

## The EU's Turkey challenge

*EU leaders will discuss relations with Turkey at a special European Council meeting that begins today. The discussion follows escalating tensions in recent months between Turkey and Greece over gas reserves and maritime rights. Luigi Scazzieri explains that while the EU is keen to encourage Turkey to pursue a diplomatic solution to resolve its differences with Greece, there is little unity between the member states on how a better EU-Turkey relationship can be achieved.*

Relations with Turkey will be one of the main issues on the agenda when European leaders meet this week. In recent months, Ankara has clashed with Greece and Cyprus, disputing their maritime boundaries and sending research ships escorted by military vessels to explore for hydrocarbons and assert its own extensive maritime claims. Advancing maximalist claims and turning up the rhetoric was also a way for the Turkish government to deflect attention from the country's ailing economy.

Turkey and Greece came close to a military clash in early September, but tensions eased after Turkey paused drilling operations south of the Greek island of Kastellorizo. Ankara has toned down its rhetoric towards Greece, and bilateral talks between Athens and Ankara have restarted. However, Turkey has maintained the pressure on Cyprus, and continues to explore for hydrocarbons in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone.

Member states broadly agree on the aim of EU policy towards Turkey. The EU has condemned Turkey's unilateral actions and imposed mild sanctions on Ankara for its exploration activities near Cyprus. It wants Ankara to engage in diplomacy to resolve its differences with Greece peacefully, and to refrain from aggressive actions towards Cyprus. The member states also want to foster a less confrontational and dysfunctional EU-Turkey relationship. But they disagree on the best way to achieve this.



Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, meeting with Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Credit: European Council

Cyprus, Greece and France believe that Turkey is an aggressive power and favour a more robust stance, believing that only firmness can push Ankara to halt its unilateral actions. France has come to see Turkey as a major threat to its interests in the region and to Europe as a whole. French leaders often mention Turkey in the same breath as Russia, and sometimes single Ankara out for even greater criticism than Moscow. To signal its support for Greece and Cyprus and to deter Ankara, Paris has increased its military presence in the region.

For Cyprus and Greece, it is frustrating that many other member states seem to be more concerned about what is happening in Belarus than about Ankara's unilateral actions towards fellow EU members. This led Cyprus to veto the imposition of EU sanctions on scores of Belarusian individuals involved in fraud in the August election and in the ensuing crackdown on dissent. Cyprus said it did not oppose sanctions per se, but that it wanted the EU to also impose additional sanctions on Turkey for its activities in Nicosia's Exclusive Economic Zone. However, Turkey's recent moves to reduce tensions with Greece mean there is little appetite amongst other member states to do as Cyprus wishes. Moreover, most member states resent Cyprus holding up an EU foreign policy decision on what they see as a completely unrelated matter.

Most member states think that sanctions on Turkey would only escalate tensions and sabotage dialogue between Greece and Turkey before it has a chance to get off the ground. Germany stresses solidarity with Greece and Cyprus, but has also taken on the role of mediator. Berlin has been critical of some of France's moves to support Greece and Cyprus, and won't consider sanctions until it judges diplomacy to have been exhausted.

Germany and a number of other member states including Italy and Spain also value their economic links with Turkey and do not want to impose sanctions as these would also damage their own economies. Italy also thinks that maintaining some cooperation with Turkey is a necessity given Italian interests in Libya and Turkey's important role there. Finally, even though Greece has hardened its border by pushing back refugees, reducing Turkey's ability to threaten the EU with a new migration crisis, many member states still fear that Ankara could push refugees towards Europe in retaliation for sanctions.

Member states will probably not agree on the best way to approach Turkey as long as they disagree on whether Ankara's recent willingness to pause unilateral actions towards Greece and engage in talks with Athens represents a genuine de-escalation or only a pause. But even if the latter proves true and Turkey resumes its exploration activities, any additional sanctions are likely to consist of limited measures such as asset freezes and visa bans on low-level Turkish officials. These are unlikely to push Ankara to lash out in the way many member states fear, but also won't do much to discourage it from engaging in more unilateral actions.

Member states are unlikely to agree on tougher sanctions that might push Ankara to review its priorities unless Turkey substantially escalates its provocations, as such sanctions would also carry a much larger risk of increasing tensions. Disillusioned with the EU's stance on Turkey, it is likely that Greece and Cyprus will redouble their efforts to bolster their defence ties to France and the US, as they have already been doing.

With member states unwilling to impose significant sanctions on Turkey, a common EU policy will necessarily be limited to trying to use diplomacy to steer relations with Ankara in a more constructive direction. The starting point should be an offer to revive EU-Turkey migration cooperation. A new deal is in the EU's interests: Europe would be betraying its values if it relied only on forcefully repelling migrants at the border. The EU should offer to extend its existing programme to help Turkey support the 3.6 million refugees it is hosting if Ankara pauses all its energy exploration activities. Turkey would welcome the EU's help, as supporting the refugees is a large burden. The money should not go to the Turkish government but would be used to directly support refugees in the country. Funding would be disbursed in tranches and would be immediately halted if Ankara resumed hydrocarbon exploration activities.

At the same time, the EU should contribute to easing regional tensions by encouraging Cyprus to start talks with Turkish Cypriots over sharing revenues from gas (if and when Cypriot fields start producing any gas), and to put its weight behind reunification talks after the election of a Turkish Cypriot leader in October. A revenue sharing agreement between Cyprus and Turkish Cypriots could pave the way for Turkey's inclusion in efforts to develop regional gas resources. The EU could also signal its willingness to start talks on modernising the EU-Turkey customs union if Ankara refrains from further actions towards Greece and Cyprus, and improves its record on civil liberties.

Ultimately, a durable de-escalation of tension in the Eastern Mediterranean and improvement in EU-Turkey relations depends on whether the Turkish government thinks it can gain more from confrontation or improving relations with Europe. Together with Turkey's own extensive economic difficulties, a new agreement to cooperate on migration could help persuade President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the merits of the latter.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)*

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