

Joint Master in Global Economic Governance and Public Affairs

***Turkiye's Expanding Global Ties and the
Future of its Relationship with the EU***

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Statutory Declaration

I hereby declare that I have composed the present thesis autonomously and without the use of any other than the cited sources or means. I have indicated parts that were taken out of published or unpublished work currently and in a verifiable manner through quotation. I further assure that I have not presented this thesis to any other institution or university for evaluation and that it has not been published before.

17/06/2025

Samuray Turedi

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S. Turedi', with a large, stylized 'S' and a cursive 'Turedi'.

Thesis Pitch

<https://youtu.be/dKl9Xwzq4s8>

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Türkiye's expanding global ties have affected the future of its relationship with the European Union. Although Türkiye remains formally part of the EU accession framework, the credibility of membership has weakened significantly, reducing the effectiveness of EU conditionality as a tool of external governance. At the same time, Türkiye has expanded its diplomatic, economic and security engagement across the Balkans, Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East. This has contributed to a more autonomous and multi-vector foreign policy, shaped by a wider shift towards multipolarity in the international system.

The dissertation uses a qualitative single case study and process tracing to analyse the relationship between accession stagnation, Türkiye's strategic diversification and the changing nature of EU-Türkiye relations. It argues that Türkiye's expanding global ties have reduced the focus of EU accession within Turkish foreign policy. However, this has not resulted in a complete breakdown of EU-Türkiye cooperation. Instead, the relationship has shifted away from accession-driven Europeanisation and towards a more transactional form of strategic interdependence.

The findings show that EU influence over Türkiye has not disappeared but changed in character. While the accession process remains institutionally present, cooperation now depends on mutual interests in areas such as trade, migration, security and regional stability. The case of Türkiye therefore highlights a wider challenge for EU external governance. Conditionality is the most effective when the reward of accession is credible, consistent and politically achievable. In a multipolar order, candidate states with alternative partnerships may become less dependent on the EU. Türkiye demonstrates that when accession credibility declines, external governance may preserve cooperation but becomes less able to produce significant political transformation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Background and Context

The relationship between Türkiye and the European Union has moved far beyond a simple accession narrative. Although Türkiye remains formally connected to the EU enlargement framework, political credibility of membership has significantly weakened. Accession negotiations have come to a standstill, yet selective cooperation between Türkiye and the EU remain. This creates a complex relationship in which accession remains institutionally present but no longer functions as the central driver of cooperation.

At the same time, Türkiye has expanded its global diplomatic, economic and security ties beyond the EU framework. Its growing engagement across the Balkans, Africa, Central Asia and the middle East suggest a wider shift in Turkish foreign policy towards a more autonomous and multi-vector approach. This does not mean a complete separation from Europe, but Türkiye can still develop alternative partnerships outside of the accession process.

This dissertation examines this changing relationship in the context of a more multipolar international order. As global power becomes more dispersed, middle powers have greater room to pursue independent foreign policies. Türkiye's expanding global ties therefore raise an important question about the future of EU influence. If the credibility of accession has declined and Türkiye has more strategic alternative, to what extent can the EU still shape the direction of the relationship through conditionality?

1.2: Research Problem

The central problem addressed in this dissertation is that EU-Türkiye relations are still often discussed through the formal language of accession, even though the relationship is becoming increasingly based on selectiveness and cooperation. The accession process has not formally ended but no longer appears to provide a credible pathway towards membership. This

weakens the logic of EU conditionality, which depends on the belief that domestic reform and policy alignment will be rewarded with deeper integration.

Existing discussions often explain the stagnation of EU-Türkiye relations through factors such as democratic backsliding in Türkiye, enlargement fatigue within the EU and wider geopolitical issues, such as the Cyprus dispute. These explanations are important, but do not fully address how Türkiye's expanding global ties may be changing the strategic balance of the relationship. If Türkiye has developed greater diplomatic and economic ties outside of the EU, then the EU's ability to use leverage may be reduced.

This dissertation therefore focuses on the conclusion between accession stagnation and Türkiye's wider foreign policy diversification. It examines whether Türkiye's expanding global engagement has contributed to a shift in EU-Türkiye relations away from accession-driven Europeanisation and towards a more transactional relationship based on strategic interdependence.

1.3: Objectives

The main research question guiding this dissertation is how have Türkiye's expanding global ties affected the future of its relationship with the European Union?

To answer this question, the dissertation has three main objectives. First, it examines how the credibility of EU conditionality has declined in the Türkiye accession process. Second, it analyses Türkiye's expanding global ties across the Balkans, Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East. Third, it assesses how these developments have reshaped EU-Türkiye relations in a more multipolar international order.

This dissertation argues that Türkiye's expanding global ties have reduced the relative centrality of EU accession within Turkish foreign policy. However, this has not ended EU-Türkiye cooperation. Instead, the relationship has shifted to a form of strategic interdependence, where both sides continue to cooperate in key areas.

1.4: Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it contributes to debates on EU enlargement, external governance and Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye is a key case because it remains formally within the EU accession framework while pursuing increasingly autonomous foreign policy. This makes it possible to examine the limits of EU conditionality when membership is no longer seen as a credible reward.

This dissertation also contributes to a wider discussion about how multipolarity affects EU external governance. In a changing international order, candidate states and regional powers may have more alternatives available. This can reduce the EU's ability to use accession as a central source of leverage. Türkiye's case therefore highlights a broader challenge for the EU: how to manage relations with strategically important states when enlargement is no longer the main framework for cooperation.

1.5: Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured into eight chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on EU enlargement, conditionality, Türkiye's accession process, Turkish foreign policy and multipolarity. Chapter 3 develops the conceptual framework, focusing on declining EU leverage and Turkish strategic alternatives in a changing international order while defining the Causal pathway. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology, explaining the use of a qualitative single-case study and process tracing. Chapter 5 examines the weakening of EU conditionality and the stagnation of Türkiye's accession process. Chapter 6 analyses Türkiye's expanding global ties. Chapter 7 brings these findings together by assessing how EU-Türkiye relations have shifted from accession-based Europeanisation towards strategic interdependence. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes by summarising the findings, discussing the theoretical contributions and outlining the policy implications of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: EU Enlargement and External Governance

For decades, EU enlargement has been used as a governance tool that exports EU rules through conditionality, which has been used as an instrument to influence the states that have ambitions of joining the EU, or to influence states neighbouring the EU. It became particularly relevant to the European Union for the accession of new member states during the fifth enlargement process, with the mechanism being evident by changing the national constitutions of these countries (Fasone and Simoncini, 2024). Not only did accession candidate adapt the legal system intended by the EU, but they were also made to introduce and practise democratic and rule of law principles (Pinelli, 2004).

Conditionality follows criteria set by the Copenhagen Criteria. These criteria must be met for the state to become an accession state. In terms of democracy, all citizens of the country should have the ability to participate in votes on an equal basis across the governing levels of the country, requiring free elections with a secret ballot, followed by free press, trade unions and more. Rule of law implies that government authority may only be exercised in the context of documented laws adopted through an established procedure. When it comes to human rights, it must be that they are inalienable and belonging to all humans. It includes the right to life, right to be prosecuted according to the laws in existence at the time of offence, the right to be free from slavery and the right to be free from torture. There must also be respect and protection for minorities, reflected in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 1995). Furthermore, economic criteria must be met, requiring that all candidate countries have a functioning market economy and are producers capable of coping with the competitive pressure and market forces within the European Union (European Council, 1993).

For many non-EU countries, meeting the Copenhagen Criteria may be complicated, requiring large reforms. Conditionality works best when two conditions hold: firstly, the incentives for conditionality must be credible. The possibility of becoming a member state is the main incentive for many countries. This has been made credible through the many accessions over

the last decades. Without this, conditionality would not be as effective, as becoming a member state would be a false promise (Raik, 2011). The second condition is that domestic adaptation costs must be viable. If the Copenhagen Criteria requires reforms that are too politically or economically costly, or will not be adequately rewarded post-reforms, then there is no incentive for the target state to meet such criteria (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2010).

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) created the External Incentives Model (EIM), which is a rationalist framework used to aid the process of meeting conditionality. This is where the EU emphasises ‘reinforcement by reward’ and has the core assumption that governments are utility maximising actors that weigh the costs of domestic reform against the benefits offered by the EU. The EIM is often used to explain Europeanisation and democratic transitions. Europeanisation is the process, which is now mostly affecting Eastern Europe, transforming the country’s ‘way of doing things’ at a national level due to European Integration (Worschech, 2018). The key aspect of Europeanisation includes the top-down effect or adaptation, where member states change their laws, policies and institutions to comply with EU regulations. Then the bottom-up effect or uploading is where national governments shape EU policies by influencing the development of European-level rules. Finally, horizontal diffusion is where policies and practises spread between EU member states themselves rather than just from the top down (Ladrech, 2002).

2.2: Politicisation and the Limits of EU Enlargement

While EU enlargement and conditionality is normally seen as a positive process, there are also limitations and controversies around the subject. One of the reasons for this was the significant enlargement fatigue that faced the EU. Enlargement fatigue refers to the declining enthusiasm and public support within the EU for admitting new member states, often due to concerns over internal cohesion and socio-economic challenges. This undermines EU credibility and can lead to instability in neighbouring regions (Szolucha, 2010; Müftüler-Baç, 2008). Furthermore, institutional capacity is a limiting factor in EU enlargement. The ambition to expand is balanced with the EU’s ability to remain functional, cohesive and efficient (Buseti and Pacchi, 2015). However, increasing the number of member states within the EU can come with issues. Unanimity challenges in key policy areas such as foreign policy

and taxation can lead to decision making gridlock, as well as the ability for a single member country to veto significant decisions, which can be considered to be undemocratic and inefficient (Piris, 2022).

Migration concerns are yet another major factor in the limits of EU enlargement. With the Eastern European enlargements, there has been a significant flow from East to West in terms of labour mobility, with migrants seeking jobs in more economically advanced European countries and often being forced to work in jobs below their qualification level. This may be because of the vast income differences between member states, an example being the 14% wage difference between some accession states and Germany (Kahanec and Zimmermann, 2016). This led to brain drain within many new member states such as Poland and the Baltic States. Furthermore, there was an increase in pressure on housing in some Western European cities due to the rapidly rising populations, as well as further pressures on public services including schooling and healthcare services (Kahanec et al., 2009). There is also a debate surrounding the tension between a common European identity and the preservation of national diversity. This has led to a rise in nationalism and populism, as far right parties frame enlargement as a threat to domestic national identities (Balent, 2011).

Türkiye has been a very different case than Eastern Europe accession. Before applying in 1987, there were already concerns over the characteristics of Türkiye as a country. Unlike the smooth transition of countries such as Spain and Portugal, Türkiye's application was viewed with scepticism due to its volatile, coup-prone history, especially after the 1980 coup and negative human rights reports in the 1980s (Arnold, 2004). Türkiye was also a far larger country than other accession countries with a predominantly Islamic population which sparked debates about cultural identity, and the definition of 'European Values', creating a cultural hurdle not previously seen in other enlargement cases (Aryal et al., 2021). Similar to Eastern European accessions, the EU was concerned with potential immigration in case Türkiye would become a member state. With Türkiye however, there was more to it. Not only would it create additional East to West mobility for Turkish citizens, but Türkiye is seen as a key route for immigrants from the Middle East and beyond. An accession of Türkiye would make it harder for the EU to control its external borders (Elitok and Straubhaar, 2011). This would also apply huge strain on European labour markets and social systems, as well as

reinforce the concerns raised over cultural differences between Türkiye and the EU, which is frequently a controversy in political discussions.

2.3: EU – Türkiye Accession and Institutional Stagnation

To fully discuss Türkiye's accession and why it has stagnated, it is essential to discuss the history of the purported accession process. Türkiye's formal application for membership occurred in 1987, and developed through to candidate status in 1999, with accession negotiations finally opening in 2005. The early years of the accession process was viewed with cautious optimism, as the EU increasingly viewed enlargement as a strategic instrument for promoting political reform and regional stability. Türkiye's recognition as a candidate state at the 1999 Helsinki European Council marked an important stage, signalling that membership was theoretically possible if the Copenhagen Criteria were fulfilled (Müftüler-Baç, 2005). During the early 2000s, the Turkish government introduced a series of constitutional and legal reforms aimed at aligning domestic institutions with EU standards, especially in the areas of civil-military relations, judicial independence, and human rights protections (Hale, 2011).

The opening of negotiations in 2005 led to the expectations that Türkiye could follow a similar trajectory than the central and eastern European states that joined the EU in the 2004 enlargement. However, the negotiation process was met with significant political and institutional obstacles (Erhan, 2022). One of the key challenges was the unresolved Cyprus issue. Following the accession of the Republic of Cyprus into the EU in 2004, the dispute between Cyprus and Türkiye became entangled with the institutional dynamics of EU enlargement. Türkiye's refusal to recognise the Republic of Cyprus and Turkish restrictions on Cypriot access to Turkish ports and airports led the EU to suspend several negotiation chapters in 2006. As a result, the accession process became increasingly fragmented, with varying member states exercising veto power over different areas of negotiation, significantly slowing down progress (Tocci, 2014).

The accession process has also been affected by political tension stemming from other issues between Türkiye and the European Union. During the early phase of negotiations,

Europeanisation reforms aligned with EU conditionalities were carried out within Türkiye were carried out, appearing to strengthen democratic institutions and improving the quality of life for its citizens (Soyaltin-Colella, 2017). However, the reality is that these reforms were only implemented on paper. Türkiye still faces vast cronyism, a form of elite corruption with loyalty to the state party which is being rewarded, and selective rules being applied (Kimya, 2018). The 2016 coup event also added to the concerns over democratic governance and rule of law felt within European institutions, with highlighted issues relating to judicial independence, media freedom and the concentration of executive power within the Turkish political system (Esen, 2024). Analysts of these developments have described the process as one of gradual de-Europeanisation, in which the domestic political incentive to maintain alignment with EU norms and the Copenhagen Criteria have weakened over time (Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber, 2016).

The stagnation of the accession process became particularly visible after 2018, when the European Council concluded that negotiations with Türkiye has effectively frozen. While accession negotiations were never formally terminated, no new chapters have been opened since then, and the overall process has entered a phase of institutional paralysis (Samur and Demirtepe, 2025). This situation has often been described as a form of ‘institutional stagnation’, where the formal framework of accession remains in place but lacks meaningful political momentum (Saatçioğlu, 2016).

Despite this stagnation, cooperation between Türkiye and the European Union has continued in several important policy areas. One of the key examples is in the subject of migration. The 2016 EU-Türkiye statement established a mechanism for cooperation aimed at reducing the huge flow of migrants into Europe following the Syrian refugee crisis. Under this arrangement, Türkiye agreed to strengthen border control measures and take in a large refugee population, while the EU provided financial assistance and political support for refugee programs within Türkiye. Despite the agreement facing periodic tensions and criticism from both sides, it has demonstrated the continued strategic interdependence between Türkiye and the European Union in managing regional migration challenges (İçduygu and Diker, 2017).

Economic relations have also remained strong between the EU and Türkiye. The EU-Türkiye Customs Union created in 1996 continues to structure trade relations between the two (Alkan, 2017). The EU remains Türkiye's largest trading partner, while Türkiye represents a significant market for European exports and investments. Analysis of the Customs Union has suggested that the economic interdependence between Türkiye and the EU has persisted despite political stagnation of the accession process, reinforcing the importance of the economic relationship for both sides. Therefore, economic integration has deepened even as the accession framework has weakened (Forytek, 2022).

Security cooperation represents a further factor of continued engagement between the two parties. Türkiye occupies a strategically important position at the intersection of Europe, the Middle East and the Black Sea region. Its role within NATO and its geographic proximity to several conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq and Ukraine have made it an important security partner for European states (Oğuzlu, 2014). Cooperation between Türkiye and EU member states has therefore continued in areas such as counterterrorism, regional stability and energy security. In counterterrorism, Türkiye has acted as a crucial partner in monitoring and disrupting transnational networks, given its position as a transit hub between regions. Although political relations have become increasingly complex, the strategic importance of Türkiye within the broader European security environment has ensured that the channels of cooperation remain not only open but have actually become increasingly important (Kurt, 2016).

Together, these developments illustrate the emergence of a paradoxical relationship between Türkiye and the EU. The accession process has entered a prolonged phase of institutional stagnation. Despite this, economic, political and security interdependence between the two actors has continued to evolve. This dynamic highlights the limitations of the traditional enlargement framework in explaining the relationship between the EU and Türkiye. Rather than moving steadily towards membership, EU-Türkiye relations increasingly operate through a combination of selective cooperation and strategic interdependence across multiple areas of policy.

2:4 Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy

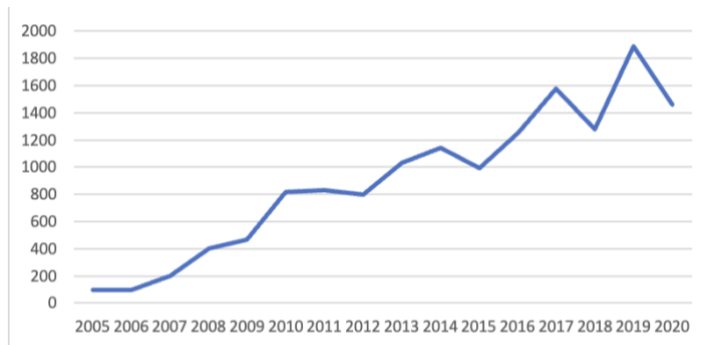
The transformation of Turkish foreign policy over the past two decades represents an important factor in the changing nature of EU-Türkiye relations. While the early 2000s were characterised by a strong Europeanisation agenda linked directly to the accession related reforms, Turkish foreign policy has gradually shifted towards a more autonomous and multi-vector approach. This transformation has been interpreted as a move where Türkiye seeks to maximise its influence through diversified partnerships, rather than primarily relying on its relationship with the European Union (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2009). During the early Justice and Development Party (AKP) period, Turkish foreign policy was often described as having ‘zero problems with neighbours’ which aimed to improve relations with surrounding regions while maintain strong ties with western institutions. This period coincided with strong EU reform momentum, suggesting that Türkiye’s European orientation and its regional engagement were initially complementary rather than contradictory (Kirdiş, 2015). However, as accession negotiations slowly began, and regional instability increased, Turkish foreign policy began to prioritise flexibility and strategic independence. This shift reflects Türkiye’s attempt to adapt to a changing international system characterised by increasing multipolarity and declining Western dominance (Arabaci, 2008).

One of the defining features of modern day Turkish foreign policy is the pursuit of multi-vector diplomacy. This refers to the development of parallel diplomatic, economic and security relations across multiple regions at the same time, (Nicolescu, 2012). Rather than abandoning Western alliances, Türkiye has increasingly followed a strategy of flexible alignment, maintaining cooperation with NATO and the EU while also expanding engagement with Russia, China and emerging powers. This approach suggests that Türkiye is intending to act as a ‘middle power’, seeking to increase influence through diplomatic activism and regional engagement rather than through traditional methods (Dal, 2018).

Türkiye’s growing diplomatic engagement in the Balkans is one example of the regional activism. Historical, cultural and economic ties have enabled Türkiye to expand its political influence in the region. This has been done through infrastructure investment, trade agreements and diplomatic initiatives (Ketenci, 2023). Turkish engagement in the Balkans

increasingly reflects both economic interests and geopolitical consideration, especially in the context of EU enlargement fatigue and the growing competition for influence in the region (Bechev, 2012). This demonstrates how Türkiye has sought to position itself as a relevant regional actor even within areas traditionally associated with EU influence.

Figure 1: Türkiye Foreign Direct Investment in Africa (Million Dollars)



Source: OECD

Türkiye's diplomatic expansion has been particularly significant in Africa. Since the early 2000s, Turkish Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has been seen much more in many African countries. The graph shows that FDI in Africa has risen from 100 million USD in 2005 to 1,459.5

million USD in 2020. The number of Turkish embassies in Africa has expanded dramatically, reflecting a broader strategy of economic diplomacy, humanitarian engagement and political cooperation. Turkish Airlines' expansion across the African continent has helped to connect Africa to the rest of the world, currently flying to 60 different destinations in 40 African countries, a huge increase from its 5 African flight destinations in 2005. Alongside this, development assistance programs and increase trade relations have all contributed to strengthening Türkiye's presence on the continent. It can be considered as part of a broader strategy aimed at increasing Türkiye's global diplomatic reach while reducing excessive dependence on European markets (Özkan and Akgün, 2010).

Central Asia represents another important region of Türkiye's multi-vector foreign policy. Türkiye has sought to strengthen ties with Turkic states through cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation and institutional initiatives such as the Organisation of Turkic States (Toraman, 2024). These initiatives have aimed to build regional networks based on shared linguistic and historical ties while expanding Türkiye's geopolitical influence in Asia. These efforts reflect a broader attempt to position Türkiye as a bridge between Europe and Asia rather than an actor dependent on European Integration (Aras and Fidan, 2009).

The Middle East has also become an increasingly important Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye's involvement in regional conflicts and humanitarian diplomacy has demonstrated its growing willingness to act as an independent regional power. Turkish engagement in Syria and Libya reflects an assertive foreign policy standing that prioritises national security interests and regional influence. The shift can be considered as a transition from predominantly normative foreign policy during the EU reform era to a more interest-driven and security orientated approach (Özdamar and Artıkoğlu, 2024).

Together, these regional engagements portray Türkiye's attempt to position itself as a globally relevant middle power. Middle power diplomacy usually involves coalition building, mediation and active participation in international organisations, which has been clearly shown by Türkiye's behaviour (Cooper, 1997). The diversification of foreign policy priorities has important implications for EU-Türkiye relations. As Türkiye's diplomatic, economic and security engagement expands across multiple regions, the relative importance of EU membership at the centre of Turkish foreign policy has declined (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021). As the international system becomes increasingly multipolar, regional powers such as Türkiye have gained greater room for manoeuvre in pursuing independent foreign policies. Therefore, Türkiye's expanding ties reflect not only domestic political changes, but also structural transformations within the international system that have enabled middle powers to pursue more autonomous forms of global engagement (Altunisik, 2026).

2.5: Multipolarity and the Changing Global Order

In the past decades, the global order has drastically changed. Once a western dominated system, global power is now far more distributed. One of these Western powers was the European Union. In the modern day, the EU is experiencing a relative decline driven by economic stagnation, energy dependencies and intermetal structural constraints (Dahiya, 2024). Despite maintaining large economic markets, its share of global GDP is shrinking, projected to fall to a similar level than China's GDP, which is consistently growing. This may contribute directly to the EU's reducing influence. The financial resources that the EU can deploy abroad to promote objectives such as climate change or human rights have diminished and so has the EU's ability to credibly threaten military power (Webber, 2015).

While the global power of the EU has gradually reduced, emerging economies have become more influential. China is a key example of this. Part of the BRICS countries, China has had rapid economic growth over the previous decades and has established itself as a central power in economics, technology and military strength. China is actively reshaping global governance, challenging Western-centric structures and investing heavily in the global south through the Belt and Road Initiative. Under President Xi Jinping, there has been a recent shift from economic growth to active political influence, playing a more prominent role in institutions such as the UN and IMF (Chen, 2022).

Another BRICS country that has undergone economic growth in the last decades is Russia. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Putin, there has been a global shift from the post-Cold war, US-led unipolar world to a multipolar world order. Russia utilises its vast oil and gas reserves to fuel its economy and display influence, especially over neighbouring countries (Naim and Hasanah, 2024). Significant military action has been taken in the ‘Near Abroad’ regions to prevent the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU, including the 2008 war with Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and most recently the full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which is the first major conflict on European soil since the wars in the Balkans (Rotaru, 2019; Sajadi, 2024). Furthermore, Russia has intervened in global conflicts, such as the 2015 intervention in Syria to save the Assad regime securing a strategic foothold in the Middle East. However, the fall of the Assad regime in 2024 meant that Russia lost this influence. Russia was unable or unwilling to intervene due to the resource heavy Ukraine conflict, and Moscow has now lost its projection of power in the Middle East. Doubt has now been casted on Russia’s abilities to protect its allies, and the strategic geopolitical anchor within Syria has been lost, and the future of Russia’s military bases in Syria remains uncertain (Abbasov and Souleimanov, 2025).

Together, the rise of global powers across the BRICS countries and the diminishing influence of the EU has led to a world order where middle powers are becoming more autonomous and more common. Countries such as Brazil or India are not under thumb of the EU or Russia, and can act as their own economic power, competing for the influence of developing countries (Wso and Mahmood, 2025). Türkiye aligns with this stance, distancing itself from

the EU while still keeping a partnership, yet at the same time exerting Turkish influence onto Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

2.6: Literature Gap

While existing scholarship provides explanations of EU enlargement conditionality, Türkiye's stalled accession process and the transformation of Turkish foreign policy, these debates often remain separated. In particular, there has been limited focus on how Türkiye's expanding global ties may be reshaping the incentives of EU conditionality, and whether Türkiye's growing multi-polar foreign policy may reduce the effectiveness of EU leverage and therefore contribute to the stagnation of accession negotiations. Furthermore, existing research tends to analyse EU-Türkiye relations through the lens of accession, often overlooking the emergence of the hybrid relationship characterised by political cooperation and economic interdependence. This suggests the need for a shift away from a linear accession narrative and more towards a broader analysis of strategic interdependence between Türkiye and the EU. This dissertation therefore aims to contribute to the literature by bridging enlargement theory, middle power diplomacy and global order transformation. It argues that Türkiye's expanding global engagement should not only be understood as a consequence of accession stagnation, but also as a factor that is reshaping the strategic context in which EU-Türkiye relations operate.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

3.1: Introduction

This dissertation seeks to explain how Türkiye's expanding global engagement has changed the trajectory of its relationship with the European Union. As established in the literature review, scholarship has provided discussion on three major areas essential to the study. This being EU enlargement conditionality, the transformation of Turkish foreign policy, and the gradual global change towards a more multipolar system. However, these areas are frequently examined separately, rather than together. This analytical separation creates an important gap for this dissertation. If EU accession conditionality relies on the assumption that candidate states remain dependent on the benefits offered by European integration, then any major shift in the external environment of the candidate state may alter the effectiveness of the leverage.

Türkiye's growling diplomatic, economic and security engagement across multiple regions suggests that accession can no longer be analysed through only a linear enlargement lens. Therefore, this study will adopt process tracing as its primary analytical method. Process tracing examines the sequence of political developments and intervening conditions through which a particular outcome emerges. For this reason, the conceptual framework must clearly identify the principle analytical conditions that are expected to shape the case and establish a pathway that the dissertation will trace through subsequent analysis.

3.2: Declining Credibility of EU Conditionality

EU external governance refers to the European Union's ability to shape the laws, policies and institutions of non-member states beyond its formal borders. Unlike internal governance, which operates through binding EU law inside member states, external governance functions through the projection of EU law inside member states, external governance functions through the projection of EU rules onto candidate states and neighbouring regions. This is important in the enlargement context, where the EU does not simply offer cooperation, but attaches political, legal and economic conditions to the possibility of deeper integration.

Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2009) argue that EU external governance is based on the extension of EU rules beyond membership, but its effectiveness depends on the institutional relationship between the EU and the target state. In the case of candidate countries, this relationship is strongest when the reward of eventual accession is both clear and credible.

Conditionality is therefore a central mechanism through which the EU external governance operates. It is based on a logic of reward and punishment, with domestic reform being encouraged through the promise of benefits such as accession negotiations, market access, or eventual EU membership. Conceptually, conditionality assumes that the target state behaves as a rational actor, calculating where the expected rewards of compliance outweigh the political and economic costs of reform. This makes conditionality different from purely normative influence. The EU may present itself as promoting democracy, rule of law and human rights, but the practical mechanism of enlargement depends heavily on incentives (Grabbe, 2006).

For this dissertation, conditionality is understood through three main conceptual dimensions. These are credibility, consistency and domestic adaptation costs. Credibility refers to whether the target state believes that compliance will be rewarded. If a candidate country carries out reforms but the promised incentives are not met, the motivation to continue reform will weaken for the target state. Consistency refers to whether the EU applies its conditions clearly and predictably, rather than changing expectations or allowing individual states to block progress for unrelated political reasons. Domestic adaptation costs refer to the political and institutional costs that reform creates for domestic elites. When reforms threaten powerful interests, executive authority or dominant political narratives, then governments are less likely to comply unless the expected EU reward is substantial (Treib, 2003).

This conceptual framework is particularly relevant to Türkiye because the credibility of EU conditionality has not remained stable over time. In the early 2000s, EU conditionality was relatively strong because Türkiye's candidate status and the opening of accession negotiations created the impression that membership was possible if reforms were implemented. However, the accession process later became increasingly open-ended. This weakens commitment credibility because the candidate state faces uncertainty over whether reform will be rewarded

by accession (Uğur, 2010). This provides a conceptual explanation as to why reform momentum may decline even when the formal accession framework remains in place.

A further problem is that conditionality not only depends on the EU's formal rules, but also on the political behaviour of EU member states. In theory, the accession process is supposed to be rules-based with progression depending on compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria. However, in practise, member-state vetoes, enlargement fatigue and geopolitical disputes can reduce the perceived fairness of the process. This weakens the EU's authority as a rule-based actor (Hoxhaj, 2025). In Türkiye's cases, the dispute over Cyprus, migration and culture has led to the accession pathway appearing less linear. This matters because conditionality is most effective when the EU can credibly offer deeper integration as an incentive for candidate state reforms. Once this link is weakened, compliance becomes less likely. In some cases, states will also comply to EU reforms symbolically in order to secure short-term benefits while avoiding deeper institutional transformation (Noutcheva, 2009). This therefore questions whether or not EU conditionality retains the ability to produce sustained domestic transformation.

For the purposes of process tracing, declining credibility of conditionality will be treated as a key intervening condition in the transformation of EU-Türkiye relations. The expected causal pathway is that as credibility of accession declined, the incentive for Turkish governments to prioritise EU-driven reform is also weakened. This did not automatically end EU-Türkiye cooperation, but it changed the relationship between the two. Instead of operating primarily through accession framework, the relationship shifted towards selected and transactional cooperation in topics such as migration, trade and security. Therefore, this dissertation brings the idea that EU conditionality is not a fixed source of leverage but is a variable mechanism whose effectiveness can rise or decline depending on the credibility and weight of the rewards.

3.3: Expansion of Türkiye's Strategic Alternatives

Middle power theory provides the framework for understanding how states that are neither great powers nor small states attempt to increase their influence in international politics.

Middle powers do not yield the same dominance of great powers, but have enough diplomatic, economic or military capacity to shape outcomes within regions or policy areas. They often seek to influence through coalition building, mediation and institutional participation, while maintaining flexible diplomacy. Middle power theory is useful for this dissertation because helps to explain how Türkiye can pursue a more autonomous foreign policy without fully abandoning its relationship with the European Union.

The concept of a middle power can be understood in two main ways. From one perspective, middle power is defined according to material capabilities, such as economic size and military capacity. Middle powers would occupy an intermediate position in the international hierarchy. They are not strong enough to dominate the global system, but they are not passive rule-takers. The second perspective is that middle powers are defined more by behaviour. This focuses less on what a state is and more on what it does. In this view, middle powers are identified through foreign policy practises such as multilateral engagement, diplomatic activism, coalition-building and attempts to act as bridge-builders between larger powers and smaller states (Jordaan, 2003).

Traditional middle powers such as Canada or Australia have often been associated with support for liberal multilateralism and the existing western-led order. Emerging middle powers however are more likely to seek status, autonomy and regional influence. They may still participate in Western institutions, but they are less likely to fully align their foreign policy with Western preferences (Xiao, 2025). Türkiye fits more closely with the second category. It remains institutionally linked to the West through NATO, the Customs Union and the EU accession framework, but has also sought a more diversified foreign policy.

Strategic autonomy is central to this framework. It refers to the ability of a state to make foreign policy choices without being excessively dependent on a single external actor or alliance structure. For Türkiye, strategic autonomy is not a complete break from the West. It is maintaining cooperation while developing diplomatic, economic and security partnerships with other countries. However, despite Türkiye's attempt to become more autonomous, there are limitations due to economic vulnerabilities and domestic political constraint (Ayдын-Düzgit et al., 2026).

Middle power theory also helps to connect Türkiye's foreign policy behaviour to the declining credibility of EU conditionality. If EU accession is seen as the central path of Türkiye's foreign policy, then EU conditionality has greater leverage. However, if Türkiye increasingly takes a more autonomous position with multiple strategic options, then the importance of accession declines. This does not mean that the EU becomes irrelevant. However, middle power behaviour reduces the extent to which Türkiye's external identity and policy direction is based around EU membership alone. It increases Türkiye's ability to cooperate with the EU selectively rather than entirely comply with EU expectations.

Middle power theory therefore functions as an explanation as to why Türkiye becomes less responsive to leverage over time. The expected causal logic is that as the credibility of EU accession weakens, Türkiye has greater incentive to behave as an autonomous middle power, expanding alternative partnerships and increasing diplomatic flexibility. Middle power theory is used in this dissertation to explain how Türkiye's foreign policy autonomy changes the conditions under which EU influence operates.

3.4: Increasing Multipolarity in the Changing World

Multipolarity refers to an international system in which power is distributed across several important centres rather than concentrated around a dominant actor or two competing blocs. A unipolar system is structured around a dominant power while a bipolar system is organised around two major powers. A multipolar system constrains several influential actors with the ability to shape international politics across different regions and policy areas. For this dissertation, multipolarity is understood as a process through which power, influence and strategic options become more dispersed across the globe.

In the current international system, there is not just a simple shift from Western dominance to a fully equal multipolar system. Instead, it is becoming more fragmented and plural. The current order can be understood as a 'multiplex' world, where the US remains important but no longer has the same ability to organise the international system alone (Acharya, 2026). In this type of order, emerging powers and alternative institutions all play a greater role in shaping international politics.

Multipolarity matters for EU external governance because conditionality works most effectively when the EU is able to offer rewards that its target states cannot easily obtain elsewhere. If the EU represents the main pathway to incentives such as market access, political recognition and investment, then there is stronger motivation for states to comply with EU conditions. However, when there are alternative sources of trade, finance and diplomatic recognition, the EU's leverage may decline. This does not mean that EU incentives disappear, but it does mean that it becomes less exclusive. In a multipolar environment, candidate states and regional powers may be able to pursue multiple relationships at the same time, reducing their dependence on the accession process.

This structural change is especially relevant for Türkiye. While still closely connected to the West through NATO, the Customs Union and the formal accession framework, Türkiye also has access to the wider international environment and has created opportunities to diversify its foreign policy. Multipolarity provides the background condition that makes Türkiye's middle-power behaviour more viable. Strategic autonomy has become increasingly important as the international order moves towards multipolarity, with Türkiye attempting to create a more autonomous space from its traditional Western allies (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026). Therefore, Türkiye's external diversification should not be seen only as a domestic policy choice, but also as a response to structural change in the international system.

Within this framework, multipolarity is treated as an enabling condition rather than a direct cause. It does not automatically produce the weakening of EU conditionality. Instead, it changes the environment in which conditionality operates. When the accession process is credible, the EU will exercise strong influence even in a more complex global order. However, when accession credibility declines, multipolarity increases the availability of alternative options, providing candidate states with the option of increased autonomy. In the context of Türkiye, the rise of alternative centres of power does not mean that Türkiye has abandoned the EU, nor does it mean the EU has become irrelevant. Türkiye can remain economically and strategically connected to the EU while also developing other partnerships that reduces the EU's ability to act as the sole partner to Türkiye's foreign policy.

3.5: Analytical Framework and Hypothesis

This dissertation brings together three conceptual components: the declining credibility of EU conditionality, Türkiye's expansion of strategic alternatives, and the emergence of a more multipolar international system. These concepts are treated as connected parts of a single analytical framework rather than as completed isolated explanations. EU conditionality explains the mechanism through which the European Union attempts to shape the behaviour of candidate states. Middle power theory explains how Türkiye has developed into a more diplomatically flexible and autonomous state. Middle power theory explains the wider structural environment that allows Türkiye's method of foreign policy. Together, these concepts provide the basis for analysing how Türkiye's expanding global ties have altered the trajectory of EU-Türkiye relations.

The causal pathway examined in this dissertation can be summarised through the three key concepts. First, the declining credibility of EU accession process weakens the incentive for Türkiye to prioritise EU-driven reform. Second, Türkiye's expanding strategic alternatives increases its ability to behave as an autonomous middle power. Third, the wider shift towards multipolarity makes these alternatives more available and politically useful. The expected outcome is a transformation of EU-Türkiye relations away from accession driven Europeanisation and towards a more transactional form of interdependence.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1: Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to examine how Türkiye's expanding global ties have affected the trajectory of its relationship with the European Union. The dissertation adopts a qualitative research design and uses Türkiye as a single case study. This approach is appropriate because the research question is not only concerned with whether EU-Türkiye relations have changed, but also with how and why this change has occurred over time.

The analysis is structured around the causal pathway developed in the conceptual framework. This includes the declining credibility of EU conditionality, Türkiye's expansion of strategic alternatives, and the wider global shift towards multipolarity. These concepts are used to examine whether Türkiye's relationship with the EU has moved away from accession being a primary influence of foreign policy, and towards a more transactional form of strategic interdependence.

4.2: Research Design

This dissertation adopts a qualitative research design based on a single case study of EU-Türkiye relations. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research is concerned with explaining a political and historical transformation rather than a purely statistical relationship. The dissertation examines how Türkiye's expanding global ties have affected the trajectory of its relationship with the EU, especially through the causal pathway previously stated. These are complex political processes that require interpretation, sequencing and contextual analysis rather than purely quantitative study.

The study analyses a single case because it allows for detailed within-case analysis. Case study research is particularly useful when the aim is to understand complex developments in the real-world context. EU-Türkiye relations cannot be separated from broader developments

such as accession stagnation, domestic political change regional security issues and the changing international order. Therefore, a single-case approach allows the dissertation to examine how these factors interact over time, rather than treating them as isolated variables.

The research design is explanatory rather than purely descriptive. It does not only describe the stagnation of EU accession or Türkiye's growing foreign policy diversification. Instead, it seeks to explain how these developments are connected. The conceptual framework provides the main analytical structure for this explanation through the causal pathway. This allows the dissertation to assess if the weakening of accession credibility is contributing to Türkiye's more autonomous foreign policy behaviour and whether this has changed the character of EU-Türkiye relations.

This research design is also suitable because it supports process tracing, which will be discussed further in section 4.5. Case studies are especially useful for within-case analysis and for identifying causal mechanisms in complex political cases. This is important for this study because the argument depends on tracing a sequence of developments rather than proving a single direct cause. The dissertation therefore uses a qualitative single-case study to examine whether EU-Türkiye relations have shifted.

4.3: Case Study Selection, Why Türkiye?

Türkiye is selected as the central case study because it represents a particularly important and complex case for examining the limits of EU external governance and conditionality. Unlike many Central and Eastern European countries that moved from candidacy to membership with a relatively clear enlargement trajectory, Türkiye has remained formally connected to the accession process while experiencing prolonged political stagnation. This makes Türkiye a useful case for analysing what happens when the formal structure of accession remains in place, but with the credibility of membership becoming increasingly uncertain.

Türkiye is a strong case because its relationship with the EU contains both stagnation and interdependence. On one hand, accession negotiations have become politically blocked and reform momentum has weakened. On the other hand, the relationship has not collapsed.

Cooperation continues in certain areas such as trade, migration and security. Türkiye's case has long been one of the most controversial cases in EU enlargement, shaped by both external and domestic complications, such as debates over Europe's borders and the EU's institutional capacity (Müftüler-Baç, 2016).

This is also a significant case because Türkiye occupies a key strategic geopolitical position that makes it difficult for the EU to treat it as an ordinary candidate state. Türkiye is positioned between Europe, the Middle East, the Black Sea and the East Mediterranean. This gives it importance in several policy areas, including migration management, energy security, NATO cooperation and relations with Russia. As a result, EU-Türkiye relations cannot be understood only through the technical logic of enlargement. It must also be understood as a strategic relationship shaped by mutual dependence. Türkiye remains a relevant regional security actor for the EU, even as the accession process faces deep political obstacles (Buhai, 2021).

Türkiye is further suitable for this dissertation because it has actively expanded its diplomatic, economic and security relations beyond the EU framework. This allows the study to examine whether the growth of alternative partnerships reduces the relative importance of EU accession. The literature review has already shown that Türkiye's foreign policy has become more multi-vector, with increasing engagement across regions such as the Balkans, Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East. This makes Türkiye a useful case for examining the connection between foreign policy diversification and declining EU leverage.

Finally, Türkiye is selected because it allows the dissertation to connect three levels of analysis. At the EU level, the case highlights the problem with conditionality. At state level, it shows how a candidate country can pursue greater autonomy and strategic alternatives. At the international level, it reflects how multipolarity may change the wider environment in which the EU operates. Therefore, Türkiye is not selected simply because it is an important country, but because it provides a revealing case through which to analyse the transformation of EU-Türkiye relations from accession-driven Europeanisation towards a more transactional form of strategic interdependence.

4.4: Data Sources

This dissertation will rely primarily on secondary qualitative data and documentary sources. As the study examines the changing trajectory of EU-Türkiye relations over time, the evidence will be drawn from a range of academic, institutional and policy-based materials. These sources will be selected in accordance with their relevance and to the three main components of the conceptual framework.

The first category of sources will consist of official European Union documents. These will include European Commission reports on Türkiye, European Council conclusions, enlargement strategy papers and documents relating to EU-Türkiye cooperation in key areas. These sources are useful because they provide evidence of how the EU has formally assessed Türkiye's accession process, democratic reform and wider strategic relationship with the EU.

The second category of sources will include official Turkish and international institutional material. This will include documents from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, foreign policy strategy documents and publicly available data from international organisations or Turkish statistical institutions. These sources will be used to assess Türkiye's expanding external engagement, especially in relation to trade, diplomacy, regional cooperation and security partnerships.

The third category of sources will be academic literature. This will include peer-reviewed journal articles and other works of scholars on EU enlargement, external governance, Turkish foreign policy and more. Academic literature will be used to support the interpretations of the empirical evidence and to connect the findings to wider theoretical debates. This is important because the dissertation does not only describe EU-Türkiye relations but seeks to explain how changing strategic conditions have reshaped the relationship.

Overall, the data sources will be used to identify patterns and sequences rather than produce a statistical measure of EU influence. The purpose is to assess whether the evidence supports the causal pathway.

4.5: Method of Analysis

This dissertation uses process tracing as its main method of analysis. Process tracing is a qualitative method used to examine causal mechanisms within a single case. Rather than only identifying whether two elements are related to each other, process tracing examines the sequence of events and intervening conditions through which an outcome is produced. It is particularly useful for qualitative research because it allows the searcher to identify causal-process observations and compile evidence within a wider causal sequence (Collier, 2011). This makes the method appropriate for this dissertation, as the research seeks to explain how EU-Türkiye relations have changed over time rather than simply describing the change.

This method is suitable because the dissertation's argument is based on a causal pathway developed in Chapter 3. The framework suggests that the declining credibility of EU conditionality reduced Türkiye's incentive to prioritise accession-driven reform. At the same time, Türkiye's expanding strategic alternatives increased its ability to act as a more autonomous middle power. The wider shift towards multipolarity then created an international environment in which these alternatives became more available and politically viable. The expected outcome is a transformation of EU-Türkiye relations away from a purely European focus and towards a more transactional relationship.

The analysis will therefore trace this process across the empirical chapters. Chapter 5 will examine the development of EU conditionality and accession stagnation, focusing on how the credibility of accession incentives have changed over time. This includes the early reform period, the opening of accession negotiations, the weakening of reform momentum and the role of institutional and political barriers. Chapter 6 will follow this, examining Türkiye's expanding global ties. This will analyse whether Türkiye's foreign policy became more diversified and less centred on the accession framework. Chapter 7 will bring these findings together by assessing whether EU-Türkiye relations now operate through accession conditionality and more through selective cooperation in key areas.

The process tracing approach will focus on identifying evidence that supports or challenges the proposed causal pathway. Evidence supporting the argument would include evidence

supporting the weakening of EU accession credibility, evidence that Türkiye has increasingly pursued diplomatic, economic and security partnerships beyond the EU framework, and evidence that EU-Türkiye cooperation continued despite accession stagnation in a transactional form. This allows the dissertation to assess whether EU leverage has declined, and if so, how this decline has interacted with Türkiye's changing foreign policy and the wider international environment.

This method also allows the dissertation to avoid treating Türkiye's global engagement as either a simple cause or a simple consequence of accession stagnation. Instead, the process tracing makes it possible to examine the relationship between these developments as part of a broader sequence. Türkiye's expanding global ties may partly result from the weakening of the accession process, but also the reduction of the relative importance of EU membership reinforces this. This is important because the dissertation does not claim that one single factor explains the transformation of EU-Türkiye relations. Instead, it analyses the interaction of the causal pathway.

Overall, process tracing provides a suitable method because it allows the dissertation to connect theory to empirical analysis. It links the conceptual framework to case evidence by examining whether the proposed sequence is visible across the development of EU-Türkiye relations. The method therefore supports the central aims of the dissertation, which is to explain how Türkiye's expanding global ties have reshaped the EU-Türkiye relationship from a primarily accession-driven process towards a more complex relationship based on strategic interdependence.

4.6: Limitations

This dissertation has several limitations. The first limitation concerns the use of a single case study. Focusing on only Türkiye allows for detailed analysis of EU-Türkiye relations but also limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to all candidate or neighbouring states. Türkiye is a unique case due to its long accession process, strategic geography, NATO membership and large economy. Therefore, while findings may contribute to wider debates

on EU conditionality and external governance, they should not be treated as automatically applicable to other accession cases.

A second limitation relates to causality. The dissertation argues that Türkiye's expanding global ties have contributed to the weakening of EU conditionality-based leverage. However, it is difficult to prove a direct causal relationship between these developments. Türkiye's foreign policy diversification may have reduced the relative importance of EU accession, but it may also have been partly caused by the accession stagnation. Furthermore, Türkiye's global engagement should be understood as interactive rather than one-directional. This is why process tracing is useful, as it allows the dissertation to examine sequences and causal mechanisms rather than simple cause and effect.

A third limitation concerns the use of secondary data. This dissertation relies on academic literature, official documents, policy reports and publicly available data rather than interviews or original fieldwork. This makes the research feasible within the scope of the dissertation, but it also means that the analysis is dependent on the availability and reliability of existing sources. Official EU and Turkish sources may reflect institutional or political interests, while policy reports may also contain analytical assumptions. For this reason, the dissertation will compare different categories of sources where possible and avoid relying too heavily on one type of evidence.

A fourth limitation is the complexity of EU-Türkiye relations. The relationship is shaped by many overlapping factors, including accession negotiations, domestic politics, regional conflicts, and many other issues. The conceptual framework narrows the analysis to the three main factors in the causal pathway, but this means that some other important variables cannot be examined in equal depth.

Finally, multipolarity is difficult to measure directly. It is a broad structural condition rather than a single event or policy change. The dissertation therefore treats multipolarity as an enabling context that increases Türkiye's room for manoeuvre, rather than as a direct and measurable cause of stagnation. This limitation does not weaken the relevance of the concept,

but it requires caution when linking global structural change to specific developments in EU-Türkiye relations.

Overall, these limitations mean that the dissertation should be understood as an explanatory case rather than a definitive causal proof. Its purpose is to explain how Türkiye's expanding global ties have contributed to the changing character of its relationship with the EU. This remains valuable because the case of Türkiye highlights the challenges facing EU external governance when accession credibility declines and candidate states develop wider strategic alternatives.

Chapter 5: EU Conditionality and the Accession Stagnation

5.1: Early Reform Period (1999-2005)

The early reform period between 1999 and 2005 represents the most credible stage for EU conditionality in the EU-Türkiye accession process. The key turning point was at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, where Türkiye was no longer treated only as an external partner, but as a state with a formal membership perspective. The Helsinki conclusions stated that Türkiye was a candidate state ‘destined to join the Union’ on the basis of the same criteria applied to other candidate countries, while also confirming that Türkiye would benefit from a pre-accession strategy designed to support reform (European Council, 1999). This created a stronger incentive for domestic reform. Through the accession framework, reform progress became linked to the possibility of opening negotiations. In process tracing terms, this period provides the evidence for the first stage of the causal pathway. This is when the rewards of European integration appeared to be credible, and Turkish political actors had stronger incentives to pursue EU-driven reforms. The EU’s leverage during this period rested on the belief that compliance with the Copenhagen criteria could produce solid movement towards membership.

The incentive structure can be understood through the External Incentives Model. According to this model, EU conditionality is based on the rationalist logic in which candidate states adopt EU rules when expected rewards of compliance outweigh the domestic costs of reform (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2019). The most important reward is the possibility of membership, but other incentives also mattered, including financial assistance, market access and closer political cooperation. In this sense, Türkiye’s earlier reform momentum can be understood as a period in which EU reward appeared sufficiently credible to make domestic reforms politically worthwhile.

The first major evidence of this reform momentum was the constitutional reform package in October 2001. This was followed by further legislative reform packages in the early 2000s, covering areas such as freedom of expression, human rights protections and the strengthening of civilian control over the military. By 2004, the European Commission reported that

Türkiye had adopted two constitutional reforms and eight legislative reform packages since 1999. These included reforms relating to the death penalty, gender equality, freedom of press and judicial alignments with European standards (European Commission, 2004). The early AKP period also contributed to the acceleration of reform. After coming into power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party presented EU accession as part of its political modernisation agenda. This helped to align domestic political incentives with EU conditionality, with reform being justified as both a path towards membership as a means of limiting older institutional structures such as military influence in politics. In this sense, EU conditionality was not only an external pressure but domestically used as a political resource.

However, even during this most successful phase of the EU accession process for Türkiye, there were signs that reforms were uneven. Legal and constitutional changes were feeling the effects of a vast implementation gap, and the commission continued to raise concerns over the practical protection of rights and freedoms. This suggests that conditionality was effective in encouraging formal reform but was not so successful in ensuring deep institutional transformation.

Overall, the 1999-2005 period demonstrates that EU conditionality initially had significant influence over Türkiye's reform agenda. The credibility of accession helped to generate constitutional and legal changes, leading to the decision to open accession negotiations in October 2005. However, the negotiating framework also stated that the negotiations were an 'open-ended process' whose outcome could not be guaranteed. This meant that even during the period of the greatest accession momentum, the limits of EU credibility were already visible, (Council of the European Union, 2005).

5.2: Declining Credibility of EU Incentives

While the 1995-2005 period demonstrated the initial effectiveness of EU conditionality, the credibility of accession incentives began to weaken almost immediately after negotiations opened. The 2005 Negotiation Framework stated that the 'shared objective of the negotiations is accession' but also added as mentioned in the previous section, that negotiations were an 'open ended process' whose outcome could not be guaranteed (Council of the European

Union, 2005). This wording was significant as it meant that Türkiye has no clear trajectory towards membership unlike previous enlargement rounds in Central and Eastern Europe. The accession process therefore created a built-in ambiguity. Türkiye was negotiating for membership, but the final reward remained politically uncertain. This ambiguity weakened the logic of conditionality. In Türkiye's case, reforms in areas such as minority rights, judicial independence and civilian-military relations carried high domestic and political costs. These reforms were easier to justify when accession appeared realistic. Once it became open-ended and politically contested, EU-driven reform became harder for the Turkish government to present as worthwhile. Therefore, the weakening of credibility did not simply reduce enthusiasm for accession. It also directly undermined the incentive structure that had supported reforms in the early 2000s.

The Cyprus issue became the first major institutional blockage in the accession process. Following the Republic of Cyprus' accession into the EU in 2004, Türkiye was expected to extend the Ankara Agreement and Customs Union obligations to all new member states, including Cyprus. However, Türkiye did not fully implement the additional protocol and continued to restrict access to its ports and airports for vessels connected to the Republic of Cyprus, including all vessels flying the Republic of Cyprus flag, or whose last port of call was Cyprus, (European Commission, 2006). The dispute had direct consequences for accession negotiations. In December 2006, the council decided to suspend negotiations on eight chapters connected to Türkiye's restrictions regarding Cyprus. The council also stated that no further chapters would be provisionally closed until Türkiye fulfilled its commitments related to the Additional Protocol, (Council of the European Union, 2006). This was a major turning point because the accession process was no longer purely governed by technical compliance with the *acquis* but became deeply affected by an unresolved political dispute between Türkiye and an EU member state.

Following the partial suspension of negotiations, the accession process became increasingly viewed as blocked and politicised. Formally, negotiations continued, but the scope for progress became limited. This mattered because conditionality depends not only on the existence of rules, but also on the belief that compliance will be rewarded in a predictable way. Once the chapters could be blocked for political reasons, Türkiye's perception of EU

conditionality changed. The accession process appeared to be less merit-based and more like a process vulnerable to member-state vetoes and bilateral disputes. This undermined the EU's ability to present itself as a consistent rule-based actor.

The credibility problem was reinforced by wider enlargement fatigue inside the EU. After the 2004 enlargement adding ten new states to the EU, and the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, public and political support for further enlargement became more contested. Türkiye's accession was especially controversial because of its population size, Muslim majority, economic differences and geopolitical position. These debates meant that even if Türkiye implemented reforms, membership still appeared uncertain. This was acknowledged by the EU, stating that negotiations would be long and difficult, and that public concerns within the EU had to be taken into account (European Commission, 2005). Opposition from individual member states further weakened the credibility of EU incentives. The accession process increasingly became shaped by political reservations of member states rather than only by Türkiye's compliance with EU criteria. This reduced the consistency of conditionality. In previous enlargement cases, the promise of membership had been the central reward for compliance. However, became no longer the case for Türkiye, now needing to rely on the political willingness of EU member states to accept Türkiye as a future member. This created a credibility gap between formal accession framework and the political reality of enlargement.

By the late 2000s and 2010s, this credibility gap had become increasingly visible. Although chapters continued to open slowly, the overall process lost momentum. Türkiye's Ministry for EU Affairs stated that in the accession negotiations, only sixteen chapters had been opened and only one chapter, being Science and Research, had been provisionally closed (Directorate for EU Affairs, 2024). The weakening of credibility became explicit in the Council's later conclusions. In 2018, they stated that Türkiye had been 'moving further away from the European Union' and that accession negotiations had effectively come to a standstill. It also concluded that no further chapters could be considered for opening or closing (Council of the European Union, 2018). This language is important because it shows that the accession process was not formally terminated but had lost practical momentum. This marks the

consolidation of the accession stagnation. The institutional framework still existed, but the incentive of membership is no longer a credible driver of domestic reform.

Overall, the decline in the credibility of EU incentives resulted from several factors. The 2005 Negotiating Framework made accession open-ended, the Cyprus dispute created direct institutional blockages, enlargement fatigue reduced internal EU support, and member-state opposition made the process increasingly unpredictable. Together, these developments weakened the central mechanism of EU conditionality. The promise of accession remained formally present, but its credibility declined. This supports the dissertations' causal pathway by showing that EU leverage over Türkiye weakened not because conditionality disappeared, but because the reward attached to compliance became increasingly uncertain. In this sense, the accession process entered a paradoxical phase. Türkiye remained a candidate country and negotiations technically continued, yet the political conditions for membership became less convincing. This reduced the EU's ability to act as the central anchor of Turkish reform. The decline of accession credibility therefore forms the key bridge between the early reform period and the later transformation of EU-Türkiye relations.

5.3: Institutional and Political Barriers

The stagnation of Türkiye's accession process cannot be explained only by declining EU credibility. It was also shaped by domestic institutional and political developments inside Türkiye, which increased the cost of compliance with EU conditionality. As accession became less credible, Turkish political elites had weaker incentives to absorb the domestic costs of EU-driven reforms, especially in areas such as judicial independence, media freedom, separation of powers and fundamental rights.

One of the most important barriers was the weakening of the rule of law. The European Commission repeatedly raised concerns over the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, as well as political pressure on legal institutions. This was emphasised after the 2016 attempted coup, where the Turkish state introduced a prolonged state of emergency and carried out extensive dismissals and arrests. While the government argued that these measures were necessary for national security, the EU warned that anti-terror measures must remain

consistent with the rule of law and human rights, which are mentioned in the Copenhagen criteria and were directly violated (European Commission, 2018).

The 2017 constitutional referendum further deepened these institutional concerns. The reforms replaced Türkiye's parliamentary system with an executive presidential system, abolishing the office of Prime Minister and increasing the powers of the Presidency. The Venice Commission (2017) warned that the amendments risked creating an excessive concentration of executive power and weakening the separation of powers. This was significant for the accession process as EU conditionality depends on the candidate state moving towards European standards. Instead, Türkiye's institutional trajectory increasingly diverged from the democratic and rule of law expectations of the EU.

Media freedom and freedom of expression also became major political barriers. The European Parliament (2018) express concern over the deterioration of fundamental rights, freedoms and the lack of judicial independence. These concerns mattered because freedom of expression and media pluralism are central parts of the Copenhagen criteria. As these deteriorated, the gap between Türkiye's political system and the EU's accession expectations widened further.

These developments also changed the domestic logic of reform. During the early accession period, EU-related reforms could be presented as part of modernisation and democratisation. However, Turkish politics became more centralised and security focused, with EU conditionality increasingly appearing to be an external constraint on state authority rather than a useful political resource. This meant that reforms demanded by the EU became more politically costly for the Turkish government. The issue was therefore not simply that the EU had less leverage, but that the domestic cost of compliance had increased overtime. Later reports show that this institutional divergence remains unresolved. Türkiye remained at an early stage for applying EU standards in the area of rule of law and fundamental rights, and there has been further backsliding during the reporting period (European Commission, 2023). Furthermore, major problems identified in previous reports remain unaddressed. This demonstrates that accession stagnation was not only a temporary diplomatic blockage but reflected a deeper institutional gap between Türkiye and the EU.

Overall, institutional and political barriers to accession were interactive rather than one sided. EU-side factors such as the Cyprus blockage, enlargement fatigue and member-state opposition weakened the credibility of the membership reward. At the same time, Türkiye-side developments, including democratic backsliding and pressures on fundamental freedoms increased the cost and difficulty of compliance. Together, these factors produced a situation in which the accession framework formally remained in place but no longer operated as an effective reform mechanism. For the process tracing argument, this section completes the first stage of empirical evidence of the dissertation. Chapter 5 has shown that EU conditionality initially encouraged reform when accession appeared credible, but this mechanism weakened as the process became open-ended, politicised and institutionally blocked. Domestic political developments inside Türkiye then reinforced this stagnation by distancing it from EU political criteria. This supports the argument that EU leverage did not disappear suddenly, but declined through a sequence of credibility loss, institutional blockage and rising domestic adaptation costs. As a result, Türkiye had stronger incentives to pursue a more autonomous foreign policy and expand strategic alternatives beyond the accession framework, which chapter 6 will examine.

Chapter 6: Türkiye's Expanding Global Ties

6.1: Shift to Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

Türkiye's shift towards a multi-vector foreign policy represents the second stage of the process tracing argument of this dissertation. Chapter 5 showed that EU conditionality weakened as accession became increasingly open ended and institutionally blocked. This did not mean that Türkiye abandoned the EU entirely. However, the weakening accession credibility led to the priority of Turkish foreign policy changing dramatically. Multi-vector foreign policy refers to the pursuit of simultaneous diplomatic, economic and security relationships across multiple regions. In Türkiye's case, this has meant maintaining cooperation with Western institutions, while expanding ties with regions such as the Balkans, Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes Turkish foreign policy as aiming to protect Türkiye's interests in a volatile regional and global environment, while contributing to peace and stability in its neighbourhood and beyond (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). This reflects a more active and geographically diversified understanding of Türkiye's international role, rather than one primarily focused on accession to the EU.

This shift should not be understood as a complete break from the West, but more as a move towards strategic autonomy. Türkiye has sought to increase its room for manoeuvre by developing alternative partnership while still maintain benefits of its existing Western allies (Aydın-Düzgüt et al., 2025). Russia is an important example of this flexible alignment. Türkiye has cooperated with Russia in areas such as energy, trade and regional diplomacy, while also opposing Russian interests in Syria, Libya and Ukraine. This shows the logic of Türkiye's multi-vector foreign policy. Ankara does not replace Western ties with a single alternative power but seeks greater room for manoeuvre through selective cooperation with multiple actors. For this dissertation, the key point is that multi-vector foreign policy reduces the centrality of EU accession without making the EU irrelevant. Türkiye's expanding global ties gives it additional diplomatic, economic and security options. This changes the context in which EU leverage operates.

6.2: Türkiye in the Balkans

Türkiye's engagement in the Balkans is an important example of its multi-vector foreign policy as the region overlaps with the EU's enlargement space. According to documents, Türkiye considers itself to be a Balkan country and attaches importance to the region due to political, historical and cultural ties (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.).

Economic diplomacy has been central to this engagement. Türkiye has free trade agreements with several Western Balkan states, including North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). Türkiye's presence in the region is not just cultural and historical but also institutionalised through trade frameworks. Serbia is one of the main examples. Türkiye's medium-term bilateral trade target with Serbia is \$5 billion, while Turkish investments in Serbia have increased from \$1 billion to \$400 billion over the last decades. Turkish contracting companies have also reached a business volume of around \$923 million through 57 projects in Serbia (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). Between Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the two countries have signed more than 90 agreements, established more than 140 sister city relations and bilateral trade volume approached the target of \$1 billion in 2021 (Republic of Türkiye, 2022). In North Macedonia, bilateral trade exceeded \$700 billion by the end of 2022, with expectations to hit \$1 billion in the coming years (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). In Kosovo, the free trade agreement signed with Türkiye entered into force in 2019, which is Kosovo's first free trade agreement (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.).

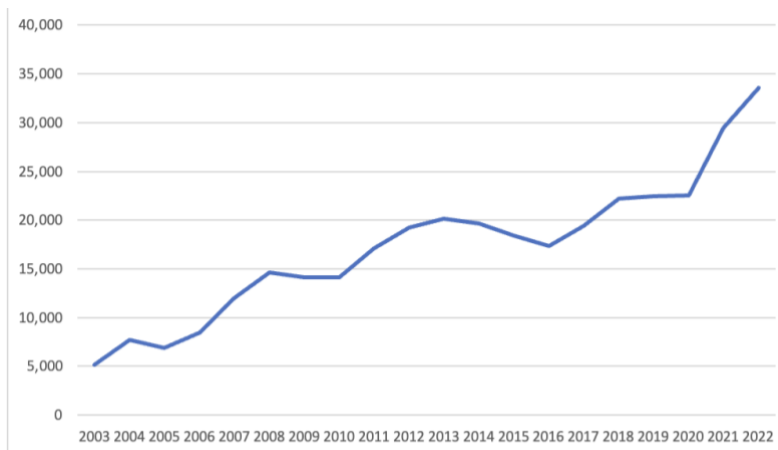
For the process tracing argument, the Balkans show that Türkiye has developed strategic alternatives in a region closely associated with EU enlargement. Türkiye does not replace the EU as the dominant actor in the Western Balkans, but it has built a parallel role through trade agreements, investment, infrastructure and cultural diplomacy. Türkiye is able to maintain relations with the EU while also acting as an autonomous regional power in Europe's surrounding neighbourhood.

6.3: Türkiye in Africa

Türkiye's engagement in Africa provides some of the strongest evidence of its expanding global ties beyond the EU. While Turkish African relations existed before the 2000s, they became far more institutionalised after Türkiye adopted its 'opening to Africa' policy and later developed this into a wider partnership strategy. Türkiye was declared a strategic partner of the African Union in 2008, and the first Türkiye-Africa Cooperation Summit was held in Istanbul the same year (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). This was a key turning point in Türkiye's long-term foreign policy diversification.

The expansion of diplomatic representation is one of the clearest indicators of Türkiye's autonomous shift. Turkish diplomatic missions in Africa increased from 12 in 2002 to 43 by 2021, while the number of African embassies rose from 10 in 2008 to 37 by 2021, (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). Embassies are not only symbolic, but create institutional infrastructure for trade, investment, development cooperation and political dialogue. This supports the argument that Türkiye has built alternative diplomatic channels outside the EU.

Figure 2: Türkiye's Trade Volume with Africa (Thousand Dollars)



Source: TUIK data

Economic relations have also grown substantially. Türkiye's total trade volume with Africa is shown in the graph, increasing from \$5 billion in 2003 to approximately \$34 billion in 2022, a constant upwards trend. Turkish contracting companies have

undertaken projects worth \$77.8 billion across the continent, while Türkiye has established joint business councils with 45 African countries (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). These figures show that Türkiye's Africa policy is not only humanitarian or cultural, but also strongly economic. Africa has become a region where Türkiye can develop export markets, infrastructure partnerships and business networks outside its traditional European partners.

Connectivity has been another central part of Türkiye's Africa strategy. Turkish Airlines became a key foreign policy instrument by connecting Istanbul to African cities. This has helped to support business, tourism and diplomatic interaction. Turkish Airlines has reached 60 destinations in 39 African countries before the pandemic, supporting Türkiye's ambition of turning Istanbul into a hub that connects Africa with the wider world (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.).

Development assistance has also supported Türkiye's influence in Africa. TİKA (2022) reported that it carried out 1,884 projects in Africa over five years, including 267 education projects and 204 projects aimed at strengthening administrative and civilian infrastructure. These projects allow Türkiye to present itself as a development partner rather than only a commercial actor. This reinforces the middle power identity, combining economic diplomacy with humanitarian and developmental engagement.

Overall, Africa shows how Türkiye has expanded its strategic alternatives through diplomacy, trade, infrastructure, aviation and development assistance. This does not mean that Africa replaces the EU in Turkish foreign policy, but it shows that accession is no longer the only framework that Türkiye is seeking international influence from.

6.4: Türkiye in Central Asia

Central Asia represents another important pillar of Türkiye's multi-vector foreign policy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye was the first country to recognise the independence of the Central Asian republics and sought to build relationships around shared historical, linguistic and cultural ties. Central Asia is also strategically important, because of its energy resources, pipeline routes and role as a trade corridor between Europe and Asia.

Türkiye's relations with Central Asia have been supported by diplomatic and development mechanisms. High Level Strategic Cooperation Councils with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and a similar mechanism with Tajikistan, provides platforms for deepening relationships (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). TİKA was originally established to provide

development assistance to these countries, showing that Central Asia was one of the earliest regions where Türkiye attempt to build influence through aid and cooperation. Cultural and educational links have also played a role through TURKSOY, Türkiye Scholarships, Turkish Ministry of National Education schools, and joint universities such as the Turkish-Kazakh International Hoca Ahmet Yesevi University and the Turkish-Kyrgyz Manas University.

Institutionalisation has become especially visible through the Organisation of Turkic States. The organisation was first established on 3rd October 2009 as the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States and became the Organisation of Turkic States on 12th November 2021. The members are Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Hungary, Turkmenistan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus are observer states. The organisation aims to deepen cooperation among Turkic states with a multilateral framework based on common history, language and culture (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). This provides Türkiye with a formal regional platform outside of the EU framework, covering political dialogue, economic cooperation, culture and transport.

Connectivity is another part of Türkiye's Central Asia strategy. The Middle Corridor, or Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor, begins in China and passes through Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, before reaching Europe through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye. The route is 2000km shorter than the Northern Corridor and can connect China and Europe in 18 days. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway opened in 2017 and is expected to carry 6.5 million tonnes of cargo per year initially, rising to 17 million tonnes by 2034 (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). This shows that Türkiye's Central Asian policy is linked not only to identity and diplomacy, but also to trade routes, infrastructure and its ambition to act as a Eurasian connector.

Overall, Central Asia demonstrates Türkiye's attempt to expand its reach through trade, institutions, education and connectivity. It strengthens Türkiye's role as a bridge between Europe and Asia, supporting its shift towards a more autonomous and multi-vector foreign policy.

6.5: Türkiye in the Middle East

The Middle East represents the most security focused aspect of Türkiye's multi-vector ambitions. Policy in the Middle East has been shaped heavily by conflict, border security, refugees, energy and regional competition. This is especially visible in Syria and Iraq.

Türkiye's involvement in Syria has been driven by the combined issues of counterterrorism and a refugee crisis, while preserving Syria's territorial integrity (Republic of Türkiye, 2024).

Türkiye at one point was hosting over 4 million displaced people, including over 3.6 million Syrians, showing the scale of the regional impact of the Syrian Crisis on Turkish foreign policy (Republic of Türkiye, 2019).

Iraq is another important example of Türkiye's security-driven regional engagement.

According to official documents by the Republic of Türkiye (n.d.), the main pillars of Türkiye-Iraq relations are preserving Iraq's political unity and territorial integrity, improving cooperation in investment, trade, transportation and infrastructure, and strengthening security cooperation against terrorism, especially the PKK. This demonstrates the combination of economic and security objectives in Türkiye's Middle Eastern foreign policy. The Development Road Project has become increasingly important, with Iraq seeking to connect the Gulf to Türkiye and Europe through transport infrastructure. Erdoğan's visit to Iraq in 2024 was reported to be focusing on this, showing Türkiye's attempt to position itself as a regional connectivity actor as well as a security power.

Türkiye's role in Libya also demonstrated its willingness to act as an assertive regional power beyond the EU framework. Türkiye's support for the Tripoli-based Government of National accord showed a more interventionist foreign policy designed to protect strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Economic links also remain relevant, with Türkiye maintaining strong trade volume despite the war (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). At the same time, Türkiye has pursued pragmatic normalisation with several Middle Eastern States. Relations with Egypt have improved after years of tension, with bilateral trade reaching \$8.8 billion in 2024 and setting a target of \$15 billion (Republic of Türkiye, 2025). Türkiye also has deepened institutional ties with Qatar. In 2025, Türkiye and Qatar welcomed the entry into force of their

Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement and reiterated the aim of reaching \$5 billion in bilateral trade (Republic of Türkiye, 2025).

Overall, the Middle East shows the assertive side of Türkiye's strategic autonomy. Türkiye has acted through military operations, diplomatic normalisation, trade agreements and infrastructure projects. This supports the wider Chapter 6 argument that Türkiye's foreign policy has become more autonomous and regionally active. Türkiye has expanded diplomatic, economic, institutional and security engagement beyond the EU accession framework with many regions. These relationships do not mean that the EU has become irrelevant to Türkiye but show that EU accession is no longer the sole principle of Turkish foreign policy. For the process tracing argument, this supports the second stage of the causal pathway, as credibility of EU accession has declined, and Türkiye has developed wider strategic alternatives and increased its influence as a middle power. This sets up chapter 7, which analyses how these changes have reshaped EU-Türkiye relations into a more transactional relationship.

Chapter 7: EU-Türkiye Relations in a Multipolar Order

7.1: From Accession to Strategic Interdependence

The evidence from chapters 5 and 6 suggests that EU-Türkiye relations have shifted from an accession centred relationship to one based on strategic interdependence. The accession framework has not formally disappeared, but the accession negotiations have effectively come to a standstill since 2018. This is despite Türkiye remaining as a candidate state in the current day. This demonstrates the central paradox of the relationship. Accession is formally present but no longer functions as the main mechanism that is driving relations.

Instead, EU-Türkiye relations increasingly operate through selective cooperation in areas where both side remains mutually dependent. Trade is the clearest example of this. EU-Türkiye trade relations are based on the 1963 Association Agreement and the Customs Union which has been in force since 1996. The EU is by far Türkiye's top trading partner, accounting for almost a third of Türkiye's trade. Meanwhile, Türkiye is the EU's seventh largest trading partner, accounting for 3.6% of total EU trade (European Council, 2025). This shows that economic interdependence has remained deep even as accession negotiations have lost political momentum. Recent trade data reinforces this. In 2025, bilateral trade between Türkiye and the EU reached a record high of over \$252.4 billion (European Commission, 2025). The inaugural meeting of a new EU-Türkiye High-Level Dialogue on Trade took place in 2024, giving a platform for both parties to work on bilateral irritants. This would allow for discussion on several areas of cooperation that would strengthen the functioning of the customs union, (European Commission, 2024). This emphasises that despite the collapse of accession negotiations, the EU and Türkiye are actively seeking to further their relationship built on interdependence.

Migration cooperation provides another example of this shift. The EU-Türkiye Statement in 2016 was created in response to the migration crisis and aimed to reduce irregular migration from Türkiye to the Greek islands. Under this arrangement, all new irregular migrants crossing to the Greek islands after 20th March 2016 could be returned to Türkiye. This is while the EU began disbursing €3 billion through the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye,

(Council of the European Union, 2016). The EU pledged an additional €3 billion by 2018, bringing the financial side of the agreement to €6 billion (Republic of Türkiye, n.d.). This was not an accession mechanism, but a transactional agreement based on political and humanitarian pressures affecting both sides. The migration arrangement shows how Türkiye gained bargaining power from its geographic position and regional role. As a host country for millions of refugees and a transit state between the Middle East and Europe, Türkiye became essential to the EU's migration management strategy. For the EU, cooperation with Türkiye became necessary for reducing irregular arrivals. For Türkiye, the agreement provided financial support and reinforced its strategic relevance to Europe. This demonstrates the changing nature of the relationship. Cooperation continued outside of accession, but through interest-based arrangements.

Security and regional stability are another two key areas for cooperation between the EU and Türkiye. Türkiye is considered to be a key strategic partner for the EU on issues including climate, security, counterterrorism and the economy. This is because of Türkiye's important strategic geographical location. Therefore, the main transformation is not from partnership to hostility, but from accession-driven conditionality to strategic interdependence. In the early accession period, the EU's influence depended on the credibility of membership as a reward. In the current period, cooperation depends more on overlapping interests and mutual vulnerabilities. The accession framework still formally exists but is no longer the key driver of the relationship.

7.2: Linking Declining EU Leverage with Türkiye's Strategic Autonomy

The relationship between declining EU leverage and Türkiye's strategic autonomy should be understood as interactive rather than one directional. Chapter 5 showed that EU conditionality weakened because the accession reward became less credible, the negotiation process became intuitively blocked and domestic adaptation costs in Türkiye increased. Chapter 6 then showed that Türkiye expanded its diplomatic, economic and security engagement beyond the accession framework, especially in the Balkans, Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East. Together, these findings suggest that Türkiye's foreign policy diversification was both a response to accession stagnation and a factor that reinforced it.

This does not mean that Türkiye became independent from the EU. The EU remains central to Türkiye through trade, investment, the migration cooperation and a wider security dialogue. However, Türkiye's expanding global ties have reduced the extent to which the EU can act as the sole anchor of Turkish foreign policy. EU influence has not disappeared but changed in character. It now operates through sectoral cooperation and mutual dependence rather than accession driven conditionality.

This distinction is important for the dissertation's causal argument. If Türkiye had remained primarily dependent on accession, the EU's weakened conditionality may still have retained stronger political influence. However, because Türkiye developed wider strategic alternatives, the declining credibility of accession became more consequential. The developments therefore reinforce each other. Weaker EU leverage creates incentives for diversification, while diversification further limits the exclusivity of EU leverage. This interaction explains why EU-Türkiye relations have not collapsed but have shifted towards a more transactional form of strategic interdependence.

7.3: Implications for EU External Governance

The case of Türkiye has wider implications for EU external governance, as it shows that candidate status alone is not enough to produce sustained compliance. EU external governance relies on the ability of the European Union to project rules and expectations beyond its borders, especially through enlargement and conditionality. However, this mechanism depends on the credibility of the reward. If accession is perceived as realistic, EU rules can become a strong incentive for domestic reform. However, if accession remains formally open but politically blocked, then conditionality risks becoming ineffective. Türkiye demonstrates this clearly, now that there is no longer the same reform incentive that there was in the early 2000s. This supports the wider argument in the dissertation that EU leverage is not fixed, but varies according to the credibility, consistency and exclusivity of the incentives offered.

This has important implications for the future of enlargement policy. The European Commission's revised enlargement methodology in 2020 suggests that the EU itself recognises the problem of credibility. The methodology was designed to make accession more credible, predictable and subject to stronger political steering. It also emphasised that candidate countries must deliver reforms, while the EU must also deliver when those reforms are achieved. This is significant because it addresses one of the central problems visible in the Türkiye case. Conditionality weakens when compliance is not clearly connected to progress. The methodology also gives greater importance to the fundamentals of accession, with increased focus on rule of law, democratic institutions and public administration reform, which are opened first and closed last in the negotiation process (European Commission, 2020). This suggests that the EU has attempted to prevent future accessions from becoming increasingly problematic and to keep the accession process as credible as possible.

A second implication is that EU external governance may increasingly rely on gradual integration rather than a single membership or non-membership divide. The Commission's 2025 Enlargement Communication refers to gradual integration through stronger connections between the EU and candidate or potential candidate countries. This includes participation in certain EU policies and programmes before membership (European Commission, 2025). However, it also states that these advantages should be conditional on reforms including rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy. This points towards a model where the EU offers earlier and more tangible benefits to candidate states, while keeping these benefits reversible if reform commitments are not met. In theory, this could help to avoid the credibility gap that emerged in EU-Türkiye relations by giving candidate states visible rewards before accession. However, gradual integration also creates a dilemma. On one hand, it may strengthen EU influence by giving states practical benefits before membership. On the other hand, if gradual integration becomes a substitute for accession rather than a pathway towards it, candidate states may interpret it as evidence that full membership is unlikely. This could once again produce a scenario that is similar in the Türkiye case, where cooperation continues but accession loses political legitimacy. Therefore, gradual integration can strengthen EU external governance only if it is clearly connected to a credible accession perspective. If it becomes a permanent holding arrangement, it may preserve cooperation while weakening transformation.

The Türkiye case also has implications for other candidate states. It suggests that the EU's influence is strongest when candidates still believe that reform will be rewarded and when the EU maintains a consistent political commitment to enlargement. The 2025 Enlargement Communication shows that progress on reforms was noted in countries such as Montenegro, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine. Georgia on the other hand experienced severe democratic backsliding and its accession process was effectively halted (European Commission, 2025). This contrast matters because it shows that the EU continues to use conditionality, but its effectiveness varies across cases. Candidate countries that remain committed to the accession process which the EU then rewards are where reform momentum can continue. Candidate countries where domestic political actors turn away from EU norms or where accession loses credibility is when candidate status becomes more symbolic than genuine.

Türkiye therefore provides a warning for the EU's wider enlargement strategy. If candidate states experience long-term stagnation without visible progress, they may develop alternative diplomatic, economic and security options. This does not mean that they may abandon the EU completely, but it can reduce the EU's ability to act as the central anchor of domestic and foreign policy. This risk is relevant in a multipolar order, where alternative actors can offer trade, investment, and political support without attaching the same democratic conditions. The EU's external governance is therefore challenges not only by enlargement fatigue, but by the wider availability of alternative partnerships.

For EU-Türkiye relations specifically, the future is likely to involve differentiated integration rather than a return to a simple accession pathway. Müftüler-Baç (2016) discusses cases where alternative models of integration may be more realistic than full membership. This can include deeper cooperation through the Customs Union, visa dialogue, climate policy, foreign policy coordination and more. This approach may be practical because it recognises the depth of EU-Türkiye interdependence without pretending that accession is politically imminent. However, it also carries the risk that the EU prioritises transactional cooperation too heavily, so it may also reduce its ability to influence democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights.

Overall, Türkiye shows that EU external governance remains important but is no longer automatically transformative. The EU can still shape cooperation through markets,

institutions, funding and regulatory frameworks. However, where accession is not credible, this influence becomes narrower and more conditional on mutual interests. The wider lesson is that enlargement conditionality requires more than formal candidate status. It requires believable rewards, consistent political commitment and clear links between reform and progress. Without these conditions, EU external governance may preserve engagement, but is less likely to produce deep political transformation.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1: Summary of Findings

This dissertation examined how Türkiye's expanding global ties have affected the future of its relationship with the European Union. The main argument was that EU-Türkiye relations have shifted away from a primarily accession-driven relationship and towards a more transactional form of strategic interdependence. Türkiye remains formally connected to the EU accession framework, but the credibility of its membership has weakened significantly. At the same time, Türkiye has expanded its diplomatic, economic and security engagement beyond Europe, allowing it to act with greater strategic autonomy.

The first stage of the analysis examined the decline of conditionality. During the early reform period, the accession process created a strong incentive for domestic reform within Türkiye. Candidate status and the opening of accession negotiations made membership appear possible, giving the EU significant leverage. However, this weakened over time, with the accession process stagnating and the EU's ability to encourage reform through conditionality declining.

The second stage of the dissertation analysed Türkiye's expanding global ties. Türkiye has pursued a more multi-vector foreign policy, strengthening its engagement in the Balkans, Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East. These ties have not replaced Türkiye's relationship with the EU but have enabled Türkiye to pursue alternative sources of influence and cooperation. This has increased Türkiye's ability to cooperate with the EU selectively rather than relying on accession as the central framework for its external relations.

The final stage of analysis examined EU-Türkiye relations in a more multipolar international order. The dissertation found that declining EU leverage and Türkiye's strategic autonomy are interactive rather than one directional. The weakening of the accession process created incentives for Türkiye to diversify its foreign policy, reducing the exclusivity of EU influence. Therefore, the relationship has not collapsed but is now based more on mutual interests than accession-driven Europeanisation.

8.2: Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation contributes to debates on EU enlargement, external governance and middle power diplomacy. It supports the argument that EU conditionality is not a fixed source of influence. Its effectiveness depends on the credibility of the reward and the domestic costs of adaptation. In Türkiye's case, the formal existence of candidate status was not enough to maintain reform momentum once the credibility of accession was no longer there.

The study also contributes to the literature on Turkish foreign policy by showing how Türkiye's multi-vector engagement has changed the wider context of EU-Türkiye relations. Türkiye's expanding ties reinforce the decline of EU leverage by giving Türkiye more diplomatic, economic and security alternatives. This shows that candidate states are not passive recipients of EU influence. They can respond to stagnation by developing alternative strategies.

The dissertation also highlights the importance of multipolarity for understanding EU external governance. In a more fragmented order, the EU no longer operates in a scenario where it is the only source of trade, investment or strategic partnership. This reduces the exclusivity of EU incentives and gives regional powers more room for manoeuvre. Türkiye therefore demonstrates how the effectiveness of enlargement conditionality can be weakened when candidate states gain access to alternative partnerships.

8.3: Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for the future of EU-Türkiye relations. The EU cannot rely on accession framework alone to shape its relationship with Türkiye. Although accession has not been formally abandoned, it no longer provides a credible or immediate path for cooperation. A more realistic approach may involve differentiated integration, focusing on areas where both sides continued to have shared interests. However, this approach also carries risks. If EU-Türkiye relations become entirely transactional, the EU may preserve cooperation while losing its ability to influence democratic reform and rule of

law. Therefore, the EU faces a balance between recognising Türkiye's strategic importance while avoiding a relationship based only on short term interests.

For Türkiye, the findings show that strategic autonomy does not mean independence from the EU. Türkiye's relationship with the EU remains highly important, especially in economic and security terms. However, Türkiye's expanding global ties allow it to approach the relationship from a more flexible position.

There are also wider implications for EU enlargement policy. It shows that candidate status alone is not enough to produce long-term transformation. If the EU want conditionality to remain effective, it must maintain credible rewards, consistent political commitment and clearer links between reform and progress. Without these conditions, candidate states may continue to engage with the EU, but the EU's transformative influence will be weakened.

8.4: Limitations and Future Research

This dissertation has some limitations. First, it is based on a single case study. This allows for detailed analysis but limits the extent to which findings can be generalised to all candidate states. Türkiye is a unique case because of its long accession process, NATO membership and active foreign policy. Therefore, finding should not be considered to be universal.

Second, the relationship between accession stagnation and Türkiye's global ties is difficult to prove in a direct causal way. Türkiye's foreign policy diversification may both be a consequence of declining EU credibility and a cause of it. While this has been addressed by using process tracing, the relationship remains interactive rather than linear.

Third, the dissertation relies mainly on secondary sources, official documents and academic literature. While this is appropriate for the scope of the study, future research could strengthen the analysis through interviews with policymakers, diplomats or experts involved in EU-Türkiye relations.

Fourth, the dissertation is limited by the availability and consistency of official data. Some Turkish policy documents and official statistics are either outdated, undated or not regularly updated. This makes it difficult to establish a fully consistent timeline of Türkiye's external engagement across different regions.

Future research could also compare Türkiye with other candidate or neighbouring states such as Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine or Western Balkan countries. This would help to assess whether the pattern identified in Türkiye is part of a wider challenge to EU external governance in a multipolar order.

Overall, this dissertation has shown that Türkiye's expanding global ties have reshaped the context of its relationship with the European Union. The EU remains an important partner, but it is no longer the sole anchor of Türkiye's foreign policy. The future of EU-Türkiye relations is therefore likely to develop as a complex relationship based on strategic interdependence, selective cooperation and continuing tension between shared interests.

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