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**EU-Turkey Relations:
Historical Debates and Regional Implications XX-XXI century**

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SUMMARY

Abstract	3
Introduction An overview on Turkish situation today	4
Chapter 1 Turkey-EU relations in historical perspective	
1.1 From the Ankara Agreement to the Negotiation Framework Document	8
1.2 A fluctuating but ongoing relationship: from 2006 to 2015	11
1.3 Cooperation efforts on common challenges	14
1.4 Possibilities for reunification?	17
Chapter 2 Turkish strategy in the Syrian conflict	
2.1 Erdoğan's fluctuation between the two camps: Russia and US	19
2.2 Turkish interests in the Syrian civil war	21
2.3 The end of the “Strategic Depth” Doctrine	26
Chapter 3 Italian-Turkish interests in their bilateral relations	
3.1 Turkish-Italian relations: a strategic partnership	31
3.2 Italian and Turkish interests in the Mediterranean: the Libyan case	33
3.3 The “Calabrian route”	36
Chapter 4 Italian public opinion on key Turkish events	
4.1 The one thousand contradictions’ society: between a «religiosità indocile e un laicismo nazionalista»	39

4.2 2016 Turkey's coup attempt: Erdoğan «restava l'unico volto conosciuto in una notte incerta e oscura»	41
4.3 How the Turkish and French "dangerous game" in Libya affects NATO stability	43
4.4 Consequences of Erdoğan's victory for Turkey and the West	45
Conclusion	49
Bibliography	
Primary sources	53
Secondary sources	56
Sitography	58

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is the outcome of experiences and work of the last year, as a consequence of the Erasmus+ Programme at Bilkent University in Ankara and the curricular internship at CeSPI- Osservatorio Turchia under the supervision of Dr Veleria Giannotta and the Director Daniele Frigeri, experiences that allowed me to implement my skills developed during the Master's Degree in International cooperation on human rights at Bologna University, thanks mainly to my supervising Professor Michele Marchi and Co-supervising Professor Marco Puleri.

Hence, this thesis work aims to study both theoretically and practically the role of Turkey within the broader Middle East and Mediterranean context, looking at its regional interests and its relations with Washington and the EU, as NATO ally, in a historical evolution and a specific focus on the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Turkey.

Indeed, in the first chapter, I analyse Turkey-EU relations from different points of view, in historical evolution, starting from the Ankara Agreement in 1963, arriving to identify possible scenarios in the next future, passing through common challenges and critical moments.

While the second chapter investigates the Turkish foreign policy following Erdoğan's profits, especially in the Syrian war, a decisive backdrop to obtain domestic consensus and reinforce his political role giving him the chance to keep himself in power for twenty years and, after the last elections, also for the next five.

Moreover, the third chapter is focused more in detail on Italian-Turkish bilateral relations, developed and improved in the light of their shared advantages such as the energy and industrial sector, the maintenance of strategic position in Libya and the management of migration flows in the so-called "Calabrian route", further exploring the dynamics behind the tragedy off the coasts of Cutro last February.

To conclude, this dissertation proposes a fourth chapter that, in view of the proposed analyses in the previous chapters, outlines some turning points in Turkish modern history and investigates them from the Italian public opinion's perspective, emphasizing how the latter changes according to economic-diplomatic interests with Ankara, ending with studies of the electoral results and Western responses to Erdoğan's reconfirmation at Presidency.

INTRODUCTION

An overview of the Turkish situation today

2023, the 100th anniversary of the Republic founded by Atatürk, should have been the moment of its history when Turkey presents itself as one of the largest economies in the world with a strong international position, based on multiethnic and cohesive identity, characterized by institutional revolution from the past, all of these should have been promoted and covered by AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: «Turkey will run with much bigger steps and advance much faster towards its goals, we will work tirelessly and without a break on the path to building the Century of Turkey»¹.

Contrary to expectations, today the situation appears in a different way: economically, according to World Bank data, Turkey presents annual inflation near 72.3%² in front of which the Turkish Central Bank declares a value of 43.68% for the month of April³. Hence, Erdoğan is trying an “economic experiment” keeping forcibly interest rates low to preserve economic growth with, as a consequence, the doubling of prices. The effects of this economic crisis on the population are a key element in the perspective of the future elections the next May⁴ in Turkey and the element of consensus or not for Erdoğan Presidency.

While, looking at its international role, if at the beginning of his political career as President Erdoğan used European conditionality and pressure to influence the Turkish political condition showing a strategic alignment with the EU, after the 2010s he started to combine democratic and more authoritarian rules, creating a hybrid system in which multipartitism is under central control and the President focuses the powers on his person. The new strategy of cooling relations with the EU responds to the AKP decision to present Turkey as an alternative to the European model, not only in terms of institutions, breaking the process of democratization started with a new Penal Code (2004) and amendments to the constitutions about equality and non-discrimination clause, arriving to ratify as the first country the Istanbul Convention in 2011, but especially in terms of identity, presenting Turkish people as something else, better on moral and values plan than the West and Europeans.

¹ See [Presidency Of The Republic Of Turkey : “We will work tirelessly on the path to building the Century of Türkiye” \(tccb.gov.tr\)](https://www.tccb.gov.tr)

²See [Inflation, consumer prices \(annual %\) - Türkiye | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org)

³See [TCMB - Consumer Prices](https://www.tcmb.gov.tr)

⁴ About a possible postponement of the elections, see [nota_2_radar_turchia_2023_sette_0.pdf \(cespi.it\)](#)

Even if due to the decline of democratic rights and freedom in the country European Parliament decided on the last 7th of June to not resume agreements for full membership of Ankara in the EU⁵, European countries know how much is crucial coworking with the AKP government in fields such as foreign policy, security and immigration issues. Conscious about the necessity for the EU to keep relations with him, Erdoğan is reinforcing his international position by presenting himself as the mediator in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, offering Turkish gas pipelines as an alternative for Russian gas and keeping on national territory almost 4 million of refugees, of which 3,6 million are Syrians⁶.

To complicate the picture of EU- Turkey relations even more there were the devastating earthquakes, measuring between 7.7 and 6.5 on the Richter scale, that took place on February 6, 2023, and caused destruction in various cities among the South and South-East of Turkey and the North-West of Syria⁷. The estimated number of deaths in Turkey alone is more than 50.000 and in Syria more than 6,000 people have lost their lives, adding almost 2 million of evacuated people⁸. The solidarity that the closest European countries are showing despite the complex relations with Ankara, like Greece and Cyprus, of course, are unlikely to demonstrate an immediate turning scenario but surely raise the question of how Europe should react to the emergency founding a more stable balance with Turkey. Keeping in mind that Turkey remains a strategic challenge, on one hand, the EU should be unconditional support for areas in the wake of the earthquake, on the other hand, looking at the increasingly uneven and non-democratic situation in these countries, European leaders and institutions should manage relations defining a firm position in the rocky months ahead.

While the EU is thinking about how to define its strategy with Ankara, the AKP leader is looking at the Middle East as a region where concentrating his energy and resources to obtain more internal consensus given the elections and simultaneously competing with other countries in the region to acquire an extended leadership, also using the anti-Western rhetoric as an electoral tool.

If for all the past century Turkey's foreign policy has been driven by the achievements of the Lausanne Peace Treaty's clauses⁹ in the face of which Turkey was a predominantly status quo

⁵ See [I rapporti tra UE e Turchia: tra cooperazione e tensioni | Attualità | Parlamento europeo \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶ See [Le relazioni UE-Turchia sono al minimo storico | Attualità | Parlamento europeo \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁷ See <https://en.afad.gov.tr/day-5-of-the-disaster-of-the-century>

⁸ See <https://en.afad.gov.tr/press-bulletin-36-about-the-earthquake-in-kahramanmaras>

⁹ At Lausanne, the 24th July 1923 is signed the Peace Treaty between The British Empire, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Roumania and the Serb-Croat-Slovens State of the one part, and Turkey, of the other part; with the aim to

country, out of the broader geopolitical struggles, committed to preserve sovereignty and territorial integrity against the continuing threats, since the end of the Cold War and the subsequent economic and diplomatic growth, Ankara has decided to reshape the regional order to achieve its desire to international influence.

This goal to change the traditional Turkish foreign policy of non-intervention is intensified under the AKP government: if on one hand, Erdoğan is starting a competition with the other Arab powers, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, at the same time the President pursues his goal to break Turkey out of the regional isolation that did little to advance Turkish interests in the Middle East trying to reset relations with Saudi Arabia firstly, after the tensions over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and Ankara's support for Doha after the imposition of the Saudi-led blockade on Qatar in 2017 and he is looking at new friendship with Israel where, after more than 10 years of a complicated relationship, today seems to be the possibility for a turnaround due to the economic crisis in Turkey and more flexibility of Gulf diplomacy. Indeed, there are interests from both actors to collaborate on specific topics such as the economy, internal security, and the willingness to restrict Iran's influence on Syria. On the contrary, Israel's relations with the Kurds community and Ankara's support of Hamas activities continue to represent possible elements of friction.

The recent hyperactivism of the Turks¹⁰ in the region, also military, especially in Syria, where the Turkish army has intervened several times to assure security on borders and show its power and presence in the Syrian civil war, occupying areas and threatening new interventions constantly, re-creating a conflict in which foreign policy's interests and internal security issues converge around the Kurdish question, causing from July 2015 to January 2023 more than 6.500 deaths only inside Turkish territory¹¹.

A possible window for dialogue among parties is opened with the earthquakes that struck southern Turkey near the northern border of Syria: during a meeting of the UN Security Council on the last 1st of March, the representative of Turkey said that «the devastation wrought by the earthquake demonstrated the concomitant need to create momentum in Syria's political

settled officially the conflict that had originally existed among parties since the World War I, the Treaty established Turkey's modern borders and its political independence as Republic under the guide of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. For details about territorial and diplomatic clauses see <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/lausanne-peace-treaty-part-i-political-clauses.en.mfa>; while for a deeper historical overview see N. Danforth and A. Stein, *Turkey's new foreign policy. Ankara's Ambitions, Regional Responses, and Implications for the United States*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, 2023, chapter 1.

¹⁰ See [Turkey at the Centre of the Mediterranean Geopolitical Chessboard : IEMed](#)

¹¹ See [Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer | Crisis Group](#)

process»¹² and to do this his Government continues to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people, and it has made the border gates at the Bab Al-Salam and Al Ra'ee crossings more available, in order to allow the faster transfer of United Nations aid in greater quantities. The standardization process among involved parts moves also from the 3rd April 2023 quadripartite meeting between Russian, Turkish, Iranian and Syrian foreign ministers¹³, the first direct meeting for Turkish and Syrian governmental representatives after the war, even though the refugees' return issue remains a key problem.

Another central area of interest for Ankara in the Middle East is Libya, seen as a strategic partner through which expanding Turkish influence on the Mediterranean, contrasting other Arabs countries in the region and, finally, obscuring internal economic crisis creating more consensus on foreign policy's strategy. To comply with these purposes, in 2019 Turkey signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Libya based on military cooperation assuring Turkish army personnel and Syrian mercenaries along the coast around Tripolitania¹⁴.

In conclusion, as appears by Erdoğan's political strategy, the recent AKP agenda seems to be built more on guaranteeing electoral consensus for the next elections, projecting the defence of national interests on foreign policy decisions, rather than on the promotion of a real change in the international and Mediterranean power relations. Inside this discourse, the new mediator role with the EU, the interventionist turn in Syria and Libya, and the reconciliation with Israel and Saudi Arabia can be interpreted as responses to internal political, security and consensus needs in addition to the willingness to avoid an international isolation and maximise the possible returns coming from the area.

To reinforce and consolidate the AKP and the President's domestic power, the Ankara government is presenting itself as a consolidated alternative to the European identity and Arabs countries' domination in the region, trying to cover, how much is possible, the economic and diplomatic crises, also linked with the security's policy on its borders and the lack of protection on minorities and refugees' rights in the countries.

¹² See [Plagued by 12 Years of Conflict, Syria's Suffering Only Compounded by Earthquake, Officials Tell Security Council, Citing Hampered Emergency Response - Syrian Arab Republic | ReliefWeb](#)

¹³ See [Disgelo Siria-Turchia, a Mosca la delegazione di Damasco - Politica - ANSAmed.it](#)

¹⁴ For a deeper overview of the Turkish foreign policy in Libya, see [brief 13 - turchia-libia ferhat polat.pdf \(cespi.it\)](#)

Chapter 1 TURKEY-EU RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1.1 From the Ankara Agreement to the Negotiation Framework Document

Since its foundation in 1923, the Republic of Turkey looked at the European Countries for the process of modernization, in economic and civil terms, trying to balance the European model of civilization with the creation of its own, specular, identity.

The beginning of this relationship is represented by the EU-Turkey Association Agreement, known as the “Ankara Agreement”, signed in 1963, to establish «closer bonds between the Turkish people and peoples brought together in the European Economic Community»¹⁵ and to constitute the legal basis of the association among parties. The principal aims were, not only accelerating the economic program and expanding trade but also improving the living conditions in Turkey and reducing the disparities between the Turkish economy and the economies of the other European States.

In addition to this Agreement, in 1970 the Additional Protocol was added, which entered into force in 1973. The two actors created conditions for a transition period when «free movement of industrial and agricultural products, as well as persons, were foreseen»¹⁶. Even if at that time was a timetable for the establishment of the Customs Union, the political and economic conditions in Turkey, characterized by more authoritarianism and the strengthening of the executive with pressure from the military, led to a suspension of the relations with the EU after the military coup of 12 September 1980.

Despite the internal political instability persisted, this process of economic liberalization and democratic modernization has been started again with the re-establishment of civil authority in 1983, arriving in 1987 to apply for Turkish full membership in the EU, although the phases foreseen in Ankara Agreement were not completed, and receiving due to this, a negative response from the Community.

A breakthrough was represented by the Helsinki Summit held on December 1999 through which Turkey was officially recognized by the European Council as a candidate State without

¹⁵ See [EU-Turkey Association Agreement \(the "Ankara Agreement"\), 1963 - dipublico.org](https://dipublico.org/en/eu-turkey-association-agreement-the-ankara-agreement-1963)

¹⁶ See [History of Türkiye- EU Relations \(ab.gov.tr\)](https://ab.gov.tr/en/history-of-turkiye-eu-relations)

any preconditions at the same level as the other candidates and then, in 2001, by the Accession Partnership¹⁷ prepared by EU Commission with «principles, priorities, intermediate objectives and conditions»¹⁸ for supporting Turkey to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria¹⁹.

In his discourse after the acceptance of the candidacy, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit has underlined not only the exceptional nature of Turkey as «the only country to have effected a customs union with the European Union without becoming a full member»²⁰ and as the country that «carried the heavy economic burden of this responsible role with a great sense of duty»²¹, but also claimed the important role played by his country for Europe as «leader country in democracy and secularism among countries having a majority of Muslim population»²². With this speech, Ecevit wanted, on the one hand, to reassure the European Community about the willingness of his Party to overcome their deficiencies, especially in terms of human rights and democracy, on the other hand, to show at the domestic contest, how «during the six and a half months that elapsed after our three-party coalition government took office, we took far-reaching strides in expanding human rights and democracy in Turkey and in improving our economic performance»²³.

Indeed, the fear felt by a part of Turkish society, politicized by nationalist groups as the main opponents to Turkey-EU accession, was that this standards' implementation required changes in economy and politics but mostly at social dimension, with the risk to lose their identity in favour of a complete Europeanization.

In this picture, on 3 November 2002, the elections were won by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the Millî Görüş' descendant but more able to manage diverse tendencies, including Islamist, centre-right, and far-right, as well as various ethnic and class backgrounds holding these different constituencies together and governing the country in a heterogeneous

¹⁷ See [EUR-Lex - accession partnership - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html)

¹⁸ See [Turkey APD 2001.pdf \(ab.gov.tr\)](https://ab.gov.tr/Turkey-APD-2001.pdf)

¹⁹ Copenhagen criteria, or Accession criteria, are certain conditions and principles that were established by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and strengthened by the Madrid European Council in 1995 to which any country wishing to become a member of the EU must conform. How to indicate in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>, they are stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU; the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the 'acquis'), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

²⁰ [Statement of Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit In Helsinki On Turkey's Candidacy To The EU December 11, 1999 / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(mfa.gov.tr\)](https://mfat.gov.tr/Statement-of-Prime-Minister-Bulent-Ecevit-In-Helsinki-On-Turkey-s-Candidacy-To-The-EU-December-11-1999)

²¹ *Ibidem*

²² *Ibidem*

²³ *Ibidem*

way.²⁴ Challenging the establishment of the old regime which acted also militantly to protect the secular and modernist constitution against an Islamist and separatist threat, AKP under the leadership of Erdoğan promoted, in the beginning, the expansion of individual liberties and recognition of pluralism, putting at the core of its political agenda the dialogue about the fulfilled process of integration in the EU and showing to give priority to the reforms proposed by the Copenhagen criteria as a necessary step to enter into the international community. These propositions helped the party establish hegemony, shifting discourses, alliances and policies acquiring total control of the state apparatus in recent years.

However, at first, the need to be recognised as a more democratic and modern Turkey by the international arena responded to internal dynamics: with the support of the EU, AKP started to promote a series of domestic reforms primarily to limit the military power in favour of civilian one and increase the consensus around the Party working liberally and democratically (between October 2003 and July 2004, the Parliament approved 261 laws that change the military role inside the political system, renewed the judicial procedures, established human rights; and in 2005 other 166 laws²⁵).

Hence, the progress of the reform process under the AKP let the European Council, firstly on December 2004, to recognize Turkey in line with the political criteria promoted by the EU and, secondly in October 2005, to launch the accession negotiations with the Negotiation Framework Document and its 35 chapters negotiated among parties²⁶. The Document, that states «the shared objective of the negotiations is accession»²⁷ pointing out, at the same time, the «open nature» of that process, enables the EU to determine opening benchmarks for every negotiation chapter, in addition to closing benchmarks, heralding a tough time ahead, challenges and difficulties with long transition periods, derogations and permanent safeguard measures. However, «the fact that it could not be deconstructed into objective, measurable criteria applicable to all candidate states made the document, and consequently the negotiation process, ambiguous»²⁸ and this ambiguity is also probably the result of a certain level of mistrust towards Turkey. Nonetheless, the negotiations opened a new scenario.

²⁴ See Massicard E., *Parties and Politics in Turkey* in *The Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Turkey*, Routledge, 2021, Chapter 9.

²⁵ See Guidi M., *Atatürk addio: come Erdoğan ha cambiato la Turchia*, il Mulino, 2018, p. 66.

²⁶ To have more information about the 35 chapters and the Accession Negotiations see <https://www.avrupa.info.tr/en/accession-negotiations-720>. While to know the current state of the negotiation, see [Current Situation \(ab.gov.tr\)](https://www.ab.gov.tr/en/current-situation)

²⁷ See [GEN \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/gen/)

²⁸ See [The State of Turkey-EU Negotiations : IEMed](https://www.iemed.it/en/the-state-of-turkey-eu-negotiations)

Determinant for the European Council's positive decision was the Turkish government's acceptance to sign the Protocol to extend the Ankara Agreement to the other ten new Member States in the negotiations. Among these countries, there was also The Republic of Cyprus, recognized by the international community but not by the Turkish government. That will be a key issue in the whole future of Turkey-EU relations.

1.2 A fluctuating but ongoing relationship: from 2006 to 2015

The enthusiasm for the modern and reforming spirit that characterised the AKP political agenda in its first years of governance ended soon around the Republic of Cyprus recognition's issue: even though in 2006 the first chapter of negotiation on Science and Research was provisionally closed, in December of the same year «the Council decided in particular to suspend negotiations on eight chapters relevant to Türkiye's restrictions about the Republic of Cyprus, and will not close the other chapters until Türkiye fulfils its commitments under the additional protocol to the EU-Türkiye association agreement, which extended the EU-Türkiye customs union to the ten member states, including Cyprus, that joined the EU in May 2004»²⁹.

Although the position taken by the Council, Erdoğan showed himself determined to carry on reforms in European and democratic terms through pragmatic, liberal-conservative and at the same time cautious politics creating the conditions, in January 2007, for a re-start of the negotiations on the chapters that were not suspended³⁰.

In this ongoing but fluctuating EU-Turkey relationship, the period between the two elections in 2007 and 2015 signed a shift from a policy of regional economic and diplomatic cooperation to abrupt turnabouts with less predictability in foreign policy, including strong support to the Muslim Brotherhood and armed Sunni groups in the Middle East, as well as anti-Kurdish

²⁹ Chapter suspended by the General Affairs and External Relations Council Decision of 11 December 2006: 1) Free Movement of Goods; 3) Right of Establishment and Freedom to Provide Services; 9) Financial Services; 11) Agriculture and Rural Development; 13) Fisheries; 14) Transport Policy; 29) Customs Union; 30) External Relations. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_06_352

³⁰ See [Current Status | EU Delegation to Türkiye \(avrupa.info.tr\)](https://avrupa.info.tr/en/Current-Status)

militarism as an expression of a mix of key domestic political push and external pull factors that gave the possibility to AKP to consolidate its power and impose its Islamic orientation³¹.

In particular, two external threats created domestic consequences and a decline of consensus around the AKP political agenda, how which is evident in the General Elections in 2015³²: the Russian invasion of Crimea and the civil war in Syria.

Looking at the Crimea crisis represented an issue for Erdoğan not only due to the geographical proximity (only 173 miles across the Black Sea) but also strong for the huge community of Turkic Tartars who are ethnically and linguistically near to Anatolian Turks and against the Russian annexation of the peninsula. This has implicated, on one hand, a Crimean diaspora with millions of Tartars concentrated in certain provinces such as Eskisehir, Ankara and Konya³³ and all the internal problems concern security and integration, on the other hand, a possible diplomatic and economic crisis with Russia. Turkey, indeed, depending on Russian natural gas and oil, has adopted a moderate position, playing a balancing game in the Crimea issue but more pragmatically in the Syrian crisis where «even though Russia has blocked international action against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus, effectively undermining Ankara's policy of helping Assad's opponents, Erdoğan has shied away from picking a fight with Putin, knowing that his country's economic growth and his political fortunes depend on his ability to maintain a steady supply of Russian gas and oil»³⁴. The role of Ankara after the deterioration of the situation in Syria was determinant for managing the huge numbers of refugees fleeing the war who were accommodated in its territory, helping the EU reassure its public opinion of issues around immigration flows and internal security.

At that moment, the common Turkish feeling was expressed by Foreign Minister Egemen Bağış with the expression «the EU's need for Turkey is much more than Turkey's need for the EU in the long run»³⁵ reflecting how AKP, once the internal program on changing bureaucracy,

³¹ See [Too big for its boots \(clingendael.org\)](http://clingendael.org)

³² On 7 June 2015 in Turkey were held general elections to elect 550 members to the Grand National Assembly. The result was the first hung parliament since the 1999 general elections: AKP lost its parliamentary majority and won 258 seats with 40.9% of the vote, clearly missing the aimed two-thirds majority for the implementation of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's call for an executive presidency. Reasons can be identified in a faltering economy, in the political conflict between the government and the Gülen Movement, and in Turkey's involvement in the Syrian Civil War, emphasized by growing allegations of government corruption and authoritarianism. Unsuccessful attempts to form a coalition government resulted in a snap general election being called for November 2015 where AKP obtained finally the majority with almost 50% of votes.

³³ See [Crimean Tatars and Noghais in Turkey \(iccrimea.org\)](http://iccrimea.org)

³⁴ See [Turkey's Muted Reaction to the Crimea Crisis | The Washington Institute](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org)

³⁵ See [Egemen Bağış-"THE EU'S NEED FOR TURKEY IS MUCH MORE THAN TURKEY'S NEED FOR THE EU IN THE LONG RUN" \(egemenbagis.com\)](http://egemenbagis.com)

political administration and the judicial system ended, has no more need of European conditionality to obtain centrality and prestige in the region³⁶ but EU needed Turkey as a strategic partner in the area, especially after the Syrian crisis.

For these reasons in December 2013, the Visa Liberalization Dialogue (VDL) was launched between Turkey and the EU, in parallel with the signature of the Turkey-EU Readmission Agreement based on the “Roadmap”, a document setting out the requirements that need to be met. Following the aim to lift the Schengen visa requirement for Turkish citizens during their short stays in the Schengen Area, «once the Visa Liberalization Dialogue is finalized, all Turkish citizens with biometric passports will be able to travel for short stays (i.e. of 90 days within any 180 days) in the Schengen Area without a visa for business, family or touristic purposes»³⁷.

Intending to cover these criteria and to strengthen domestic consensus, Erdoğan showed a significant strategic change in his foreign and internal policies fulfilling Turkey’s democratization through the resolution of the Kurdish question. After almost 30 years of violent conflict between PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and Turkey, on October 1, 2013, the government announced the “democratization package” as the first act of a new era of peace proposing «education in the Kurdish language, decreasing the election threshold, recognizing letters used in the Kurdish alphabet, and returning Kurdish names to cities and villages»³⁸, obtaining strong support by NGOs, civil society and Kurdish community at the light of the next presidential election.

Notwithstanding, the AKP’s willingness to assimilate minorities, embrace multicultural populations and protect human rights by promoting the peace process with Kurds, the events of Gezi Park, with the strong police repression and the forced silence of the media, have shown how the steps did by Ankara government to democratize the state, were tiny. And, even though the European Parliament in the resolution of 13 June 2013 on the situation in Turkey expressed «its deep concern at the disproportionate and excessive use of force by the Turkish police in its response to the peaceful and legitimate protests in Istanbul’s Gezi Park, and calls on the Turkish authorities to thoroughly investigate the police violence, to bring those responsible to justice and to offer compensation to the victims»³⁹, the controversial relationship Turkey-EU will be

³⁶ See Guidi M., Atatürk addio: come Erdoğan ha cambiato la Turchia, il Mulino, 2018.

³⁷ See [The Visa Liberalization Dialogue \(ab.gov.tr\)](http://ab.gov.tr)

³⁸ See [The Kurdish Peace Process and Presidential Elections in Turkey | Wilson Center](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-kurdish-peace-process-and-presidential-elections-in-turkey)

³⁹ See [Texts adopted - Situation in Turkey - Thursday, 13 June 2013 \(europa.eu\)](http://www.europa.eu)

destinate to continue in the next years especially on topics like immigration and security, as tentative to answer to the exacerbation of the Syrian conflict.

1.3 Cooperation efforts on common challenges

The peace process started in 2013 intending to end the conflict between PKK and Turkey was closed two years later after the escalation of violence across Turkish southern borders involved in a bigger regional conflict and the pressure of ISIS in Syria. PKK was identified as the main supporter of the Syrian Kurdish militias, responsible, in the eyes of the Ankara government, for threatening internal stability and security. As a consequence, Turkey saw another influx of refugees⁴⁰, especially Kurds from Kobane, leading AKP and EU to re-think cooperation about migration management and reduction of irregular flows.

To achieve the common challenges and the need for synchronised responses, in 2015 EU and Turkey signed the Action Plan «to step up their cooperation on support of Syrians under temporary protection and migration management in a coordinated effort to address the crisis created by the situation in Syria»⁴¹. During various informal meetings, a series of collaborative actions were identified to be implemented due to the urgency of the crisis to supplement Turkey's efforts. Hence, this joint action tries to address the current situation in three different ways: (a) by addressing the root causes leading to the massive influx of Syrians, (b) by supporting Syrians under temporary protection and their host communities in Turkey and (c) by strengthening cooperation to prevent irregular migration flows to the EU. Under a spirit of burden sharing, there were also recognized the firm commitments and commendable efforts taken by Turkey to provide massive humanitarian aid and support to an unprecedented and continuously increasing influx of people seeking refuge from Syria (at that date, it had exceeded 2.2 million) for whom Turkey has spent more than €7 billion of its resources. The Plan is built on two parts: the first one for supporting the Syrians under temporary protection and their Turkish hosting communities sees the EU side that intends to mobilise substantial and concrete new funds outside the IPA funds to support Turkish humanitarian assistance, while Turkey

⁴⁰ Between 2015 and 2016, the Turkish government assessed that among 1,5- 2,5 million of registered Syrian refugees were in the country: [Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response \(unhcr.org\)](http://www.unhcr.org/Situation-Syria-Regional-Refugee-Response)

⁴¹ For a complete overview of the joint Action Plan see [EU-Turkey joint action plan \(europa.eu\)](http://europa.eu/EEA-Turkey-joint-action-plan)

intends to further enhance the effective implementation of the law on foreigners and international protection continuing the identification procedure of Syrian asylum seekers. Whereas the second part, based on strengthening cooperation to prevent irregular migration, is built on the liberalisation dialogue, the visa roadmap and the provisions of the EU-Turkey readmission agreement.

To better discuss the importance of re-energizing the accession process as a way to overcome the common challenges ahead, between November 2015 and March 2016, the leaders of the EU and their Turkish counterparts met each other several times. Particularly significant is the Brussels meeting⁴² on 26 November when the Action Plan was finally adopted and reaffirmed the vast potential of Turkey-EU relations, the reason for which opening chapter 17 of the Negotiation Framework Document and launching preparatory steps for upgrading the Customs Union.

Following the purpose to assist Turkey in dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis, the EU inside the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) earmark the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey «managing a total of €6 billion in two tranches, provides for a joint coordination mechanism, designed to ensure that the needs of refugees and host communities in Türkiye are addressed in a comprehensive and coordinated manner; the Facility focuses on humanitarian assistance, education, migration management, health, municipal infrastructure, and socio-economic support»⁴³.

In spite of the commitment by the European Union and the signed accord to stem westward migration in return for financial aid, the President of the Turkish Republic has started to criticize funds transferred to Turkey from the EU as not enough and too slow and to threaten at the beginning of 2020 to allow refugees and migrants transit into the EU. For these reasons, in the eyes of the European leaders, the announce did by Erdoğan for whom «the European Union needs to keep its promises; we are not obliged to look after and feed so many refugees; if you're honest, if you're sincere, then you need to share»⁴⁴, appears a shift to obtain, forcedly, support by the EU and NATO for the Ankara's new military campaign in the province of Idlib in Syria rather than sharing responsibilities and humanitarian duties.

⁴² See [Meeting of heads of state or government with Turkey - EU-Turkey statement, 29/11/2015 - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴³ See [The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴⁴ See [Erdoğan says border will stay open as Greece tries to repel influx | Turkey | The Guardian](#)

Anyway, this is not the first occasion of disagreements among parties: the whole relationship between Turkey and NATO is historically characterized by fluctuations and changes, especially to the Cyprus question and tensions with Greece that culminated in Turkish actions strongly criticized by Western actors, especially France. A cause of the decrease in the relations with EU and NATO in the last years is Turkey's intervention in the Libyan civil war: using this operation as one of the main points of his strategy to reinforce influence and leadership in the region, Erdoğan ignores the Atlantic Alliance, sending arms, drones and Syrian mercenaries to help the Tripoli government. These created tensions culminated in the meeting of NATO defence ministers on 17th June 2020 when French Defence Minister Florence Parly reported that Turkish marine had violated the embargo on the supply of arms in Libya⁴⁵.

Both sides know the fundamental role of Turkey in NATO but this type of foreign policy adopted by Erdoğan is not creating only diplomatic issues, but also problems in the management of immigration flows and refugees: the Turkish support for opposition forces in Syria's last rebel stronghold, pushed almost a million civilians toward the Syrian-Turkish border and other hundreds of thousands remained blocked between Syrian government forces supported by Russia and rebel fighters helped by Turkey. Therefore, at the beginning of 2020, after Turkish officials briefed that police, coast guard and border guards had been ordered to stand down, so the passage to Europe would be opened, thousands of Syrian refugees and migrants arrived at Grecia and Bulgaria through Turkey's borders, meeting there Greek border patrols with whom had started fights using firing teargas and stun grenades by police and rocks by refugees and migrants.

This Turkish strategy of politicising the borders to extract concessions from Brussels, how Von der Leyen accused Erdoğan⁴⁶, had exactly the reverse effect: in the resolution of 19 May 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Turkey, the European Parliament «strongly condemns, in this regard, Turkey's use of migratory pressure for political purposes in March 2020, when the Turkish authorities actively encouraged migrants and refugees and asylum seekers with misleading information to take the land route to Europe through Greece»⁴⁷; it pointed to a lack of commitment from the Turkish side showing to call into question its wish for accession. Additionally, also the European Council, during the summit in Brussels on 24-25 June 2021, discussing migration and external relations with Turkey and Russia, «condemned

⁴⁵ See [NATO to probe France-Turkey naval incident in Mediterranean \(france24.com\)](https://france24.com/en/middle-east/2020/06/nato-probe-france-turkey-naval-incident-in-mediterranean/)

⁴⁶ See [EU and Turkey hold 'frank' talks over border opening for refugees | Migration | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/migration/2020/jun/18/eu-and-turkey-talks-over-border-opening-for-refugees)

⁴⁷ See [Texts adopted - 2019-2020 Reports on Turkey - Wednesday, 19 May 2021 \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europa.eu/press-room/media/33440/texts-adopted-2019-2020-reports-on-turkey)

any attempt by third countries to instrumentalise migrants for political purposes»⁴⁸ and reiterated the «EU's readiness to engage with Turkey in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner»⁴⁹ only in the case in which Turkey is not run counter obligations to respect democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

Although Turkey is enjoyed the candidate status to become a member of the EU and as a candidate country and important partner of the EU is expected by it to respect and uphold the Copenhagen criteria, uphold the highest standards of democracy, respect human rights and the rule of law, in the recent years its government has pursued a continuous and growing distancing from EU values and standards; in addition to this, Turkey has campaigned unilateral actions in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as strong and has made at times provocative statements against the EU and its Member States that have brought EU-Turkey relations to a historical low point⁵⁰.

1.4 Possibilities for reunification?

Despite the decision to not resume the accession negotiations with Turkey expressed by the European Parliament on the last 7th of June 2022, both actors are aware of the necessity of co-working and finding common joint responses to common challenges, first of all in the economic field, developing closer economic cooperation given that the EU is the largest market for Turkish exports (41.3% in 2020), while Turkey is the EU's sixth largest trading partner⁵¹.

A significant improvement in the EU-Turkey relations happened in 2021 when «in a spirit of solidarity»⁵² they started meetings to re-boast bilateral cooperation in several areas of common interest: firstly on migration management, underling the necessity of a strengthened border protection and fight against illegal flows in a non-discriminatory manner; on Cyprus issue for a resumption of negotiations under the auspices of the UN with the participation as an observer of the EU; and on economic cooperation to implement and modernize the Customs Union. Even

⁴⁸ See [European Council - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/402084/image.asset?assetid=402084)

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*

⁵⁰ See [Le relazioni UE-Turchia sono al minimo storico | Attualità | Parlamento europeo \(europa.eu\)](https://www.parlament.europa.it/media/parlament/attualita/2022/06/07/le-relazioni-ue-turchia-sono-al-minimo-storico)

⁵¹ See [I rapporti tra UE e Turchia: tra cooperazione e tensioni | Attualità | Parlamento europeo \(europa.eu\)](https://www.parlament.europa.it/media/parlament/attualita/2022/06/07/i-rapporti-tra-ue-e-turchia-tra-cooperazione-e-tensioni)

⁵² See [250321-vtc-euco-statement-en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/402084/image.asset?assetid=402084)

though the “sofagate” episode risked worsening again the relations between the two sides, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen declared officially, at the end of the meeting with President Erdoğan in April 2021, the willingness to keep stability and assure European solidarity through investment and funding in the area⁵³.

Today could be two possible resolutions in the future of EU-Turkey relations: a first one based on a strengthening of relations that looks at the mutual benefits and in the interests of finding common solutions on economic cooperation and migration management, even if without full Turkish membership in the EU; a second possible scenario is based on the new political and diplomatic strategy promoted by Erdoğan. Indeed, with the beginning of the Ukraine war and the proposition to be a mediator in the relations with Russia, in addition to a willingness for centrality in the Middle East and the near elections in the country, the President could be not more attracted by European conditionality for a more democratization process in the country but looks at the supranational organization as a counterpart against which directing popular discontent about social and economic failures. How the Turkish withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (officially the 1 July 2021 after the announcement by the President on 20 March 2021)⁵⁴ seems to represent, the «future of Turkey in Europe»⁵⁵ has never been so controversial and uncertain.

⁵³ See [Statement by the President: Meeting with President Erdoğan \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/europa/en/statement-president-20210408)

⁵⁴ See [Turkey’s withdrawal from Istanbul Convention a setback for women and girls’ human rights | International Commission of Jurists \(icj.org\)](https://www.icj.org/en/news/press-releases/2021/07/01/turkey-withdrawal-from-istanbul-convention-a-setback-for-women-and-girls-human-rights/)

⁵⁵ See [Erdoğan calls on EU for dialogue, says Turkey’s future in Europe | Recep Tayyip Erdogan News | Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/03/20/erdogan-calls-on-eu-for-dialogue-says-turkeys-future-in-europe/)

Chapter 2 TURKISH STRATEGY IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

2.1 Erdoğan's fluctuation between the two camps: Russia and US

The explosion of the last 13th November in a shopping street in the Taksim Square area in Istanbul, for which the government has blamed Kurdish rebels while the PKK denied any role in the bombing⁵⁶, which killed six people and wounded 81, has been the opportunity for Erdoğan to launch a new military offensive in the Western Syrian region. After a series of arrests, on 19th November the President launched Operation Claw-Sword⁵⁷ to intensify the shelling and airstrikes by targeting key infrastructural and command nodes, blurring existing front lines, and threatening more Turkish military incursions across the region.

However, as the days passed, Erdoğan identified more strategic a possible dialogue between Ankara and Damascus rather than following his military purpose, the reason for which the Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and his colleague the Syrian Ali Mahmoud Abbas met in Moscow on the last 28th December at the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu. The meeting between Turkey and Syria was the first since 2011 and signs an important re-starting point to go out of the Syrian impasse.

This reopening of the reconciliation process seems to be part of the bigger foreign policy strategy of a “balancing act” carried on by Erdoğan as a consequence of several pushed factors, from abroad actors, inside the region and due to domestic reasons.

Analysing the external factor, Russia is the first power to push for stabilizing the Syrian crisis: especially after the beginning of the Ukraine war, Moscow needs to find a balance among various alliances, from the regional states such as Assad and Iran and the Turkish willing, determinant actors to keep political support in the international dimension. In Putin's plan, at the moment of peace negotiation, the aligned position with Erdoğan could be an important mediation with European Countries and Washington. At the same time, Ankara is playing this mediator role between the West and Russia to obtain, firstly a stronger regional position, and at the same time, a softer response by the international community for its military attacks in Syria.

⁵⁶ See [Istanbul: Six dead, dozens wounded in Turkey explosion - BBC News](#)

⁵⁷ For a complete overview of the whole Turkish official operation in Syria see [Relations between Türkiye–Syria / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(mfa.gov.tr\)](#)

If Russia seems to be fully involved in the Turkish-Syrian question, the US has a different behaviour, among the fear of a new destabilise situation and the lack of diplomatic intervention against the Turkish military attacks. With its contradictory policies, although on one hand, Washington is trying to guarantee protection to Syrian Kurds who helped in the fight against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), on the other one had created distance with Turkey that complicates a possible diplomatic resolution of the conflict.

In this web of interests, a determinant role is played by regional actors: since its beginning, the Syrian civil war represented a great opportunity for Middle East countries to strengthen their position, looking at Syria as the place where re-shaping their influences. In the opposition between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on one hand and Iran on the other, the last Turkish anti-Kurds attacks in the area are seen by the Gulf monarchies as an aligned position with Iran, committed in the same days to fight its Kurdish region. So, to avoid possible conflicts with the other regional powers and following his project to reset relations, Erdoğan is pushed to start a dialogue and diplomatic relations with Assad.

The last push factor in the shifted Turkish military actions in Syria is the link with domestic reasons and the popular consensus in the light of the next elections. In a country that still suffers from a huge economic crisis and is divided on the Syrian immigration issue, the costs for a new and more intense military operation in Syria are seen not necessary and dangerous. Even though the original Erdoğan plan intended to create a buffer zone under his control where pushing Syrian refugees, following the growing anti-Syrian feelings among the Turkish population, he changed his strategy by looking at general scepticism about this type of resolution of the issue. In recent years, anti-Syrian sentiment has grown to the point that even Erdogan's direct opponent in the elections, the Alevi Kılıçdaroğlu, given the May 28 run-off, «declared he would expel all refugees in Turkey within two years of coming to power»⁵⁸, «pivoting away from his previous messages of inclusion and democracy and instead focused solely on his anti-refugee promises, reiterating a pledge to send refugees back to their countries of origin»⁵⁹. To do this, and to obtain more consensus, Kılıçdaroğlu signed a memorandum of understanding with the leader of Turkey's ultranationalist Victory Party, based on guarantees to deport all refugees in Turkey within a year of coming to power⁶⁰.

⁵⁸ See [Ultranationalist leader backs Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for Turkish presidency | Turkey | The Guardian](#)

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*

Additionally, the last February earthquakes sign an important consolidating moment in Turkish-Syrian relations: if before the disaster Erdoğan's plan to open dialogue with Assad had responded to the need to reinforce his domestic consensus and regional role, after the tragic events the cooperation is implemented firstly around the humanitarian aid for the victims, but also to divert the attention from the political responsibility and the lack of prevention always looking at the consensus for the next elections.

Following the willingness to keep together all different needs coming from the international contest, at the same time from Gulf monarchies and looking at the domestic pushes, Erdoğan accepted Moscow's proposal to open Turkey-Russia-Syria summits with the presence of Iran as an observer to find a balance between the Turkish plan to build a buffer zone deep 30 km around Turkish borders to confirm the refugee return process and the Assad impossibility to break the relations with the Kurds forces essential to the supervision of the country.

Hence, following the double aim of countering the expansion of Kurdish forces and increasing its regional influence, since the beginning of the Syrian war Turkey was swinging between the two camps: Russia and Iran's support of the Assad regime on one hand and the US, European States and Sunni Gulf Arabic States closer to the anti-government forces on the other.

2.2 Turkish interests in the Syrian civil war

Turkey's interests in Syria are historically linked with the Kurdish question: during the period between the 1980s- 1990s the Syrian regime offered refuge and protection to many Kurds and their leader Abdullah Öcalan, but after the Turkish threat to invade Syria at the end of the 1990s, the Syrian President Hafez al- Assad has been decided to expel Öcalan in 1998, who was captured in Kenya in 1999 and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2002. This political and diplomatic decision has resulted in a decade i. e.; 2000-2010 of friendly relations among parties sealed with bilateral agreements and practices on free trade and visa exemption⁶¹. Under this economic and political project, there was a more ambitious one: the creation of a free-trade zone between Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan under the aegis of Turkey, presented as the

⁶¹ See [Joint Political Declaration on the Establishment of the High Level Cooperation Council among Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(mfa.gov.tr\)](#)

most important regional initiative in Turkey's Republican history. Also for Syria, this kind of partnership could be a way to improve its relations with the West.

Later, with the domestic political consolidation of AKP, Erdoğan invested great efforts to sustain the Kurds population with the goal to obtain their support for his executive Presidency which will be introduced later in 2017. In that way, he decided to promote reforms in favour of Kurd identity affirmation, calling a democratic new era for minority Kurds⁶², signing a formal ceasefire and bringing an end to hostilities in 2013⁶³. An example of this new purpose was the launching the first 24-hour Kurdish-language TV station.

Following this political strategy, upon the outbreak of the Rojava conflict, also known as the Rojava Revolution, inside the huger Syrian civil war, between a Kurdish-dominated coalition, for the establishment of a new constitution and the recognition of a de facto autonomous region, and the military wings that fight to maintain control of the territory in northern Syria, the Turkish President has officially condemned his Syrian counterpart due to the violent repression⁶⁴. Turkey's first reaction to the crisis was to try to persuade Damascus to meet people's demands, offering Turkish help to implement social, economic and political reforms. The Ankara government, actually, believed in Assad's liberal instincts but, as events unfolded, was evident the Syrian state repression against protesters.

Indeed, after an escalation of violence, the Syrian regime responded with heavier force, encircling cities or neighbourhoods considered hubs of protest, such as Bāniyās or Homs, with armed attacks and cutting off utilities and communications, while some groups of protesters began to take up arms against the security forces. Consequently, in June 2011, Syrian troops and tanks moved into the northern town of Jisr al-Shugūr, sending thousands of refugees fleeing into Turkey.

For all of these reasons, «Turkey hosted the Free Syrian Army's initial military headquarters, facilitated collaboration among FSA field commanders, welcomed supportive Western/Gulf representatives in the early stages of the war, and launched a “train and equip programme” in 2014 for vetted fighters to accelerate the overthrow of the Assad regime, together with the US»⁶⁵.

⁶² See [Turkey's Kurdish TV channel opens to mixed reviews | Reuters](#)

⁶³ See [International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan - Peace in Kurdistan" \(freeocalan.org\)](#)

⁶⁴ See [Turkish PM calls on Syria's Assad to quit | Reuters](#)

⁶⁵ See YÜKSEL E., *Turkey and the armed Syrian opposition: From Free Syrian Army to Syrian National Army*, Chapter 1 in *Strategies of Turkish proxy warfare in northern Syria's* CRU Report, Clingendael, November 2019.

Despite this, the trust between the parties weakened markedly in 2012 when a wing of PYD (Democratic Union Party, a Kurdish left-wing political party), the YPG (People's Defense Units, a primary component of the Syrian Democratic Forces, considered by Turkish government a PKK affiliated offshoot⁶⁶), has taken control over vast areas of land in the North of Syria: Turkey, concerned, reached the breaking point in 2014 refusing to help the Kurdish forces against ISIS in Kobani, the situation ended moreover with the Kurd's victory and the tangible Turkish concern regarding a possible territorial enlargement under Kurdish armies. Hence, since that moment, the Turkey government is accused of supporting, directly and indirectly, ISIS «because its failure is equal to the victory of the Kurds in northern Syria»⁶⁷, the same help for which is accused the Assad regime, with the aims to replace the legitimate opposition and to put pressure on Western powers trying to remove it.

All this happened after the general election in June 2015, in which AKP showed a decline in consensus losing the absolute majority of seats in parliament while the pro-Kurdish HDP arrived for the first time to overcome the 10% election threshold but the «failure among the four main political parties to agree the formation of a coalition government precipitated a second general election on November 1, which the AKP won with 49 percent»⁶⁸. The November 2015 election was the first to be overseen by an interim election government formed by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu at the request of President Erdoğan⁶⁹, who decided to change drastically his strategy using his influence to prevent the formation of an anti-AKP coalition and called new elections using national rhetoric and trying to delegitimize the HDP, arriving to recover the absolute majority in the November 2015 elections. The run-up to the November election was marked with violence, including the suicide bomb attack that killed 32 young activists on 20 July 2015 in the Suruç district⁷⁰ and a double suicide bombing in Ankara on 10 October, by individuals close to ISIS, «the worst single attack in Turkey's modern history, killing 102 people»⁷¹.

In line with the context, Erdoğan's declaration «there is no Kurdish issue in Turkey» signalled the shutdown of peace negotiations and the beginning of direct military action since August

⁶⁶ See [PKK / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(mfa.gov.tr\)](http://mfa.gov.tr)

⁶⁷ See [How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy - Carnegie Europe - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)

⁶⁸ See [World Report 2016: Turkey | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](http://hrw.org)

⁶⁹ See [Presidency Of The Republic Of Turkey : PM Davutoğlu Returns Mandate to Form New Government to President Erdoğan \(tcgb.gov.tr\)](http://tcgb.gov.tr)

⁷⁰ See [Suruç massacre: Turkey suicide bombing suspect identified - BBC News](#)

⁷¹ See [World Report 2016: Turkey | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](http://hrw.org)

2016⁷² strengthening rhetoric against PKK and Kurds people. The military operations served the government as a pretext for abolishing Kurdish rights and limiting parliamentary representation to guarantee 2017's constitutional reform.

The constitutional reform was deeply criticised, primarily, due to the timing of adoption of the amendments, during a declared state of emergency: «The referendum is planned for 16th April 2017, when the state of emergency will have been in force for almost nine months consecutively»⁷³. According to the Turkish Constitution, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (or Parliament) needed a three-fifths majority (more than 330 votes) for submitting to a referendum the constitutional amendments and in that case, it was possible with 339 votes in favour, 142 votes against, 5 blank and 2 null votes. Moreover, the constitutional amendments were assumed to «under consideration aim at operating a change in the political regime of Turkey, adopting a "Turkish-style" presidential regime»⁷⁴. With this reform, the President obtains new powers such as: appointing and dismissing Vice-presidents and ministers; appointing and dismissing high-level State officials; determining the national security policies and taking the necessary measures; declaring the state of emergency; dissolving parliament and preparing the state budget; using the veto laws and addressing the TGNA; finally, appointing members of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors and the judges of the Constitutional Court⁷⁵.

Moreover, after the bloodiest coup attempt in its modern history on July 15, 2016⁷⁶, the Kurd repression was intensified with Erdoğan and his Party that imprison Kurdish activists and overturn the democratic will of Kurdish voters, putting the future of Kurdish political and cultural aspirations in a dire position: presenting Kurdish people as an internal and external threat, AKP removed elected mayors and banned public displays of Kurdish culture and language, of the 65 mayors elected in 2019 local elections for the Kurdish-led People's Democratic Party (HDP), «Ankara has forced out or detained 59, replacing them with loyal AKP trustees»⁷⁷ and equating the HDP with the PKK, police arrested a huge number of HDP-affiliated figures on the charge to incite a rebellion against the government. Additionally, the

⁷² For more information about the 4 military interventions by Turkey in Syria see [Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq - Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik \(swp-berlin.org\)](#)

⁷³ See European Commission for Democracy through law, *Turkey: opinion on the amendments to the constitution adopted by the Grand National Assembly on 21st January 2017 and to be submitted to a national referendum on 16th April 2017*, adopted by Venice Commission at its 110th Plenary Session, Venice 10-11 March 2017.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*

⁷⁶ See [What was Turkey's failed coup about – and what's happened since? | Turkey Attempted Coup News | Al Jazeera](#)

⁷⁷ See [Erdoğan continues repression of Kurdish political and cultural rights | Ahval \(ahvalnews.com\)](#)

desire to crush Kurdish political aspirations reaches also into the cultural sphere, utilising laws to suppress the Kurds' basic civil rights, banning Kurd media, critical of the President, from operating in Turkey or forcing residents in predominantly Kurdish areas to hold underground Kurdish language classes in order to avoid reprisals from the government, or censoring books in Kurdish and about Kurdish history⁷⁸.

Despite the attempts of repression, the political confirmation of Erdoğan and his party, not only at the election in May but also for example with the election in 2018⁷⁹, the first after the new presidential system, depended on the Kurdish minority that, with an electoral basin of 8 million people, seemed to be played a determinant role in defining the outcome of the vote. Since the electoral campaign, with polls showing support balanced between Erdoğan's ruling alliance and the opposition, the main pro-minority political party, HDP, which has a potential electoral basin of more than 10%⁸⁰, has decided not to field a candidate and implicitly supports the so-called anti- Erdoğan "Table of Six", led by CHP (Republican People's Party) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, «a 75-year-old figure from the Alevi community and a native of one of Turkey's Kurdish regions»⁸¹, who has emerged as a unifying force and able to facilitate a certain consensus. But a part of this support ended after the first round due to anti-migrants and nationalist declarations by Kılıçdaroğlu, losing a determinant part of the consensus.

While the soaring inflation in addition to public criticism over the way the government handled the response to a devastating earthquake in February, has left Erdoğan and his AKP facing the toughest electoral challenge since he first rose to power: the attempt by the government to attract their consent. Hence, during the electoral campaign and also in the election days the President not only has been touring some of the worst-hit areas, in response to strong criticism for the emergency reaction there from local people but also said that hundreds of people are under investigation and nearly 200 people, including construction contractors and property owners, have already been arrested⁸². In addition to this, legal challenges could derail the role of HDP which could be banned from the May vote over charges it has links to Kurdish militants and guarantees in that way the electoral success of AKP.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*

⁷⁹ See [Kurdish Votes in the June 24, 2018 Elections: An Analysis of Electoral Results in Turkey's Eastern Cities, Articles Hüseyin Alptekin | Insight Turkey](#)

⁸⁰ See [Turkey's Kurds eye kingmaker role in election against Erdogan | Reuters](#)

⁸¹ See [Might Erdogan lose Turkey's presidential elections? - L'Orient Today \(lorientlejour.com\)](#)

⁸² See [Turkey earthquake: Erdogan seeks forgiveness over quake rescue delays - BBC News](#)

The apparent decline in popularity recorded by the polls over the AKP government seemed to be linked not only with the Kurdish question and the Kurd's electorate, but also with the continuous Turkish military interventions in the Syrian conflict that implicate an increasing population flows into the country: how shows a survey conducted by the MetroPoll Center for Strategic and Social Research, the rate of people who, in the last Erdoğan's mandate, think that the government should change its Syria policy is 83,6%, and the 40,5% of AKP voter disapprove this strategy, while one in three says «they should be sent back even if the war continues»⁸³. For Turkish citizens, the most disturbing issue about asylum seekers was the increasing unemployment, further aggravated by the mismanagement of the migration flows, with the huge risk to exacerbate the current economic and financial crisis. For these reasons, the vast majority of citizens think that aid to Syrian refugees should be reduced: according to 47,6%, the most effective method of solving problems with Syrian asylum seekers is their return.

Following the social unhappiness, even if Erdoğan won the last elections, he seems more inclined to find a diplomatic solution with Assad, helped by Russia, to build a buffer zone, even though that means possibly tainting relations between Turkey and the Western States.

2.3 The end of the “Strategic Depth” Doctrine

In foreign political terms, Turkey's military policy in Syria has resulted in a conflict of interests with the US and a new phase with the EU in managing refugee flows. Even though Ankara's involvement in Syria has boosted the country's image and its international role, securing a seat at the negotiating table with the biggest powers, at the same time, the distance with Washington could be bridged only in several years, with efforts and releases by both parties and the lack of trust makes EU hesitate to carry out the integration process.

But Turkey's foreign policy ambitions were not always growing: on coming to power in 2002, AKP foreign policy was managed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a professor of international relations with a strong influence over Erdoğan, who become Turkey's minister of foreign affairs from

⁸³ See [Metropoll araştırdı: Her dört kişiden üçü iktidarın Suriyeli politikasını onaylamıyor, üç kişiden biri "Savaş sürse bile geri gönderilsinler" diyor - Medyascope](#)

2009 to 2014 and, after Erdoğan was elected as president, prime minister from 2014 to 2016. To him is linked the new approach, known as "Neo-Ottomanism" or "Strategic Depth" doctrine⁸⁴, “zero problems”, based on shifting the traditional defensive and Western-oriented policy, in favour of more interactions with the Middle East and a more multidimensional foreign policy able to go beyond relations with the US and EU.

Following the aim to be an independent and global power that asserts its influence in its neighbourhood, Turkey increased its involvement in regional activities and presented itself as a mediator between East and West: due to this, the Ankara government started proactive diplomatic strategies in the Balkans, the Middle East, Caucasus, the Gulf and also in Syria, where since 2008 Erdoğan intervened in Syrian domestic policy, in that case, to mediate for Peace between Israel and Syria⁸⁵.

Changes happened with the Arab Spring when AKP, being caught off-guard, supported the pro-democracy movements in Tunisia and Egypt, presenting a possible model of conservative and at the same time liberal Islamism, but was unable to help protesters in the cases of Libya and Syria due to economic and domestic reasons: it was harder criticising Muammar Qaddafi because Libya was one of Turkey's major investors and tens of thousands of Turkish lived in Libya at the beginning of the fight. For all of these reasons, Erdoğan hesitated over the NATO operation against Qaddafi and he decided to help the Libyan population only secondly, inviting the Libyan leader to step down and supporting the opposition. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge to "Strategic Depth" was in Syria, where Turkey tried to show its role as a regional mediator for the West using its influence on Assad pushing him toward peaceful political change. But the Erdoğan's purposes had not translated into real links among governments, forcing AKP to support Washington's plan of a more prudent balancing policy in the Middle East, imposing sanctions rather than an international intervention. Hence, after the suspension of the strategic cooperation between the Turkish and Syrian governments by Erdoğan and the economic sanctions on Syria⁸⁶, during a visit to New York in September 2011, the Secretary of State Clinton affirmed to look to Turkey as a «guarantor of Middle Eastern stability»⁸⁷.

This continuous shift in foreign policy, between pursuing good relations with neighbours and advocating democracy and values that the people claimed, had affected also the relations with

⁸⁴ Ahmet Davutoğlu expressed this vision in his 2001 book *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth: Turkish Foreign Policy).

⁸⁵ See [Erdoğan, İsrail-Suriye barışı için aracı olmuş - Son Dakika Haberleri Milliyet](#)

⁸⁶ See [Factbox - Turkey sanctions on Syria | Reuters](#)

⁸⁷ See [Clinton urges Turkey to smooth ties with neighbors | Reuters](#)

other countries in the region, especially Iran which criticized the contradictory behaviour of Turkey, deciding to support Damascus over Ankara.

With the crisis in the summer of 2012 due to Syria's downing of a Turkish Air Force jet and the lack of NATO intervention despite the Turkish position «an attack against Turkey's borders is an attack against NATO»⁸⁸, AKP become frustrated and reluctant to the West intervention against Assad regime.

It appears therefore that the Arab Spring showed the problems related to the Strategic Depth, prompting AKP towards supporting new and different actors in the crisis, such as the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates which meant a break with the multidimensional foreign policy in favour of an Islamic one, signing a crisis in Turkey-US relations.

Indeed, the Turkish policy, especially in Syria, has contributed to create a power vacuum, filled by non-state actors and ISIS which took initially control over large swathes of territory, using Turkey as a transit point for the so-called “foreign fighters” i.e. individuals who join insurgencies abroad and whose primary motivation is ideological or religious rather than financial⁸⁹, Ankara was also accused of «helping jihadist groups in Syria, including those linked to al-Qaida because they were the most effective fighters against Asad»⁹⁰, of providing ISIS with weapons and training, «allowed free movement across its borders by jihadists, gave them control of two critical crossing points, permitted recruitment in Turkey, and allowed ISIS to sell Syrian crude oil via Turkey, with USD 100 million estimated hidden in Turkish banks»⁹¹.

After years of lack of controls across borders, due to pressure from Washington and Europe to seal the borders with Syria, Ankara has partly reversed its open-door policy that allowed Syrians to enter the country easily. But these control regulations across frontiers were also against those Syrians who need protection⁹², obligated since that to come through illegal ways, increasing security issues and management flows issues in Turkey.

Because the refugee crisis showed no sign of abating, in the spring of 2016 Davutoğlu negotiated an agreement with EU leaders to manage the borders, taking back migrants who entered Greece but allowing Turkey to send the legal migrants on it to the EU and obtaining, in addition to 6 billion euros, a half immediately and the second part later, the revocation of visa

⁸⁸ See [Attack on Turkey means attack on NATO: Erdogan | Arab News](#)

⁸⁹ See [Briefing European Parliamentary Research Service \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁹⁰ See [ORIENT JANUARY 2015.pdf \(st-andrews.ac.uk\)](#)

⁹¹ *Ibidem*

⁹² See [Turkish border guards sweep up fuel smugglers and Isis fighters alike | Turkey | The Guardian](#)

requirements for Turkey citizens. The consequence of this negotiation was the exacerbation of the pre-existing tensions between the President and Prime Minister, which ended with Erdoğan success and Davutoğlu's resignation⁹³. Indeed, within the party, there was an internal struggle during Davutoğlu's premiership between «a pro-Erdoğan wing, supportive of the leader's plan to transform Turkey into a presidential republic, and a more moderate wing, to which Davutoğlu was reportedly close, wary of further concentration of power in Erdoğan's hands»⁹⁴.

The Davutoğlu withdrawal and the failure of the 2016 coup d'état attempt had a great impact on Turkish foreign policy and produced a stronger fight anti-Kurds, coming closer to actors such as Russia, which was increasingly involved in the conflict in favour of Assad, improving the relations with Iran: as a witness of these reinforced relations, Russia, Turkey and Iran signed the Joint Statement on the International Meeting on Syria in the Astana format (10-11 December 2019) affirming the purpose to reject «all attempts to create new realities on the ground, including illegitimate self-rule initiatives, under the pretext of combating terrorism»⁹⁵ and they «expressed their determination to stand against separatist agendas aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as threatening the national security of neighboring countries»⁹⁶.

Also due to these reasons, the relationship with the US, that under the Obama presidency was reluctant to intervene again in the Middle East, and the EU has deteriorated. Indeed, Erdoğan accused Europe of not showing support for the government of Turkey, hinting that European leaders had sided with the participants of the coup and the American decision to not extradite Turkish Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Erdoğan blames for orchestrating the failed military coup, due to the lack of evidence of his complicity, led government officials and media to accuse also the US to be involved in the coup⁹⁷.

Moreover, the main concern in US-Turkey relations is the American support of PYD in Syria as a tool to stop ISIS dominance in the region and stabilize the territories, through an international coalition with British and French troops, a strategy adopted until the 2019 when Trump administration decided to withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria, throwing threw

⁹³ See [Turkish PM Davutoğlu resigns as President Erdoğan tightens grip | Recep Tayyip Erdoğan | The Guardian](#)

⁹⁴ See D'Alena, F., *The Evolution of Turkey's Syria Policy*, IAI -Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2017, p.11.

⁹⁵ See [Joint Statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria in the Astana format, Nur-Sultan, 10-11 December 2019 / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(mfa.gov.tr\)](#)

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*

⁹⁷ See [Turkey blames U.S. for coup attempt \(usatoday.com\)](#)

a previously stabilized part of the war-torn country back into chaos and giving to Turkey a new possibility to attack⁹⁸.

The same position is adopted by Biden⁹⁹ and, as a consequence, the military and political estrangement by the US strengthens the position of Russia and Iran in favour of the regime, leading Turkey to approach them, strategically, and threatening the relations with the West and the earlier pro-democratic commitments.

⁹⁸ See [Trump's Syria Shambles - Center for American Progress](#)

⁹⁹ See [The Biden administration's Syria policy sets a path towards disengagement. Here's why it's problematic. - Atlantic Council](#)

Chapter 3 ITALIAN-TURKISH INTERESTS IN THEIR BILATERAL RELATIONS

3.1 Turkish-Italian relations: a strategic partnership

Turkish-Italian relations date back to the times of the Ottoman Empire when there were close relationships with Italian city-states such as Genoa and Venice. In fact, the Galata Tower, for a long time the tallest building in the city of Istanbul, was built by the Genoese, how an inscription confirms recalling that the Genoese of Istanbul were respected and privileged under Sultan Mehmet II¹⁰⁰, whereas the relations between the Ottoman Empire and Venice go back to 1381¹⁰¹. With reference to diplomatic relations among Turkey and Italy, were established officially in 1856, celebrating in 2006 the 150th anniversary with several activities in both parties¹⁰².

Today, as two regional powers with shared and common interests, Italy and Turkey have developed strong ties in multilateral and bilateral contests, determining certain aspects of the commercial and political cooperation between them: indeed, both are members of the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)¹⁰³. Additionally, Turkey is associated with the EU by a Customs Union agreement since 1995 and «as a founding member of the European Union, Italy supports Turkey's membership to the EU»¹⁰⁴.

Turning to bilateral relations, after a period of a break during the First World War due to being on opposite sides, with the establishment of Kemalist Turkey, Italy was the second country (after the Soviet Union) to recognize the Republic of Turkey, deepening and flourishing their relations since then.

A first diplomatic crisis arrived at the beginning of the 2000 under the Italian government of Massimo D'Alema (DS, Democratici di Sinistra) around Abdullah Ocalan's issue: the leader and founder of PKK sought political asylum from Rome but, even if in a first step the Italian

¹⁰⁰ See [apr. 2 marsili italia-turchia.pdf \(cespi.it\)](#)

¹⁰¹ See [Relations between Türkiye and Italy / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(mfa.gov.tr\)](#)

¹⁰² *Ibidem*

¹⁰³ For an overview about latest developments of EU trade relations with Turkey see [EU trade relations with Türkiye \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁰⁴ See [Relations between Türkiye and Italy / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(mfa.gov.tr\)](#)

government seemed to want offer him this possibility, due to Turkish and American pressure and the Turkish threat to impose economic sanctions, D'Alema decided to not compromise the strategic relationship with Ankara and his international image¹⁰⁵. As a consequence, Ocalan was invited to leave the country, ending his escape in Kenya where he was arrested and incarcerated.

In these ups and downs, a very positive moment in terms of bilateral partnership was under the centre-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi who closed a personal friendship with Erdoğan arriving to be invited and hosted by the AKP leader at his son's wedding¹⁰⁶.

At that time, reference is made to the creation of the Turkish-Italian Forum, one of the three platforms, together with Turkey-Italy Intergovernmental Summits and Turkish-Italian Media Forum,¹⁰⁷ to exchange views regarding various dimensions in the cooperation through preferred appointments in Rome and Istanbul with the involvement of Italian and Turkish business companies and investors. These meetings follow the years and have involved different political leaders showing how Turkey represents an essential regional actor to deal with and how much is important improving the relations among the two parties: in 2009 the President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, visited Ankara and Izmir firmly claiming the need to create an «Europe global actor»¹⁰⁸ also through the recognition of Turkey integration process; during the Summit in 2012 the Prime Minister Mario Monti promoted a closer economic partnership in the regional market in favour of both countries¹⁰⁹; then years later, on July 2022 the Prime Minister Mario Draghi, during the third Turkey-Italy Intergovernmental Summit, signed in Ankara new nine bilateral cooperation agreements and negotiated possibilities for a diplomatic resolution of the Ukraine conflict through the Turkey mediation¹¹⁰, «included a message of cooperation in many areas ranging from the defence industry to transport, from the economy and trade to Türkiye-EU relations»¹¹¹, showing to overcome the 2021 crisis when Draghi explicitly defined Erdoğan «a dictator»¹¹² carrying the Turkish leader to summoned the Italian Ambassador in the country; the most recent meeting between the two Foreign Minister, Tajani

¹⁰⁵ See [Turkey, the United States, and Ocalan: The Stakes | The Washington Institute](#)

¹⁰⁶ See KESGIN, B., *Turkey's Erdoğan: leadership style and foreign policy audiences*, Turkish Studies, 2020, 21:1, pp. 56-82.

¹⁰⁷ See [Relations between Türkiye and Italy / Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(mfa.gov.tr\)](#)

¹⁰⁸ See [Il Presidente della Repubblica Giorgio Napolitano... \(quirinale.it\)](#) pg 80-85

¹⁰⁹ See

[Italia-Turchia: summit a Roma per la cooperazione e lo sviluppo – Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale](#)

¹¹⁰ See [Turkey, Italy sign 9 bilateral cooperation agreements | Daily Sabah](#)

¹¹¹ See [The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications \(iletisim.gov.tr\)](#)

¹¹² See [Draghi sparks Turkish ire with 'Erdoğan dictator' comment - English - ANSA.it](#)

and Cavusoglu, to discuss not only about migration and diplomatic resolutions of Ukraine crisis, but the willingness to improve the economic exchange arriving to 30 billion¹¹³.

Analysing in deep the economic partnership with a focus on foreign trade, Italy is the Turkish second largest European trading, following only Germany, and the fifth in the world, predicting to go on in further years¹¹⁴. Only in 2021, Turkey exported \$11.6B to Italy in sectors like Cars (\$939M), Delivery Trucks (\$616M), and Hot-Rolled Iron (\$539M), with an annualized rate of exports in the last 26 years of 7.88%, from \$1.62B in 1995 to \$11.6B in 2021¹¹⁵. While, with an export of \$11.3B, Italy exports to Turkey Refined Petroleum (\$655M), Motor vehicles; parts and accessories (8701 to 8705) (\$506M), and Jewellery (\$407M), with an increase in the last 26 years of 4.38%¹¹⁶. This economic connectivity is affected positively by various kinds of projects and investments by large companies from both sites: on one hand, especially in the Italian manufacturing industry, Fiat, Barilla, and Ferrero carry out a part of their business activities with their facilities in Turkey, on the other, projects such as Turkish Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge and TOGG Turkish national car are results of the bilateral agreements with Italy.

Therefore, the economic partnership between Italy and Turkey, encompassing multiple fronts and interests to further development of their ties, shows to have a priority for both countries that strive to actualize investments and implement agreements and reform in favour of different kinds of industrial sectors.

3.2 Italian and Turkish interests in the Mediterranean: the Libyan case

The major changes that have occurred in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean in the last decades, more specifically in the Libyan conflict, play a very important role in the definition and implementation of Italian and Turkish foreign policies, as well as in the interactions between the two countries.

¹¹³ See [Tajani ad Ankara: «Fermiamo la tratta nel Mediterraneo»- Corriere.it](#)

¹¹⁴ See [Turkey trade balance, exports, imports by country 2020 | WITS Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

¹¹⁵ See [Italy \(ITA\) and Turkey \(TUR\) Trade | OEC - The Observatory of Economic Complexity](#)

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*

Analysing historically the interests of the two sides, at the end of the Cold War Italy, with ambitions in terms of international prestige, promoted the strategy to co-work with non-aligned countries in a post-bipolar world and to fight terrorism through re-opening a dialogue with Libya, as possible ally in the region¹¹⁷. This relation with Libya was consolidated through funding allocated after the Italian Law n. 271 promulgated in 2004, with which the Internal Minister, combating illegal immigration, contributes to the fulfilment of buildings and structures, in third countries, helpful to prevent irregular departures to Italian territory¹¹⁸. The bestowed funding by Italy to Libya are not linked to migrants' rights respect or Geneva Convention regarding asylum right, or keeping the minimum international standards for detention, with these funds and law, in Libya Italian governments finance more than three detention centres for irregular migrants where the violation of human rights is a constant¹¹⁹. In addition to migration management, Italy and Libya started to collaborate to overcome the post-colonial litigation and consolidate stronger economic relations, Rome worked highly to remove the international embargo of Libya, showing this purpose, an extreme continuity in foreign policy, from 1999 with D'Alema, to Berlusconi and then Prodi.

But this cautious approach to stabilize Libya keeping their special relations and safeguarding Italian position in the Mediterranean ended on April 2011 when, after signing an agreement with Mustafa Abdul Jalil, de facto head of the state, to preserve and regulate Italian presence and ENI's activities on territory, Berlusconi supported NATO intervention sealed the closure of the special relations with Tripoli. The strategic importance of that agreement is linked with the historical ENI centrality in the Italian economy: indeed, ENI has been operating in the country since 1959, is active in various sectors such as the Exploration & Production and Global Gas & LNG Portfolio in the offshore of the city of Tripoli and the desert area and has a natural gas pipeline capacity of 8 billion cubic meters per year that arrive in Gela, Sicily, from Mellitah, through 520 kilometres of natural gas pipeline¹²⁰.

In the following years, the Italian political leaders worked to stabilize the domestic situation in Libya, putting the management of migration flows, the fight against terrorism and the Italian economic interests in Tripoli at the top priorities of the agenda. Firstly, with Paolo Gentiloni¹²¹,

¹¹⁷ See [La caduta di Gheddafi e la frantumazione della Libia | ISPI \(ispionline.it\)](#)

¹¹⁸ See [L 271/2004 \(parlamento.it\)](#)

¹¹⁹ See [Nuove intese tra Italia e Libia e salvaguardia dei diritti umani \(unifi.it\)](#)

¹²⁰ See [Our work in Libya | Eni](#)

¹²¹ See [Libya: Gentiloni, talks in the final stretch – Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale](#)

after him with Matteo Renzi¹²², Italy continuously refused military options, prioritizing a diplomatic approach, which culminated in the 2015 peace meeting in Rome¹²³ to set the ground for a political agreement (Libyan Political Agreement, LPA)¹²⁴ among Libya government and counterparties.

On the other hand, even the Turkish-Libyan relationship had been historically deep: going back to 1552, Libya was a part of the Ottoman Empire, enjoying a degree of autonomy but acknowledging Ottoman control. This kind of mutual recognition survived until the Italo-Turkish War (from 29 September 1911 to 18 October 1912), a consequence of the Italian claims to Libya after the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and supported by secret agreements with Britain in 1887 and France in 1902.

With the Kingdom of Italy's conquest, Turkey and Libya officially lost their connections until the end of the Second World War and the establishment of the Kingdom of Libya, overthrew by Qaddafi's coup in 1969 and the creation of the Libyan Arab Republic. Historically, Ankara and Tripoli kept cordial relations, building on cultural and religious common values, and shared bases that also favoured an economic partnership in the years.

For all these reasons, after the outbreak of the Libyan civil war, Turkey has taken a proactive role in the conflict allocating human and financial resources to support military operations by the Libyan government and to take a central role in the international community. As the first act, Turkey tried a diplomatic approach, speaking with Qaddafi and persuading him to abdicate, belonging in a change of governance to resolve the crisis; after the NATO intervention, Erdoğan sent humanitarian aid and worked to rebuild the country lading at its Ottoman legacy, especially for economic reasons: with the upsurge of 2011 revolts, Turkish firms in Libya «had to abandon their projects incomplete, losing 19 billion»¹²⁵, leading Turkey to invest time and resources in the post-conflict rebuilding of country to reacquire domains in economic and energy sector.

Hence, as emerges in the historical Italian and Turkish interventions in Libya, their strong interests converge in the energy sector where they compete to obtain a large energy market share: especially for Ankara, the contested Memorandum of Understanding with Tripoli¹²⁶ in 2019 opens a window of opportunity in the Mediterranean to make an own Exclusive Economic

¹²² See [Renzi reaffirms policy on Libya, Ukraine - English - ANSA.it](#)

¹²³ See [Ministerial Meeting for Libya \(December 13, 2015 – Rome, Italy\) | UNSMIL \(unmissions.org\)](#)

¹²⁴ See [The Libyan Political AGREEMENT \(unmissions.org\)](#)

¹²⁵ See YAHIA H. ZOUBIR, *The Protracted Civil War in Libya: The Role of Outside Powers*, KEDGE Business School, France Brookings Doha Center, Qatar, p. 15.

¹²⁶ See [Turkey 11122019 \(HC\) MoU Libya-Delimitation-areas-Mediterranean.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

Zone (EEZ) that involves Libya maritime space and affect the maritime continuity of Greece and Cypriot EEZ, ignoring the parallel claims by Greece¹²⁷ and Egypt¹²⁸ over the same portion of the sea. Once the isolation has been broken and Turkey has been entered into the extracting and transporting activities of the Libyan gas, Italy started worrying about the massive investments made by Turkey and the international observers fears that the Turkish strategy of presence and intervention in Libya can provide an incentive for other actors in the “enlarged Mediterranean”. From this the need and willingness of Rome to keep and strengthen diplomatic and economic relations with Ankara that pass also through the control and the containment of migrants in the Central Mediterranean migratory route.

In addition to these, in 2015 both Rome and Ankara endorsed the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), showing thus to advocate for a political resolution to the Libyan crisis through the UN-led diplomatic process and pursuing bilateral policies aimed at protecting their respective interests¹²⁹.

Even though the Italian and Turkey interests merge and fight on the same points, until today, the two NATO members decided to close commercial and diplomatic partnerships rather than clashing on energy interests over the Mediterranean, using a high level of cooperation to mitigate potential competition.

3.3 The “Calabrian route”

The Italian-Turkish relations concern the economic and energetical agreements and the frequent and steadily increasing migration flows from Turkey to Italy. In that scenario, the tragedy took place at the dawn of the last 26th February 2023, when the boat named "Summer Love"¹³⁰, left from Turkey five days before with 180 migrants on board, smashed apart on rocks within sight

¹²⁷ See [Greece expels Libyan ambassador in row over maritime boundaries | Greece | The Guardian](#)

¹²⁸ See [Egypt Cancels The Illegal Turkish-Libyan Memorandum Demarcating Maritime Borders \(greekcitytimes.com\)](#)

¹²⁹ See [Mediterranean Equilibria: Italian-Turkish Balancing and Competition over Libya | IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali](#)

¹³⁰ See [Spotlight on ruthless smugglers, rescue failures after Italy migrant disaster | Reuters](#)

of the village of Steccato di Cutro, in Calabria, leading to the death of some 90 people, is only one of the last efforts to arrive by sea in Italy through the so-called “Calabrian route”¹³¹.

Indeed, in recent years Italy has become a favourite destination for migrant smugglers, especially those departing from Turkey, after the closure of the Balkan route with the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement¹³²: according to the data by the agency of the United Nations, UNHCR, arrivals from Turkey represented 15% of 105.000 migrants who arrived in Italy the last year, coming from, how the Cutro massacre shows, countries in conflict, with security, humanitarian, environmental issue such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and West Africa¹³³.

The decision to undertake the “Calabrian route” is primarily related to two factors: firstly, migrant smugglers incentive crossings in the Mediterranean to Italy on sailboats, difficult to catch because they look like ordinary cruise ships¹³⁴, asking for \$10.000 per adult while every child pays around \$4.500. In addition to this, migrant smugglers decide for the “Calabrian route” to avoid in that way Greece, where authorities are accused repeatedly of pushbacks against asylum seekers and mistreatment of migrants, and the political leaders in the government expand the border wall in the country’s northeast. This «steel wall facing neighbouring Turkey»¹³⁵, that extends more than 27 kilometres and according to Greek authorities, it will be widened to cover most of the 192-kilometre border, increasing the difficulty «to join family in Western and Northern Europe have also led more people to pay smugglers thousands of euros to get to Italy instead»¹³⁶.

Ankara government has lashed out at Athens’s policy to stop migrants and throw them into the Aegean Sea and the tensions with the EU were intensified after the Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soyulu’s attacks: «The European Union, that beacon of freedom and human rights, continues to sleep»¹³⁷, adding that «murderous Frontex will have to answer for this»¹³⁸ with reference to a further episode of Greek failed rescue near to the Aegean Coast in January 2022.

Even though the total number of migrants who cross the Mediterranean from Turkey to reach Europe and Italy has declined after the EU-Turkey 2016 agreements, the alarming fact is the

¹³¹ See [Migrant smugglers have a new route from Turkey straight to Calabria \(rmx.news\)](#)

¹³² See [What of the Refugees? The Closure of the Balkan Route, Two Years On | ISPI \(ispionline.it\)](#)

¹³³ See [Situation Mediterranean Situation \(unhcr.org\)](#)

¹³⁴ See [Migrant smugglers have a new route from Turkey straight to Calabria \(rmx.news\)](#)

¹³⁵ See [Greece expanding border wall, calls for EU help on migration | AP News](#)

¹³⁶ See [Italy migrant tragedy death toll over 60; dozens missing | AP News](#)

¹³⁷ See [Turkish interior minister accuses Greek authorities of pushbacks resulting in death - InfoMigrants](#)

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*

death toll: according to UNHCR data, in 2021 3.231 people are registered as dead or still missing in the Mediterranean as a consequence of 123.300 departures, against 1.882 dead or still missing people in 2021, 1.510 in 2019 and 2.277 in 2018¹³⁹.

Given the unresolved tensions with Greece about the management and containment of migration flows and as a result of strong economic and diplomatic relations between Italy and Turkey, Rome and Ankara are formulating common solutions to obtain more productive results on migration issues. How in bilateral meetings showed, the two foreign ministers Tajani e Cavasoglu agree to identify a strategic priority «fighting illegal immigration»¹⁴⁰ through developing common initiatives on Libyan stabilization.

¹³⁹ See [Mediterraneo, aumentano i morti e le tragedie: lo rivela la rappresentazione grafica dei dati dell'UNHCR – UNHCR Italia](#)

¹⁴⁰ See [Tajani says migration fight Italy and Turkey's priority - Italy - ANSAMed.it](#)

Chapter 4 ITALIAN PUBLIC OPINION ON KEY TURKISH EVENTS

4.1 The one thousand contradictions' society: between a «religiosità indocile e un laicismo nazionalista»¹⁴¹

In the long and tortuous history of the EU-Turkey relationship, some turning points strongly influenced the debate in Europe and Italy, specifically, bringing to light the tensions and opportunity in the comparison of possible future scenarios and determinant topics such as immigration, energy, and human rights.

The first in-depth discussion coincides with the Turkish Accession negotiations and «il sì incondizionato»¹⁴² by the European Commission led by Romano Prodi in October 2004. The analyses of Italy's main newspapers point out that national public opinion considers the access of Ankara a win-win situation for the EU because it could consolidate «l'unica democrazia islamica offrendo un modello per tutti i paesi musulmani»¹⁴³, strengthening in that way «i rapporti con il Medio Oriente, il Caucaso meridionale e l'Asia centrale»¹⁴⁴, in addition, to enhance EU's security in energy, military and economic sectors, giving it the chance to show itself as a global power and «comunità ideale e culturale»¹⁴⁵ able to resolve «le contraddizioni tra un popolo sempre meno laico e più orientale e una élite sempre più filo-europea»¹⁴⁶.

But those contradictions inside Turkish society appear to be examples of the first hurdle to full acceptance from the European countries: if, on the one hand, Turkey appears as the bridge between Europe and Asia, the West and the East, on the other hand, it is as «la società dalle mille contraddizioni»¹⁴⁷, in front of a «gigantesco bivio mentale» between a «religiosità indocile e un laicismo nazionalista»¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴¹ See CONCINA M., *Turchia, timori e sogni aspettando l'Ue*, «Il Messaggero», 6 October 2004, p. 10.

¹⁴² See «Corriere della Sera», *Oggi da Bruxelles il «sì incondizionato» della Commissione*, 6 October 2004, p. 12.

¹⁴³ See BRUNETTA R., *L'Unione europea ha tutto da guadagnare*, «Il Sole 24 Ore», 6 October 2004, p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*

¹⁴⁵ See IGNAZI P., *Che cos'ha di europeo la Turchia per volerla fare entrare nell'UE*, «Oggi», 13 October 2004, p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁴⁷ See CONCINA M., *Turchia, timori e sogni aspettando l'Ue*, «Il Messaggero», 6 October 2004, p. 10.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*

Distinguishing from the «turco-scettici»¹⁴⁹ and the «turco-entusiasti»¹⁵⁰ positions, inside the first category it is possible to recognise Cyprus, whose «l'animosità dei rappresentanti greci della Repubblica di Cipro nei confronti di Ankara è totale e gridata»¹⁵¹, Austria and its Chancellor Wolfgang Schäussel contrary to Turkish accession because «estranea al club cristiano»¹⁵² and «troppo poco rispettosa dei diritti umani»¹⁵³, and at the end France where the neo-Gaullist Dominique Paillé even speaks of treason of our founding fathers of Europe: «La Turchia non appartiene all'Europa né geograficamente, né storicamente, né culturalmente, la Turchia è l'Asia Minore, che non è Europa»¹⁵⁴. While inside the “Turkish enthusiastic” asserts especially London that has supported the Ankara accession several times as demonstrated by Foreign Minister Jack Straw's speech: «La Turchia ha una vocazione europea e una tradizione secolare molto radicata a differenza del resto del mondo musulmano»¹⁵⁵.

However, in the internal Turkish interviews, opinion polls show how a part of Turkish society considers that the accession to the EU represents an «evoluzione democratica»¹⁵⁶ of the country that will lead to «un consolidamento delle libertà fondamentali e all'affermazione di un'opinione pubblica indipendente»¹⁵⁷, whereas the other part of Turkish electorate, made up of nationalists and conservators, fear for their Turkish and Islamic identity and believe that «l'UE ad aver bisogno della Turchia più del contrario»¹⁵⁸.

How a territorial analysis shows, these doubts, that remain in Turkish society due to an ideological and identity opposition between various parts, the rural areas, the so-called «periphery»¹⁵⁹ in the work of Şerif Mardin, a preeminent Turkish social scientist, are more linked with religious and cultural tradition in radical opposition with the «centre»¹⁶⁰, characterized by the biggest urban areas, secular-leaning and able to assert itself as the dominant centre, politically and culturally (Lipset and Rokkan).

¹⁴⁹ See «Il Foglio», *Erdogan convince l'Europa che non è convinta della Turchia*, 6 October 2004, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem*

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*

¹⁵² *Ibidem*

¹⁵³ *Ibidem*

¹⁵⁴ See ZAPPALÀ, D., *Parigi: «L'ingresso è un tradimento del progetto dei padri fondatori»*, «Avvenire», 6 October 2004, p. 7.

¹⁵⁵ See DEL SOLDATO, E., *Londra: «Non è una nazione islamica. Escluderla sarebbe un boomerang»*, «Avvenire», 6 October 2004, p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ See «Il Sole 24 Ore», *Turchia, un passaporto per l'Europa*, 6 October 2004, p. 6.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibidem*

¹⁵⁸ See CONCINA M., *Turchia, timori e sogni aspettando l'Ue*, «Il Messaggero», 6 October 2004, p. 10.

¹⁵⁹ See MARDIN, Ş., *Center-Periphery Relations: A key to Turkish politics?*, *Deadalus* 102 (1973): 185.

¹⁶⁰ See WUTHRICH, F. M., *An essential center-periphery electoral cleavage and the Turkish party system*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Cambridge University Press, November 2013, Vol. 45, No. 4, pp. 751-773.

The most significant and strongest “centre”, according to Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, is the city of Istanbul where the processes of Westernization and secularization are stopped and after that city, there is «il cuore del Paese»¹⁶¹, «l’anima lacerata della Turchia e il dolore profondo della maggior parte dei suoi connazionali»¹⁶².

Therefore, to solve the Turkish domestic contradictions and reassure the European powers, Pamuk seems to suggest the denial of a forced Westernization and listen more to the “peripheries”, and their needs and look at their integration that would grant security and stability inside as well as outside.

4.2 2016 Turkey's coup attempt: Erdoğan «restava l’unico volto conosciuto in una notte incerta e oscura»¹⁶³

The uniformity of the positions taken by Italian journalists, from different newspapers, and close to various political parties, that characterized the phase of the accession negotiations on October 2004, leaves space for conflicting opinions in the aftermath of the 16th of July 2016 coup.

Since the news of «un nuovo colpo di stato militare»¹⁶⁴ arrived, the fifth from the foundation of the Republic (1960, 1971, 1980, 1997 and 2016), organised by some Turkish army generals, Italian media, particularly those linked to the centre-left environment, write about rebels as «I custodi laici della Turchia, gli amati militari ai quali il fondatore della Repubblica Mustafà Kemal Atatürk aveva affidato i destini del Paese»¹⁶⁵ which «sono usciti dal silenzio per rivendicare il loro ruolo»¹⁶⁶, a role that Erdoğan has managed to use against the PKK and then, decided to disempower creating desired for revenge inside the lay side of the army¹⁶⁷.

¹⁶¹ See MONDADORI, M., «È oltre Istanbul il cuore profondo del Paese», «La Stampa», 6 October 2004, p. 9.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*

¹⁶³ See MICALESSIN, G., *Il braccio di ferro USA-Russia dietro il «golpicino» alla turca*, «il Giornale», 17 July 2016, p. 4.

¹⁶⁴ See CREMONESI, L., *Che cosa succede adesso nella regione?*, «Corriere della Sera», 16 July 2016, p. 7.

¹⁶⁵ See FERRARI, A., *Lo Stato laico e le mani dell’esercito*, «Corriere della Sera», 16 July 2016, p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁶⁷ See MUSACCHIO, F., *Golpe dei militari in Turchia*, «Il Tempo», 16 July 2016, p. 14.

Furthermore, Il Corriere della Sera displays Can Kasopğlu's interview, an important commentator of the Turkish Think Tank for economic affairs and foreign policy: «I militari sono gli unici centri di potere oggi in Turchia ancora in grado di limitare le ambizioni autoritarie di Erdogan»¹⁶⁸; while la Repubblica emphasises the military's crucial role as «custodi dell'ortodossia laica»¹⁶⁹ which «per tredici anni hanno assistito alla graduale trasformazione dello Stato laico creato da Atatürk in una nazione sempre più islamica»¹⁷⁰ and «dal 2003 sono rimasti a guardare il cammino della Turchia dal sogno dell'ingresso in Europa a un modello sempre più rivolto alla Mecca»¹⁷¹.

This idea of renewed democracy because of a possible Erdoğan overthrow and his tendencies of a repressive regime, seems to be confirmed, in the early hours post-golpe, by the Western powers' position taken: if the German decision to deny Erdoğan's landing¹⁷² shows the first signs of international isolation, the four hours of silence between the attack and the first declarations «in difesa del governo democraticamente eletto»¹⁷³ by the American President Barack Obama, are a noisy confirm.

The doubts from Washington, although «ragionevoli e fondati»¹⁷⁴ due to the drift towards authoritarianism and the really bad relationship in recent years, are overcome in the light of higher political interests: «Se lo scontro in Turchia dovesse proseguire trasformandosi in guerra civile»¹⁷⁵, indeed, besides delivering an extremely unstable country, it would raise «interrogativi anche sul ruolo del Paese nella NATO»¹⁷⁶, making the fight against Islamic terrorism, the management of immigration flows and the containment of foreign fighters even more complicated.

The theme of Islamic terrorism, in particular, is a key issue in the days of Turkish golpe due to the attack in Nice on the 14th of July 2016, two events that led Europe to be faced with a sense

¹⁶⁸ *Ibidem*

¹⁶⁹ See ANSALDO, M., *Colpo di Stato in Turchia. I militari: "preso il potere". Erdogan incita alla rivolta*, «la Repubblica», 16 July 2016, p. 2.

¹⁷⁰ See DI FEO, G., *Il Sultano, l'Europa, Putin, così i generali hanno deciso di scendere in campo*, «la Repubblica», 16 July 2016, p.3.

¹⁷¹ *Ibidem*

¹⁷² See RICCI SERGENTIN, M., *Il leader chiama con l'iPhone: resistete. Berlino non lo accoglie. «Torna a Istanbul»*, «Corriere della Sera», 16 July 2016, p. 4.

¹⁷³ See BONANNI, A., *L'ansia dei leader mondiali. Poi Obama sceglie Erdogan*, «la Repubblica», 16 July 2016, p.4.

¹⁷⁴ See ROMPOLDI, G., *Mai golpe fu così annunciato (e voluto)*, «Il Fatto Quotidiano», 16 July 2016, p. 9.

¹⁷⁵ See CONTI, M., *Foreign fighters e migranti, Alfano: «Fondamentale il ruolo di Ankara»*, «Il Messaggero», 16 July 2016, p. 15.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibidem*

of precariousness and discomfort, «un filo rosso di terrore che ha origini diverse ma evidenzia la stessa drammatica instabilità»¹⁷⁷.

Precisely, this fear of further instability in the Middle East is the primary boosting factor for the White House, «si è rassegnata al fatto che i vecchi demoni sono alla fine più rassicuranti di quelli ignoti»¹⁷⁸ proving that it has no intention of giving up a President who «seppur accusato di scarso rispetto per i diritti umani, di ambigue collusioni con lo Stato Islamico e di evidenti mire autoritarie, restava l'unico volto conosciuto in una notte incerta e oscura»¹⁷⁹, «la Turchia è un partner cruciale»¹⁸⁰, a fundamental ally «per la NATO e per gli americani che dalla base turca di Incirlik fanno decollare i bombardieri diretti in Siria»¹⁸¹.

Even though the different positions taken by Italian media, among those who see the coup as a sign that «l'era del Sultano Erdoğan vacilla»¹⁸² and those who believe instead that the failure of the coup «abbia ridato prestigio a Erdoğan, prestigio che si era deteriorato, consumato dagli scandali»¹⁸³ and that allows the AKP leader to implement the law on presidentialism shortly, what emerges from all the analyses conducted is how the West is willing to compromise on the sense of democracy, in order to maintain control of potentially unstable areas and situations that would affect international security.

4.3 How the Turkish and French "dangerous game" in Libya affects NATO stability

The stability in domestic politics promised by Erdoğan and which still guarantees him wide consensus today is closely linked to his ability to impose himself and intervene decisively in the international context, mostly related to his strategic role in the Middle East and Mediterranean.

¹⁷⁷ See DE ROBERTIS, P. F., *Convivere col terrore*, «La Nazione», 17 July 2016, p. 1.

¹⁷⁸ See MICALESSIN, G., *Il braccio di ferro USA-Russia dietro il «golpicino» alla turca*, «il Giornale», 17 July 2016, p. 4.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁸⁰ See BONANNI, A., *L'ansia dei leader mondiali. Poi Obama sceglie Erdogan*, «la Repubblica», 16 July 2016, p. 4.

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem*

¹⁸² See NEGRI, A., *Golpe in Turchia: si spara nelle strade*, «Il Sole 24 Ore», 16 July 2016, p. 3.

¹⁸³ See MICALESSIN, G., *Il braccio di ferro USA-Russia dietro il «golpicino» alla turca*, «il Giornale», 17 July 2016, p. 4.

For those reasons, one of Erdoğan's key interests in foreign politics to affirm Turkish centrality is Libya, where, however, in the years following the outbreak of the civil war, he found himself clashing with the positions of another power in the region, France.

Indeed, the two countries are lined up on different fronts in the Libyan war: the French government support the marshal Khalifa Haftar, while the Turkish one helps militarily and economically the Prime Minister Fayed al-Sarraj, at the head of the only government recognized by the UN¹⁸⁴.

Nonetheless, the problematic nature of the tensions between France and Turkey does not concern only the governments involved, but since they are both members of NATO, a clash between Ankara and Paris would mean «uno scontro totale, una spaccatura all'interno della NATO e dell'UE»¹⁸⁵ going to generate that international instability of which all Western powers are afraid, in primis Washington.

The risk of this instability occurred on 10th June 2020 when, off the Libyan coast, the French ship Courbet tried to inspect the Turkish ship Cirkin, flying the Tanzanian flag, to verify if it was carrying weapons. At that time, the Courbet was taking part in Operation Sea Guardian promoted by NATO¹⁸⁶ to guarantee freedom of navigation in that area and to counter maritime terrorism. France claims that the escorting Turkish ships would have acted aggressively and threatened the Courbet three times: «Nel linguaggio di mare la triplice illuminazione del radar ha un significato preciso, è l'allarme che precede l'apertura del fuoco»¹⁸⁷. On the contrary, Turkey affirms that the Cirkin was carrying only medical supplies and that the interaction with the Courbet would be friendly.

After coming close to the naval battle, France asked NATO to investigate what happened¹⁸⁸ and withdrew from Operation, further commenting from the Elysée that «la Turchia sta giocando una partita pericolosa»¹⁸⁹ that signs «la morte celebrata dell'Alleanza Atlantica»¹⁹⁰.

Anyway, this “dangerous game” is not only being played in the diplomatic sphere but primarily in the military and economic ones, passing through interests such as gas and oil, «interessi

¹⁸⁴ See [Francia e Turchia sono ai ferri corti - Il Post](#)

¹⁸⁵ See STABILE G., *Francia-Turchia, è scontro totale. Ora si apre anche il fronte sul gas*, «La Stampa», 26 June 2020, p. 13.

¹⁸⁶ See [NATO - Topic: Operation Sea Guardian](#)

¹⁸⁷ See ANSALDO M., *Così il cargo turco Cirkin pieno d'armi attraversò il Mediterraneo fino alla Libia*, «la Repubblica», 7 July 2020, p. 15.

¹⁸⁸ See «la Repubblica», *Inchiesta della NATO: Turchia-Francia scintilla tra due navi*, 15 June 2020, p. 13.

¹⁸⁹ See BATTISTINI F., *Libia, scontro tra Macron e Erdogan*, «Corriere della Sera», 24 June 2020, p. 17.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibidem*

incompatibili con ricalcano le alleanze politiche regionali»¹⁹¹: the idea of the French oil company Total to converge the gas extracted in the Eastern Mediterranean towards two large liquefaction plants and then transport it to Europe collides with the Turkish project; Erdoğan, indeed, wants to build a network of gas pipelined to collect methane from Central Asia and the Mediterranean to direct to Europe¹⁹².

Between the two strategies, Turkey seems to be in a stronger position, playing on «la concorrenza e i litigi tra i singoli paesi europei, arrivati addirittura a schierarsi su fronti opposti nella guerra civile libica»¹⁹³ and launching a bipartition of Libya with Russia, another great reference power in the Middle East.

The significant data, as the Italian media emphasize, is that beyond the individual positions, Turkey itself is a part of NATO and therefor, theoretically, is an ally of Europe. What emerges, however, is «una partita double face: da un lato [la Turchia] gode delle copertura politica e strategica della NATO (che può far valere nei confronti dell'ingombrante vicino russo), dall'altro sta imponendo un ruolo di potenza mediterranea di fatto contrapposta all'Europa»¹⁹⁴.

In conclusion, as Erdoğan's strategic choices demonstrate, Turkish ambiguity in foreign policy, between the EU and NATO on the one hand, and the resumption of relations with other players in the Middle East on the other, is a constant that characterizes both the Libyan context, and the Turkish interventions in Syria, and the position in the Ukrainian conflict.

4.4 Consequences of Erdoğan's victory for Turkey and the West

The most recent turning point in Turkish domestic policy that influences the Western debate around the role of Turkey in several international key issues is the elections in May 2023 when, for the first time in his political career, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan does not win at the first round but fights against the strongest opposition of the last twenty years.

¹⁹¹ See STABILE G., *Francia-Turchia, è scontro totale. Ora si apre anche il fronte sul gas*, «La Stampa», 26 June 2020, p. 13.

¹⁹² *Ibidem*

¹⁹³ See VALENTINI C., *La UE dorme, Russia e Turchia banchettano*, «ItaliaOggi», 15 June 2020, p.2.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibidem*

What Italian newspapers agree on is the fact that «i risultati del primo turno e delle elezioni parlamentari hanno mostrato un paese non solo spaccato ma anche cristallizzato e restio alle rivoluzioni»¹⁹⁵. Indeed, although the runoff is already a historic event for Turkey, «sarà un ballottaggio amaro per chi credeva che il ventennio del sultano si sarebbe concluso ieri [14th May]»¹⁹⁶ given that AKP has confirmed a large majority in Parliament, with 317 seat on 600, winning over the center-left coalition that collects only 234, «con la prospettiva concreta di essere ridotta all'impotenza, senza neanche la possibilità di imbastire un'opposizione parlamentare»¹⁹⁷, and Erdoğan who gets 27 million votes in the first round, equal to 49,4%, surpassing the challenger Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, stopped to 44,5%.

In this suspended Turkey, «sospesa e spaccata in due»¹⁹⁸, «il secondo turno non può essere considerato una buona notizia per l'opposizione»¹⁹⁹: Kılıçdaroğlu, indeed, not only did he not reach 60% of the votes as he had said several times during the electoral campaign, «non si sa bene in base a quale evidenza»²⁰⁰, but he also believed, incorrectly, that the conservative electorate could have voted for a candidate of Alevi origins, albeit in coalition with three parties linked to the Sunni Islam. Additionally, the Kurdish vote, that «in alcune parti del Paese non è andato verso il candidato dell'opposizione come si aspettavano nel Partito repubblicano (Chp)»²⁰¹ determined the gap between the two candidates, together with the votes won by the ultra-nationalist candidate Sinan Oğan, who was able to gather «il malcontento per la crisi economica e l'insofferenza verso I rifugiati siriani»²⁰², preventing «ai suoi rivali di vincere già domenica scorsa [14th May]»²⁰³.

Notwithstanding almost all Italian newspapers identifying Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as «la nuova speranza del Paese»²⁰⁴, «il volto del cambiamento»²⁰⁵, Erdoğan's victory seemed obvious given the «due decenni di potere pressoché assoluto -mediatico, economico, militare, burocratico,

¹⁹⁵ See VITA L., *La Turchia spaccata va al ballottaggio*, «Il Riformista», 16 May 2023, pp. 1-3.

¹⁹⁶ See STABILE G., *Turchia in bilico*, «La Stampa», 15 May 2023, pp. 1-3.

¹⁹⁷ See STABILE G., *Turchia risveglio amaro*, «La Stampa», 16 May 2023, pp. 1-3.

¹⁹⁸ See COLARUSSO G., *Turchia al ballottaggio, Erdogan in testa ma lo sfidante accusa "Conteggio farsa"*, «la Repubblica», 15 May 2023, pp. 1-17.

¹⁹⁹ See OTTAVIANI M., *Un trauma enorme per l'opposizione. Sono stati troppo ottimisti*, «Avvenire», 16 May 2023, p. 6.

²⁰⁰ *Ibidem*

²⁰¹ *Ibidem*

²⁰² See GIUSTINO M., *Gli assi di Erdogan*, «Il Foglio», 16 May 2023, p. 1-10.

²⁰³ *Ibidem*

²⁰⁴ See LOCCATELLI G., *Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, l'umile "Ghandi di Dersim" col sogno di spodestare il sultano*, «La Stampa», 15 May 2023, p. 17.

²⁰⁵ *Ibidem*

educativo-»²⁰⁶ with which «il Presidente non ha plasmato la Turchia a sua immagine, o almeno non del tutto»²⁰⁷ but «ha saputo leggerne l'altra anima, quella che ha vissuto come violenza la discriminazione della propria identità religiosa, marginalizzata dal laicismo su cui è fondata la repubblica kemalista»²⁰⁸. Hence, what is interesting to understand from the analysis of the vote and the electoral map is that «la polarizzazione del voto fra città e aree rurali è stata marcata»²⁰⁹, Turkey «non è solo Gezi Park»²¹⁰ or «la spinta progressista intravista nell'unità tanto sudata dalle opposizioni e nelle piazze da anni piene del Pride e dell'8 marzo»²¹¹, Turkey «è un Paese molto conservatore»²¹², where a significant part of the Turkish population recognises that «il Paese, sotto la guida di Erdoğan, ha conosciuto momenti drammatici e una decisa svolta autoritaria, si è allontanato dall'Europa, ma ha continuato ad avere un ruolo geopolitico determinante, anzi accresciuto»²¹³.

This determinant Turkish role brings the European chancelleries and Washington to take a careful look at the events in the country: «La sconfitta di Erdoğan potrebbe avere due effetti [per Bruxelles], la riapertura di un dialogo con Ankara per l'adesione della Turchia nell'UE e lo sblocco dell'impasse sull'ingresso della Svezia nella NATO»²¹⁴ and also for Biden «una vittoria di Kılıçdaroğlu potrebbe aprire nuove strade alle relazioni fra Stati Uniti e Turchia»²¹⁵.

Even though this «paniere di proposte non può dispiacere alle cancellerie europee»²¹⁶, «c'è però anche l'altro lato della medaglia»²¹⁷: Kılıçdaroğlu, in addition to leading a coalition of six very varied and disunited parties, if not to attack Erdoğan, wants to re-discuss the 2016 agreement on Syrian refugees and maintain the same equidistance that Erdoğan has chosen towards Cyprus and Greece, between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, «la sua [di Kılıçdaroğlu] intenzione di riaprire la quasi eterna pratica di adesione della Turchia all'UE (avviata nel 1987) segnala una

²⁰⁶ See CRUCIATI C., *La Turchia non è solo Gezi Park. Erdogan l'ha capito*, «Il Manifesto», 16 May 2023, pp. 1-7.

²⁰⁷ *Ibidem*

²⁰⁸ *Ibidem*

²⁰⁹ See STABILE G., *Turchia in bilico*, «La Stampa», 15 May 2023, pp. 1-3.

²¹⁰ See CRUCIATI C., *La Turchia non è solo Gezi Park. Erdogan l'ha capito*, «Il Manifesto», 16 May 2023, pp. 1-7.

²¹¹ *Ibidem*

²¹² See SARGENTIN R. M., «Vince un'altra volta lo status quo, il Presidente per molti è un profeta», «Corriere della Sera», 16 May 2023, p. 15.

²¹³ See GERONI A., *Erdogan ridimensionato va al ballottaggio ma ora chi rischia di più è il suo avversario*, «il Quotidiano del Sud», 16 May 2023, pp. 1-6.

²¹⁴ See DE GIOVANNANGELI U., *Sultano vs. Democrazia: Turchia al bivio*, «l'Unità», 16 May 2023, p. 12.

²¹⁵ *Ibidem*

²¹⁶ See SCAGLIONE F., *Pugno di ferro, crescita e inurbamento. Il voto spacca la Turchia di Erdogan*, «Avvenire», 16 May 2023, pp. 1-2.

²¹⁷ *Ibidem*

sguardo interessato verso Ovest ma anche il desiderio di stanare Bruxelles da decenni di esitazioni, cosa che l'UE, alle prese con la questione ucraina, forse vede più come un problema che come un'opportunità»²¹⁸.

But, the day after the ballot, it is clear that «lo sfidante non è riuscito a catalizzare la voglia di cambiamento»²¹⁹ while «la fiducia in Erdoğan, il timore di metà della popolazione di ritrovarsi senza una guida in un Paese in perenne emergenza sono state le chiavi della vittoria, ieri e oggi»²²⁰. The choice, then, to direct his electoral campaign towards nationalism and anti-migrants, led the CHP leader to lose support especially among the Kurdish population²²¹, without however being able to leverage Oğan's ultra-nationalist electorate.

In the international context, definitely the re-election of Erdoğan «è una buona notizia per Vladimir Putin e per chi simpatizza con la Russia» above all Orban, because, as NATO and G20 country, «scompiglia le carte occidentali e, soprattutto, è uno delle principali vie di aggiramento delle sanzioni»²²², while in Brussels the reactions are mixed and the relations of the immediate future will depend on the NATO summit in Vilnius next July, when Turkey will be asked to revoke the veto on Sweden's accession to NATO. Also in EU, «qualcuno tira forse un sospiro di sollievo»²²³ because «con Erdoğan al potere i nemici dell'allargamento possono continuare a dormire sogni tranquilli o a preoccuparsene solo per non fare entrare l'Ucraina»²²⁴.

Hence, Erdoğan's victory assured the international powers and his poll of support that once he enters his third decade in power, in some ways everything will change, while, in others, nothing has changed: relations with the European Union, the United States, as well as with Russia and China, or the southern powers, will not change; in addition to this, with the European Union it will remain «una relazione immoralmente transnazionale, un do ut des dossier per dossier, a partire dall'immigrazione»²²⁵; what will really change, and it is the main concern of the Italian media today, are the democratic spaces, which will be further reduced²²⁶.

²¹⁸ *Ibidem*

²¹⁹ See DI CAPUA G., *Erdogan ha vinto. «Ora si aprono le porte del secolo»*, «Il Tempo», 29 May 2023, pp.1-7.

²²⁰ *Ibidem*

²²¹ See OTTAVI M., *Il Sultano vince, il Paese è spaccato. «Abbiamo scritto di nuovo la storia»*, «Nazione-Carlino-Giorno», 29 May 2023, pp.1-14.

²²² See STEFANINI S., *Una buona notizia (solo) per Putin*, «La Stampa», 29 May 2023, pp. 1-25.

²²³ *Ibidem*

²²⁴ *Ibidem*

²²⁵ See TOCCI N., *Turchia, l'identità batte la ragione*, «La Stampa», 16 May 2023, pp. 1-29.

²²⁶ *Ibidem*

CONCLUSION

A few weeks after the 2023' important elections²²⁷, Turkey is still in a very critical situation due to an unstoppable economic crisis, exacerbated by the recent earthquake in the southeast region, and to a complex position in the regional and international context. Nevertheless, during the elections, the rule of law and economy have gone into the background, how to show the millions of electors who voted for a strong leader with a guarantee of stability, focused on topics such as security, defence and unity of the state²²⁸, rather than protection of human rights and recognition of minorities.

Indeed, from an internal point of view, the election on the last 14th of May appeared as a final referendum on Erdoğan's republic²²⁹ and his party that, after more than 20 years of government, enjoyed the support of a stable and cohesive front composed of 4 People's Alliance parties (established in February 2018 between AKP and MHP adding on 2023 BBP and YRP), the Sunni Kurdish Islamist political party, HÜDAPAR, and the centre-right neoliberal ANAP. The declared objective of the President in office since the electoral campaign is the consolidation of the "century of Turkey", based on economic development, with a goal of growth set of «\$400 billion in exports by 2028, up from \$254 billion at present, while boosting investment in tourism to attract revenues of \$100 billion»²³⁰ and on the radicalisation of identity issue, refusing and rejecting any possible identity imposed from outside that doesn't correspond to Turkey and party willingness.

The importance of nationalism and the self-perception of Turkey as a power independent of foreign interference proved decisive last May 28 even though this powerful image that Erdogan gave and still gives about himself to the electorate and media seemed like a strategy no longer winner: during the electoral campaign, in fact, Turkey's opinion polls tracker pointed to a neck-and-neck race with the possibility even of a power change²³¹ in favour of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu called "Turkish Gandhi" after the 2017 "March for Justice" from Ankara to Istanbul over the

²²⁷ See [If Turkey sacks its strongman, democrats everywhere should take heart \(economist.com\)](#)

²²⁸ See SETTE G., *Verso il ballottaggio: l'ottimismo di Erdoğan, la delusione e resilienza dell'opposizione, e una rinnovata enfasi su nazionalismo e immigrazione*, Radar Turchia: Elezioni 2023, Nota n. 5/ May 2023, CeSPI, Roma.

²²⁹ See [Turkish Elections: A final referendum on Erdogan's republic – EURACTIV.com](#)

²³⁰ See [Turkey's Erdogan lays out promises to party base, but offers few details - Al-Monitor: Independent, trusted coverage of the Middle East](#)

²³¹ See [Turkey opinion poll tracker: Erdoğan vs Kılıçdaroğlu | Euronews](#)

jailing of government critics²³². The communication strategy adopted by the CHP candidate looked at Turkish families' needs, the necessity to improve workers' conditions and women's rights, being understood that the possible next President wants to re-open a constructive dialogue with EU and the West: «On May 14th, the government will change in Turkey. Together we will build a prosperous, fair, and democratic Turkey where everyone gets their due, with radical innovations in every field from economy to democracy, justice to security policies»²³³, but this dream of Erdoğan defeat was broken after the first round, when with his more nationalistic positions, Kılıçdaroğlu lost more than 2 million of voters²³⁴.

On paper, Turkish electors had many reasons to be dissatisfied with their President, in office for 20 years, but that is not what happened: «Erdogan has managed not only to cling to office but also potentially emerge even stronger»²³⁵. If it is true that national and international observers have not declared significant or determinant irregularities during the voting process, Erdoğan's political approach can be compared with that of other illiberal leaders in European democracies, first of all, the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, «who have used a combination of institutional leverage and populist measures to sustain broad support and rig the system in their favor»²³⁶, evidenced by the almost absolute limitation and governmental control of the news media (during the first round, for example, Erdoğan appeared in the media a total of 32 hours against his opponent's total 32 minutes, which fell to zero during the runoff²³⁷).

But the outcome of the May elections suggests that Turkey has now shifted closer to a Eurasian autocracy than an illiberal European democracy, closer to Putin than Orbán: as well as Russian President Vladimir Putin, indeed, Erdoğan «was able to set the parameters of the elections long before any votes were cast»²³⁸, arresting key opposition leaders and civil society activists, demonizing opposition parties as Western sympathizers, coup plotters, and terrorist allies and playing the homophobic card.

²³² See [How 'Turkish Gandhi' Kilicdaroglu could influence May's elections - International report \(rfi.fr\)](#)

²³³ See [Main opposition presidential candidate Kılıçdaroğlu releases his pledges for first 100 days in power \(duvarenglish.com\)](#)

²³⁴ See [Turkey election: Opposition dares to dream of Erdogan defeat - BBC News](#)

²³⁵ See [Erdogan's Russian Victory: Turkey Is Shifting From Illiberal Democracy to Putin-Style Autocracy \(foreignaffairs.com\)](#)

²³⁶ *Ibidem*

²³⁷ See SARGENTINI, R., M., *Erdogan vince ancora, «La famiglia è sacra, adesso il secolo turco»*, «Corriere della Sera», 29 May 2023, pp. 1-8.

²³⁸ See [Erdogan's Russian Victory: Turkey Is Shifting From Illiberal Democracy to Putin-Style Autocracy \(foreignaffairs.com\)](#)

For all of that reasons, in addition to the domestic consequences, from an external point of view and especially by European countries, the Turkish elections have been seen as a crucial moment in historical and political terms: Erdoğan's reconfirmation²³⁹, made available after the Supreme Election Council decided to see as first term the 2018 election and 2023 as second candidacy (don't take into consideration the first election in 2014 and respect in that way the Article 101 of the Turkish Constitution for which candidate can be elected for a maximum of two terms)²⁴⁰, raises fears of a more conservative and radical push with effects on the whole Middle East region.

Indeed, the reconfirmed President, from a European point of view, will have to prove to comply with international agreements, concluded in particular with EU and NATO, concerning migration policies and Turkish role as mediator in the Ukraine conflict, defining its relations with Russia and managing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, to obtain international help and support, essential to improve, first of all, the Turkish economy.

But the greatest fear is that Turkey, being a «swing state»²⁴¹, i.e., one of the six states of the global south (Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey) not fully aligned with a superpower and «therefore free to create new power dynamics»²⁴², will strengthen its goal and ambition of taking the best from the various sides, especially Washington and Moscow, to present itself as the leader of its own part of the world, the Middle East.

As he has repeatedly demonstrated, to place Turkey at the centre of the international scene, Erdogan no longer needs Europe: increasingly close economic relations with Russia, which continues to ensure gas supplies to Ankara by deferring payment, and with China, which supports the Turkish public debt through credit lines, they mark an almost definitive geopolitical estrangement from Europe²⁴³.

Hence, Italian public opinion seems especially concerned about the effects that this departure from Western values has on human rights: «La visione universale dei diritti umani, fondata in primo luogo sul principio di uguaglianza, pare non rientrare nell'orizzonte di questa Turchia,

²³⁹ See [Resmi Gazete'de yayımlandı, Erdoğan üçüncü kez aday \(artigercek.com\)](https://www.artigercek.com)

²⁴⁰ See [Can Erdogan run for third term in Turkey's upcoming election? - Al-Monitor: Independent, trusted coverage of the Middle East](#)

²⁴¹ See [6 Swing States in the Global South Will Decide Geopolitics \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://www.foreignpolicy.com)

²⁴² *Ibidem*

²⁴³ See [La rivista il Mulino: «Il secolo della Turchia»](#)

che sempre più innesta nel proprio tessuto giuridico la visione erdoğanista dell'Islam politico»²⁴⁴.

In the year of the 10th anniversary of the Gezi Protests, «when citizens first clashed with police in the park after several trees were cut down in preparation for the construction of a mall complex sought by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's and his Justice and Development Party (AKP)»²⁴⁵, Erdogan was re-elected for his third term extending his government to a quarter of a century, in an extremely polarized Turkey, where the line between the desire for stability and power expressed by the 52% of the population and the claims against the authoritarian drift of the other 48%, who see a source of hope in the memory of the Gezi protests, appear extremely fleeting.

²⁴⁴ *Ibidem*

²⁴⁵ See [10 years on: What the Gezi protests mean today \(substack.com\)](https://substack.com)

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