – collectively account for 46% of all frames coded for the EP. This indicates that, despite its norm-driven stance, interest-based considerations also play a substantial role in the EP's approach to Turkey. Another interesting observation in Figure 4 is that all the institutions qualify Turkey as a 'strategic partner' – albeit at different degrees (the European Council 18%, Commission 14% and Parliament 9%).

Third, while the institutions diverge on the logic of cooperation (the *why* of cooperation), they tend to converge on the nature of cooperation (the *how* of cooperation). In terms of the logic of cooperation (Figure 5), the European Council (100% of all coded statements) and the Commission (85% of all coded statements) tend to adopt a more strategic perspective, placing strong emphasis on mutual benefits. Other aspects of mutual relations – such as economic considerations or the strategic importance of Turkey –

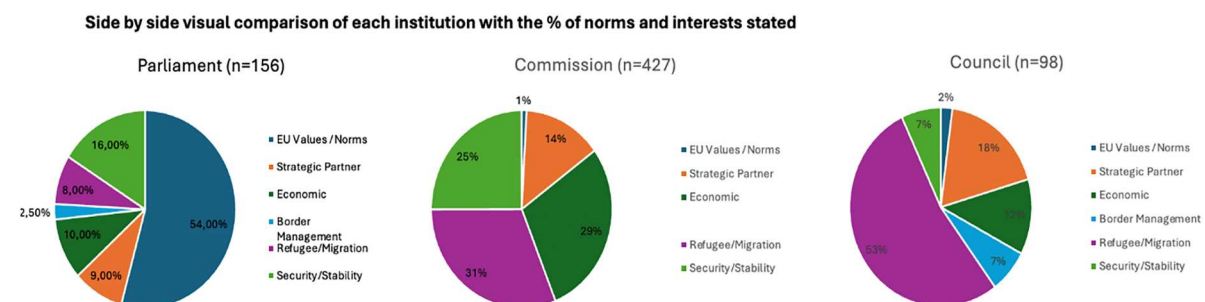


Figure 3. Interests vs norms: institutional comparison.

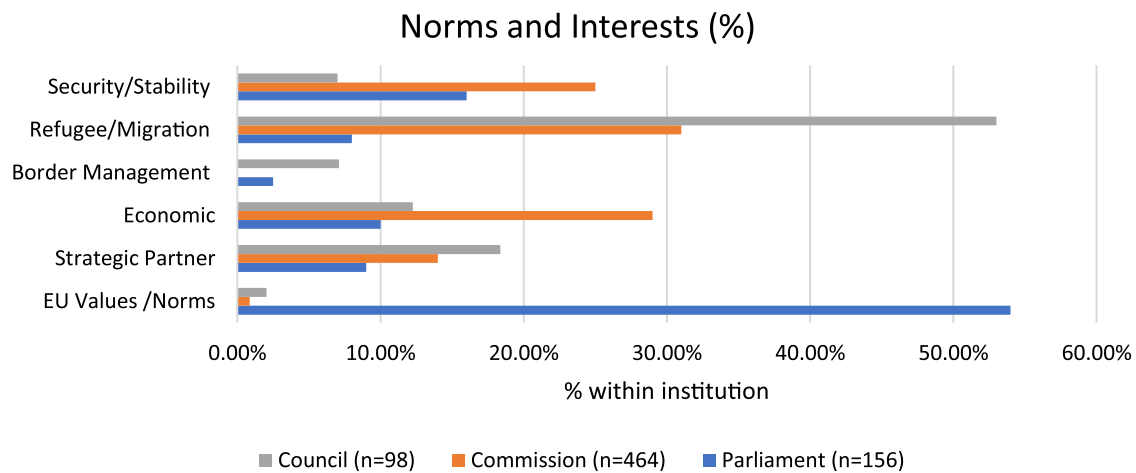


Figure 4. Breakdown of Norms and Interests (%) per institution.

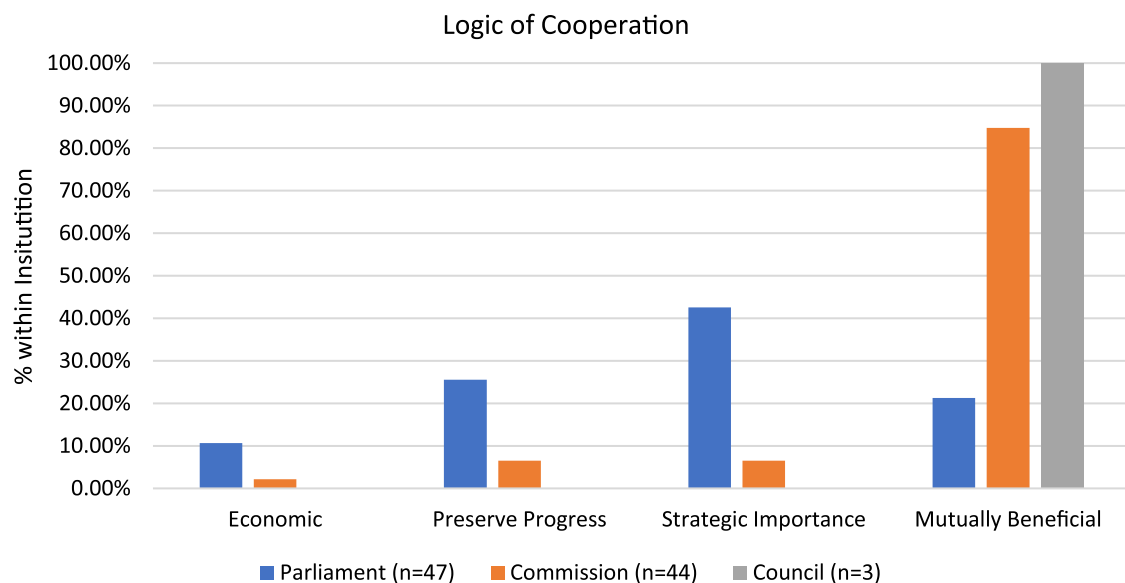


Figure 5. Logic of cooperation: Why should the EU cooperate with Turkey?

appear to be of lesser significance from the perspective of these institutions. While the EP's reference to mutually beneficial cooperation remains limited (21%), it is the institution which values Turkey as a strategic partner the most. This might be interpreted as an indication of the EP's willingness to categorise Turkey as a partner (rather than a candidate) and its search for an alternative framework of cooperation with Turkey since its recommendation to cease accession talks with Turkey; first by calling on member states to temporarily freeze accession talks in November 2016; and then, through recommending the suspension of EU accession negotiations with Turkey in March 2019. Indeed, due to Turkey's declining commitment to EU values, the EP (European Parliament 2021, paragraph 78) called for an EU-Turkey leaders' summit to 'review the current framework of relations or explore new, more effective models for EU-Turkey relations'. This suggests a shift towards an alternative form of engagement with Turkey, beyond the accession framework, in light of the country's significant democratic backsliding.

Turning to the nature of cooperation, in Figure 6, the frames coded under this category refer to the types of cooperation discussed or proposed by the institutions – particularly alternatives to full EU membership. These range from high level dialogues in areas of shared interest, negotiations surrounding association agreements, cooperation in other forums such as meetings, conferences, and technical discussions on specific topics and working groups. It is interesting to observe that despite institutions' different views on

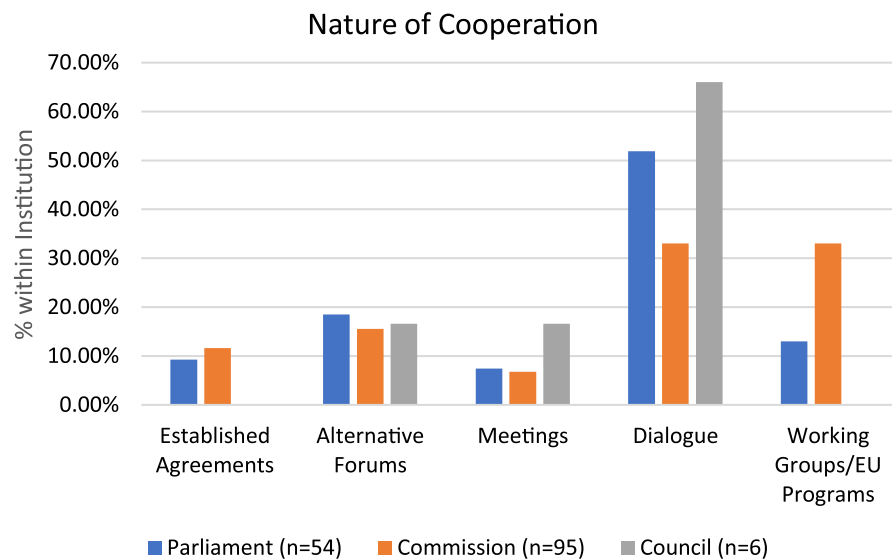


Figure 6. Nature of cooperation: How should the EU pursue relations with Turkey?

why the EU should continue cooperating with Turkey, all the institutions converge on the importance of dialogue. On this issue, the Council (66%) emerges as the primary advocate of dialogue with Turkey, followed by the EP (51.85%) and the Commission (33.01%).

Fourth, the above-discussed institutional convergence on the nature of cooperation in Figure 6 follows a similar pattern in terms of institutions' converging preference on using punitive measures (sanctions) rather than rewards in dealing with Turkey (Figure 7). Here, we observe that for all three institutions, rewards are mentioned less than sanctions. This suggests that all institutions consider sanctioning to be more effective, and that the stick works better than the carrot in the EU's relations with Turkey.

To summarise, these findings indicate a mixed picture regarding how Turkey's democratic backsliding has affected inter-institutional consistency. While the institutions have different focus about the core problems in EU–Turkey relations (conditions), the rationale for engaging with Turkey (logic of cooperation), and the relative importance of values versus interests in the EU's conditionality, they nonetheless converge on the preferred approach to Turkey i.e. dialogue over other forms of cooperation and preference for punitive measures over rewards. This preference, combined with the commitment to dialogue, may signal a shift in the EU's engagement strategy with authoritarian regimes, characterised by a hybrid approach that blends dialogue with sanctions. The following section traces the evolution of these frames over time.

Tracing inter-institutional convergence/divergence through time

An over-time analysis of the data suggests three key findings. First, EU–Turkey relations have become increasingly problematic over the past decade, with domestic issues related to Turkey's illiberal turn seen

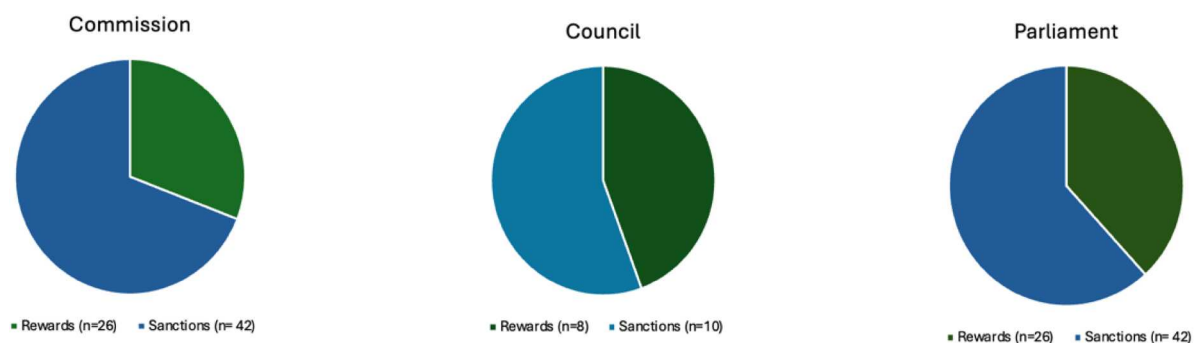


Figure 7. Do EU Institutions differ in the way they discuss Rewards and Sanctions?

as the main obstacle between Brussels and Ankara from the EU's perspective. This is followed by specific accession-related issues and regional challenges, primarily stemming from Turkey's assertive foreign policy, which have also become increasingly contentious for all EU institutions since 2017 (Figure 8). Figures 8–10 exclude data for 2017, as the Commission did not issue a report on Turkey that year. To ensure cross-institutional comparability, data from the Council and Parliament have likewise been omitted for this period.

Here 2017–2018 emerges as a critical moment that magnified existing problem areas in EU–Turkey relations. In other words, issues that were already present prior to 2017–2018 – namely accession-related, domestic, and regional challenges – became increasingly pronounced after the constitutional referendum in 2017, and the first Presidential elections held in 2018, which marked Turkey's transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system.

Second, the use of conditionality (i.e. setting conditions) remains important for the EU over time (see Figure 8) with the Commission emerging as the champion of the EU's conditionality. In accordance with institutional competences, the Commission has consistently mentioned conditions vis-à-vis Turkey the most (in total mentioned 1333 counts), followed by the EP (425 counts) and the European Council (19 counts). This finding aligns with the Commission's traditional role as the primary actor in monitoring compliance with the conditions of the accession process. The Commission's leading role in implementing conditionality is further supported by the data on the use of punitive measures, i.e. sanctions and rewards over time (Figure 9). In our study, these rewards included incentives such as increased allocation of funding, additional technical support and resources as well as societal benefits such as easing travel restrictions for citizens once the visa liberalisation is fully implemented. Sanctions on the other hand included a set of punitive measures such as ceasing specific funding, conditionally suspending negotiations, implementing economic or trade sanctions, and using targeted measures. It is the Commission that has consistently employed these tools, while becoming increasingly sanction-oriented in recent years – particularly between 2019 and 2021 – issuing more sanction-based statements than both the European Council and the EP. This shift is primarily attributed to Turkey's assertive foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, in line with the position adopted by the Council on this issue.

Third, while norms become less important for all the institutions over time, the Commission becomes the institution which emphasises the most the primacy of interests (Figure 10). Among all three institutions, the EP remains over time the most norm-driven institution in its relations with Turkey. This finding is partially in line with the literature that suggests that EU–Turkey relations have become increasingly transactional and interest-driven over the last decade, whereas the EP has remained the champion of EU values in EU–Turkey relations (Gürkan, 2023). However, the Commission's interest-driven turn over the years requires further attention. One might interpret this shift as a geopolitical turn by the Commission, shaped by evolving regional dynamics and Turkey's democratic decline. Yet, given the Commission's central role in the

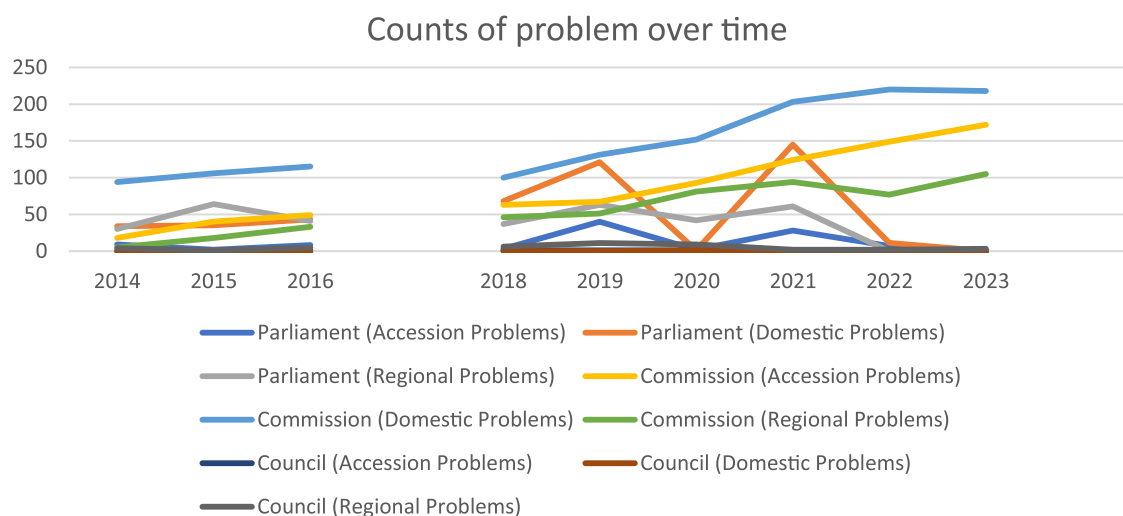


Figure 8. Evolution of problems per institution.

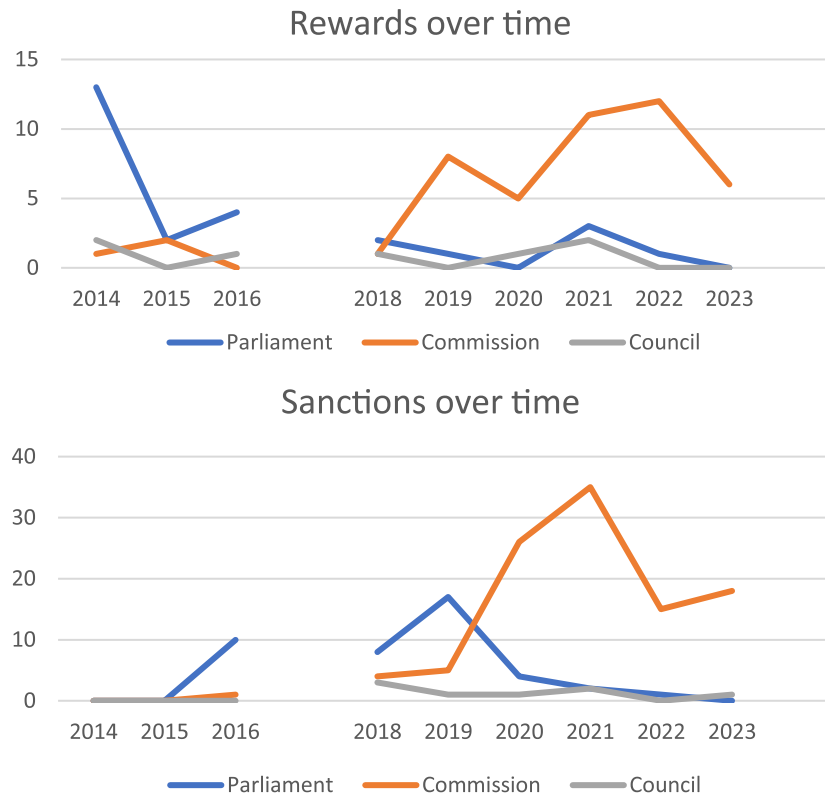


Figure 9. The evolution of rewards and sanctions over time.

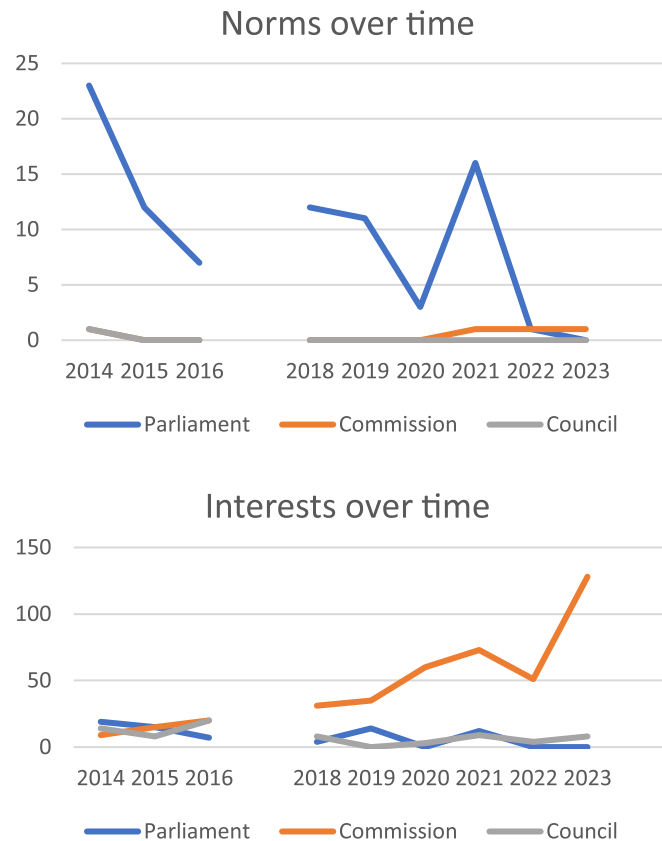


Figure 10. The evolution of norms and interests over time per institution.

enlargement process, both as a norm entrepreneur and agenda-setter, and its active role in conditionality, an interest-driven approach to Turkey is likely to consolidate illiberal trends in Turkey.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how the EU institutional actors responded to democratic backsliding in Turkey between 2014 and 2024, a period marked by overlapping challenges within Turkey and the EU. Through systematic analysis of official EU texts, we showed that institutional responses reflect significant divergences in priorities and framing, yet also areas of convergence, particularly in preferred modes of engagement with a de-democratising candidate.

Drawing on existing literature, we expected each EU institution to reflect distinct logics in responding to Turkey's democratic decline. The European Commission was anticipated to uphold rule-based conditionality but ultimately to align with the European Council's strategic agenda. The European Council, reflecting member state interests, was expected to prioritise strategic concerns like migration and regional stability. The European Parliament, as the normative voice of the EU, was expected to emphasise democratic standards, though with some flexibility under crisis pressure. Our observations based on the systematic analysis of frames largely confirm the European Council's interest-driven role and the EP's normative leadership, tempered by growing pragmatism. Most strikingly, the Commission has moved away from its traditional normative stance, increasingly aligning with the European Council's strategic framing. This suggests a shift in the EU's approach to Turkey from a values-based model to a hybrid approach shaped by geopolitical pressures, institutional tensions, and the declining credibility of enlargement. It is important to note that the Commission's turn toward interest-based framing in 2015–2016 may reflect short-term pressures linked to the refugee crisis and the EU-Turkey migration deal, rather than a purely structural or long-term institutional shift.

Our findings speak to recent theoretical debates on the evolution of EU enlargement policy in the face of democratic backsliding and geopolitical instability. Rather than relying on the traditional 'reinforcement by reward', EU institutions increasingly combine sanctions with continued diplomatic engagement, a hybrid strategy that suggests a pragmatic recalibration of conditionality under stress. While this hybrid model diverges from early rationalist theories of enlargement (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004), it resonates with more recent scholarship suggesting that conditionality is being reshaped by a weakening normative environment and institutional fatigue. In this light, our findings offer empirical support for the idea that the EU is adopting a more strategic, interest-driven stance while still seeking to uphold core democratic standards, although unevenly across its institutions.

Empirically, our findings provide detailed insights into how the EU navigates its engagement with de-democratising regimes in its neighbourhood, particularly in times of geopolitical uncertainty. In this regard, the Turkish case offers important lessons for understanding the broader dynamics of the EU's conditionality tool, as it embodies the dilemmas the EU faces when attempting to reconcile its normative commitments with its strategic interests, particularly when the asymmetrical relationship between the EU and the candidate state is reduced because of strategic or interest-driven considerations. In this sense, the patterns of engagement observed in this study may also apply to other contexts where the EU seeks to balance these competing logics but still has various engagement tools – i.e. incentives and sanctions – at its disposal, as in parts of the Western Balkans. By contrast, in cases where strategic considerations dominate and political conditionality is less relevant – such as the EU's relations with Iran or Russia – these findings may have more limited applicability. Future research could build on these insights through comparative analysis of inter-institutional dynamics in framing conditionality across different country contexts, such as Serbia, Egypt, or Tunisia, thereby testing the scope and limits of the patterns identified in the Turkish case and assessing the generalisability of our findings.

Another important limitation of this study is that while a discursive (framing) analysis offers a valuable lens for understanding EU policymaking dynamics, it needs to be complemented by research linking candidates' democratic backsliding to EU discourse and actual policy implementation. While our aim in this paper was to explore main patterns in EU institutional actors' stance on Turkey over time, an in-depth analysis connecting particular shifts in EU institutions' stance to specific turning points in Turkey's illiberal drift would offer precise understanding of the causal mechanisms between candidates' illiberal turn and the EU's policy

response. In this respect, theory-testing process tracing could connect specific framing shifts to concrete decisions, offering more precise causal insights on the researched outcome, e.g. changing discourse and policy of EU institutions (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Interview-based research with EU officials, in particular with national representatives to the Council, which prepares European Council decisions, could further reveal how internal negotiations, bureaucratic dynamics, and informal coordination shape dominant frames. Alternatively, further research might explore how changes in the Commission's leadership between 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 shaped its stance towards Turkey, thereby adding a valuable comparative dimension to the analysis of inter-institutional dynamics exploring the effects of institutional leadership changes on EU foreign policy framing.

These findings also offer relevant policy implications. First, the increasing reliance on punitive measures, combined with sustained dialogue, suggests the emergence of a more pragmatic, hybrid approach to foreign policy that blends normative commitments with strategic interests. Formalising this approach could enhance EU leverage in cases where normative pressure alone is insufficient. Second, the diminished role of rewards and the continued weakening of the accession perspective in the case of Turkey call for a rethinking of the EU's enlargement toolkit, particularly for countries where full membership is increasingly unlikely in the near term. Designing flexible forms of integration or cooperation based on mutual benefits could maintain reform incentives without relying solely on membership promises. Finally, and perhaps most critically, our findings highlight the importance of addressing internal EU divisions, both within and across institutions, and EU member states. While such divisions may offer checks and balances that guard against unilateralism or overreach, they also risk weakening coherence, credibility, and responsiveness in confronting democratic decline. In moments of geopolitical and normative stress, disjointed messaging and policy inconsistency can undermine the EU's role as a principled international actor. Prioritising greater coherence through clearer inter-institutional coordination mechanisms and a shared strategic vision requires not eliminating institutional diversity but harnessing it constructively. The case of Turkey thus offers not only a test of EU conditionality under strain, but also a window into the broader question of how the EU can act effectively, and legitimately, in an increasingly contested world.

Notes

1. By statements, we refer to coded expressions found in official EU documents. These may consist of a single word, a phrase, or an entire sentence.
2. In this article, we refer to EU "interests" as strategic or material considerations that shape institutional preferences and behaviour. These include geopolitical or economic concerns, security, and migration. This definition draws on rationalist assumptions, which suggest that the decisions on membership in the EU, is made based on instrumental rationality, which "are based on the egoistic preferences of both members and candidates for membership, and they reflect the material conditions of the international system" (Schimmelfennig, 2003a, p. 20).
3. In our study, we define norms as "a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity" that guide and legitimise political action (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). These norms draw on the shared value system of the EU and they are embedded in the EU's legal framework, and in the case of enlargement policy, they are encoded in Copenhagen criteria. This understanding of norms draws on constructivism, which suggests that "social actors act on the basis of internalised cultural values and social norms instead of their own, individual utility" or instrumental and strategic logics of action (Schimmelfennig, 2003a, p. 69).
4. EU and Turkey concluded the EU–Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016 in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. Through this agreement, the EU and Turkey agreed that all irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands would be returned to Turkey. In return, the EU, in addition to granting an extra €3 billion to the Refugee Facility for Turkey, reaffirmed its readiness to lift visa requirements for Turkish citizens (subject to certain conditions), to upgrade the customs union with Turkey, and to re-energize Turkey's accession process. In the run-up to the conclusion of this agreement, the parties provisionally agreed on the EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan (JAP) in October 2015, which was then activated in November 2015. The JAP involves the denial of entry to refugees who were arriving by the Aegean Sea. In return of Turkey's collaboration in containing refugees in Turkey, the European Council promised to re-energize Turkey's accession process (Gürkan & Coman, 2021).
5. By sanctions we mean the withdrawal of rewards or other punitive action against a target state in case of candidates' non-compliance with the EU's conditions. Rewards refer to the allocation of benefits if the candidate complies with the previously agreed conditions (Becker, 2025).
6. Turkey objects to the characterisation of its drilling activities as "unauthorised" or "illegal," arguing that these activities take place within its continental shelf and that Turkish Cypriots have also legitimate rights over the

island's natural resources. Ankara maintains that its actions are in line with international law and the rights of the Turkish Cypriot community. For Turkey's official position see Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019).

7. The clarity of the EU demands refer to the clear definition of EU conditions. Candidates should know "what exactly they need to do if they decide to comply with the EU's conditions" (Sedelmeier, 2011, p. 12). Please note that Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005, p. 12) call this factor "determinancy".
8. The timing of rewards refer to the various stages of the accession process. According to the scholars closer to the date of enlargement-related decisions by the EU, the likelihood of compliance increases (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Vachudova, 2005; Kelley, 2006).
9. This refers to the EU's effective benchmarking and monitoring (of candidate's compliance), and scholars suggested that if the EU monitors the candidate closely and effectively, the likelihood of compliance increases.
10. Scholars suggest that the conditionality is likely to be more effective if rewards are bigger. For instance, membership-related carrots (opening of accession talks or granting membership rights) are bigger carrots than technical assistance.
11. The European Commission did not publish the Progress Reports (renamed 'Country Reports') in 2017 for any of the candidate countries, as it was revising its reporting methodology. The publication of the Country Reports resumed in 2018, using the new methodology. The authors are grateful to the Delegation of the EU to Türkiye for this clarification.
12. Including media censorship, flawed democracy, humanitarian challenges and issues surrounding the labour market, workers' rights, as well as discriminatory businesses practices, corruption and politicisation.
13. The Parliament is most concerned about Turkey's democratic backsliding, the wrongful imprisonment of opposition politicians, and the lack of judicial independence, similar to the Commission.
14. The Parliament's regional concerns focused on Cyprus, including the importance of settlement, blockage of cooperation and respect for sovereignty, similar to the Council.

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