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TÜRKİYE - EU RELATIONS: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The NATO Summit held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 11-12, following the resolution of the Sweden's membership crisis, signifies a period of more favorable prospects for the future of relations between Türkiye and the European Union (EU). Charles Michel, President of the European Council, emphasized that discussions were held to highlight EU-Türkiye cooperation and revitalize relations by addressing future opportunities. The longstanding "full membership" perspective between the EU and Türkiye

reflects both Türkiye's aim to expedite reform processes and elevate democratic standards, as well as the EU's goal of enhancing regional stability and security. However, past issues, concerns about insufficient progress in areas such as human rights and the rule of law, and strategic differences have complicated the relationship.

In recent years, regarding the Türkiye-EU relationship, factors such as the refugee crisis stemming from the internal conflict in

Syria and security concerns, have emphasized the need to increase cooperation and dialogue. The EU's policies to strengthen cooperation with Türkiye include areas such as the economy, updating the customs union, and counterterrorism efforts. Nonetheless, there are certain obstacles to improve relations. Particularly, disagreements on issues like the Cyprus problem, the sharing of energy resources, human rights, and freedom of expression have created tensions. Furthermore, the political dynamics in Türkiye and internal issues within the EU also influence the course of relations. Türkiye and the EU find themselves in a period of shaping their relations at a time when the EU's foreign policy is taking shape, and Türkiye's regional role is gaining significance. In particular, international developments like the Russia-Ukraine war have increased the EU's security and defense needs, positioning Türkiye as an important player for the EU. In conclusion, today's Türkiye-EU relations are influenced by both historical dynamics and the current international environment. The political, economic, strategic, and security dimensions of Türkiye-EU relations should be comprehensively addressed.

Statements made by the EU High Representative Joseph Borrell regarding Türkiye-EU relations are important in terms of presenting the priorities of the parties in the near future and also outlining their vision for the future of the relationship. Borrell's points underscore the potential and complexity of Türkiye-EU relations. Borrell states that building a stronger relationship between Türkiye and the EU would be beneficial for both sides. This reflects both Türkiye's desire to pursue EU membership and the EU's aim to achieve regional stability and security. Borrell

mentions that issues such as updating the Customs Union and visa liberalization are on the table, emphasizing that these topics encompass not only the expectations of the EU but also those of Türkiye. This indicates the need for both sides to act taking into account their mutual interests. Türkiye's desire to update the Customs Union agreement highlights the importance of economic cooperation, while the issue of visa liberalization represents a dimension of human mobility and convergence. The disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, which Borrell has mentioned, encompass strategic issues such as the allocation of energy resources and the determination of maritime boundaries. Therefore, the resolution of these disputes between the parties is a critical step for regional stability and cooperation.

Following the NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 11-12, 2023, the EU Council has requested the EU High Representative and the EU Commission to prepare a strategic and forward-looking report on the future of EU-Türkiye relations, based on the latest election results in Türkiye and the methods and options determined by the EU Council. The report prepared by Türkiye and the EU to assess membership perspectives is significant for the future of Türkiye-EU relations. This report aims to provide a roadmap that could shape the short and medium-term course of relations. The report is expected to be presented in the post-summer period of 2023 and discussed at the EU Summit in October or December, representing an effort to reduce uncertainty regarding the future of the relationship. Especially after the war in Ukraine, the perception that Türkiye is an influential player in Europe has become increasingly widespread in Brussels. Türkiye has drawn attention by actively

participating in regional and international issues, underscoring its strategic position. However, there are serious concerns about Türkiye's progress in its EU membership process. The view that Türkiye will not make sufficient progress in meeting the Copenhagen political criteria and aligning with the EU *acquis* has arisen due to past obstacles and the slowness of reform processes. This caution leads the EU to act prudently when considering the adequacy of steps to be taken concerning Türkiye's membership process. While the report is expected to play a role in future relations, the EU is likely to observe the steps taken by Türkiye in light of the effects of the Russia-Ukraine War, the Cyprus issue, and the Copenhagen political criteria framework, among others.

President Erdogan's proposal regarding Sweden's NATO membership, where he put forward the condition of EU membership, was considered an unexpected and unlikely move by Member of the European Parliament Nacho Sánchez Amor. Highlighting the distinct purposes served by NATO and the EU, Nacho Sánchez Amor emphasized that each country must fulfill the Copenhagen criteria. The vetoes on Sweden's NATO membership are considered as assistance to Russia. The removal of Erdogan's veto and the resolution of the Sweden's NATO membership crisis indicate the beginning of a positive period in Türkiye-European Union relations. With the resolution of this crisis, an atmosphere of rapprochement and cooperation has developed between the parties. The positive statements from Ankara, Brussels, and other European capitals in the wake of this favorable atmosphere indicate that the parties are adopting an optimistic stance regarding the future of relations. Visa liberalization, in particular, has been a long-discussed issue.

However, full implementation of visa liberalization in the short term appears challenging. Nevertheless, discussions are underway for the near future to initiate negotiations for visa facilitation and even to reconsider the Customs Union. This suggests that cooperation can increase between the parties and that relations can develop in a more positive direction. The updating of the Customs Union agreement will lead to greater cooperation not only in the economy but also in areas such as digital transformation and the environment. However, how the renewal of the agreement will be perceived politically will depend on the approach of the EU member states, especially considering it as an issue of political concern.

Another important dimension of Türkiye-EU relations relates to the obligations arising from the 18 March Agreement signed in 2016. This agreement primarily aimed to control the flow of refugees into Europe, with Türkiye committing to various responsibilities, especially regarding the readmission of refugees on Greek islands. However, the implementation of this agreement and the return of refugees to their countries is a complex and delicate process. Particularly during a period when the Syrian civil war continues, creating conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees to their countries is imperative. In this regard, Türkiye and the EU must collaborate to support these returns and create an environment that enables refugees to return to their home countries safely and voluntarily. Türkiye, in this new period, expects support from the EU, especially for these returns. It particularly requests EU assistance in providing the necessary infrastructure and security measures for the return of Syrian refugees. This effort aims to both alleviate

the burden on Türkiye and facilitate the dignified return of refugees. Türkiye's expectation indicates that its relations with the EU are not limited to technical matters such as trade or visa liberalization but encompass a broader perspective that includes international and humanitarian dimensions, such as the refugee issue.

The issue of Sweden's NATO membership emerged as a bargaining element in negotiations related to Türkiye's membership in the European Union following the start of the Russia-Ukraine War. Türkiye, as part of the NATO alliance, aims to safeguard regional security and its national security. While Türkiye continues its relations with Russia to balance security concerns and protect national interests, it also recognizes the need to cooperate closely with the West. Therefore, Türkiye's approval of Sweden's NATO membership or a similar development reflects Türkiye's desire to establish closer ties with the West and, in particular, to seek support from the United States. Türkiye's accession to the EU has been a long-standing foreign policy goal. However, in recent years, this process has faced numerous challenges. Hence, it is understandable that Türkiye is exploring new strategies and alliances in its foreign policy. Following a strategic move like the indication that Sweden's NATO membership will be accepted, efforts to draw closer to the United States and seek greater involvement in international security matters demonstrate Türkiye's ambition to play a more significant role in international security. In conclusion, the future of Türkiye-EU relations depends on several factors. Firstly, achieving sustainable stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and finding a fair solution to the Cyprus problem are essential, as they represent fundamental components of regional stability and security. This is not

only important for Türkiye and Cyprus but also for the entire European continent. Additionally, revitalizing Türkiye's EU membership process is one of the most challenging issues on the agenda. The EU's willingness to rekindle Türkiye's membership perspective is a determining factor. Achieving consensus among member states on this matter is also a formidable task. The future of Türkiye-EU relations is also contingent on global and regional conditions. Particularly, international events such as the Russia-Ukraine war have increased the EU's security and defense needs, which, in turn, affects Türkiye's potential for cooperation with the EU. The future of the relationship will be shaped based on mutual willingness, regional stability, the preservation of core values, and international developments, among other factors.

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