



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

EU faces the new Turkish equation – what is the answer to Ankara's shift?



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave EU bureaucrats in Brussels tangible proof of the phrase they have been repeating for a year and a half: Russian aggression against Ukraine will fundamentally change relations in Europe.

The new quid pro quo offer from Ankara surprised them, and they reacted negatively following long-term inertia. However, they will not be able to find the answer in existing talking points, which they have been using for years. Now they will have to search for a creative solution.

Turkish President Erdoğan, with a newly renewed mandate and an even more convincing majority in the parliament than before, has set a new equation before his Western partners.

Sweden finally got the green light from Turkey to join NATO at the last moment before the start of the summit in Lithuania. In return, Erdoğan is asking to unfreeze Turkey's path to EU membership.

While the first part of the bargain caused enthusiasm among NATO/EU leaders, Erdoğan's conditions regarding the EU was shocking to most, and it seems they will tackle it more seriously after the important NATO summit.

"Turkey has been waiting at the door of the EU for over 50 years now, and almost all NATO member countries are now members of the EU. I am making this call to these countries that have kept Turkey waiting at the gates of the EU for more than 50 years. First, open the way to Turkey's membership of the EU, and then we will open it for Sweden, just as we had opened it for Finland", said the Turkish president.

Ankara's post-election shift

The Europeans are now assessing whether Erdogan just wants to trade and perhaps blackmail, or whether he is serious about returning Turkey to the track leading to full membership.

In both cases, they will have to work very quickly because the conditions he has set for agreeing to Sweden's membership in NATO are clear. The usual August collective vacation of the EU apparatus will probably have to wait this year.

Erdogan's return to the EU membership story speaks volumes about the changes in Ankara's politics since his recent victory in the presidential and parliamentary elections.

These changes confirm that Erdogan is taking a much softer position, expecting this to be accompanied by a series of concessions concerning Ankara.

First, he sharpened his course towards Moscow and, more clearly than ever before, supported Kyiv and its defence against Russian aggression.

During Volodymyr Zelensky's recent visit to Istanbul, Erdogan made that support clear whilst advocating Ukraine's entry into NATO, all of which dashed Moscow's expectations that it could count on Turkish "neutrality" during the conflict.

Those dashed expectations caused anger in the Kremlin when Erdogan handed over the captured leaders of the elite Ukrainian Azov regiment to Zelensky, even though he had previously accepted the Russian request that they remain in Turkey until the end of the war.

The Kremlin was particularly struck by the fact that Turkey announced that its navy would protect Ukrainian convoys carrying grain if

Russia sticks to the idea of not extending the Black Sea grain deal after July 17.

Thawing relations with Greece

These are significant changes in Turkey's current policy towards the war in Ukraine in just a few days.

Erdoğan's announcements that after the elections, that he would move towards an agreement with Greece on many disputed issues, including the top priority of unresolved tensions within NATO, need to be taken into account.

The first meeting between President Erdogan and Prime Minister of Greece Kyriakos Mitsotakis, both at the very start of their new mandates, is expected to take place in the margins of the NATO summit in Vilnius.

With all that - the sudden return of Turkey's membership of the EU in the game, and Erdogan's call for a new round of negotiations (trade) - speak volumes about Ankara's significant shift towards its Western partners.

The EU as support for resolving the economic crisis

A significant reason for this is the intention to start resolving the long-term economic crisis in the country with a much greater reliance on the EU, which could represent an essential shift for Turkey from the authoritarian models of capitalism, which have dominated until now.

"Turkey has no choice but to revive and accelerate the accession talks with the EU", said Professor Isin Çelebi, former Turkish Minister of Finance (1989-1990).

The architecture of the new government in Ankara undoubtedly contributed to Turkey's shift, where the new head of diplomacy, Hakan Fidan, has held one of the most significant levers of influence.

He has been active in contacts with Europeans and the administration of President Joe Biden ahead of the announcement of Turkey's "Yes" to Sweden's bid for NATO membership.

President Erdoğan has set expectations for the renewal of Turkey's EU accession process without mentioning membership as a condition.

However, many Europeans overlooked this and automatically took a defensive position saying that the EU and NATO are different organisations with different models for accepting new members.

But that is the response from the manual. This is the response of those EU structures, which hoped the Turkish case was closed long ago, and this is why they feel relieved.

Old fears in a new political environment

However, Erdoğan has revived their fears of membership of a state with a population the size of Germany, thus the largest in the Union, with an economy the size of the Netherlands (close to \$1 trillion) and a homogeneous diaspora of 5-6 million people across Western

Europe, approximately half to Germany.

Turkey's accession to the EU would also mean the accession of hundreds of its deputies (the same number as Germany) into the European Parliament, gaining the right to veto the bloc's decisions and exercise very influential participation in the decision-making process.

Negotiations with the EU were frozen by a political decision after the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, and the repression of a large number of people for being linked to the attempt to overthrow Erdogan's government.

Since then, Turkey has had negative annual progress reports from the European Commission as the main qualification for deciding the eligibility of candidates for membership.

The negotiation process could be renewed by a political decision, but the top of the EU has been divided about it.

While the European Commission, the EU's executive body, expressly rejected Erdoğan's conditions, President of the European Council Charles Michel talked with the Turkish leader and took a much milder approach. He said they were searching for opportunities to bring EU-Turkey cooperation "back to the forefront and re-energise their relations".

Charles Michel spoke on behalf of the EU's "stakeholders", its member states, and those from the European Commission in the capacity of "management" of the bloc. This difference in attitudes could hint that the Turkish case would not be resolved using a rulebook on the accession of new members, but much more by using the political decisions of the most influential bloc members.

A chance for the internal transformation of the EU

The Turkish president expects concessions from his new move, and they do not even have to go as far as Turkey's EU membership.

Their short-term effect has been calculated to be the thawing of relations with Washington and the renewal of the Turkish fleet of fighter jets F-16, which has been stopped.

The announced Erdoğan's rapprochement with Greece and the return to dialogue will facilitate the fulfilment of this condition and, at the same time, possibly the relaxation of relations regarding Cyprus, another major obstacle to Turkey's rapprochement with the EU.

Erdoğan wants a new "bargaining" stage with the West, and this should not surprise politicians and observers, at least not to the extent they are showing today.

This new round could be a chance to speed up the internal reform of the EU, which they have been announcing and preparing for years, to make the bloc more efficient regarding decision-making and, therefore, more influential on the global stage.