



# BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)  
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Roderick Parkes • Marcin Terlikowski • Beata Wojna

## A Partnership between Poland and Turkey: Filling the EU Gap?

Pinar Elman

*In 2014, on the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, Poland and Turkey are preparing to translate their good mutual relations into a deeper strategic partnership in areas of common long-term interest such as energy, defence and space. Yet, if they continue to forge this relationship via the simple bilateral track or within the NATO framework, there is a risk that such closer relations will prove unsustainable. The pair must work to cement Turkey's EU prospects.*

**The Current State of Relations.** Poles and Turks have had a special relationship since the Ottomans refused to recognise the partitions of Poland at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with Istanbul harbouring Polish political emigrants fighting for national independence. The legacy of good relations has continued to this day; according to Eurobarometer surveys, the Polish public, thanks to the legacy of past relations and the balanced representation of Turkey in the Polish media, is amongst the most supportive of Turkish membership of the EU—a just return for Turkey's support for Poland's NATO accession.

These social relations have recently been cemented by an increase in bilateral trade and cultural relations: annual trade in 2012 volume reached \$5.5 billion (compared to \$4.1 billion in 2011), favouring Poland, and has been accompanied by a visible increase in bilateral cultural activities (such as the development of long-lasting mechanisms), educational exchanges (Poland is the second most popular destination for Turkish Erasmus students) and tourism (nearly half a million of Polish tourists visited Turkey in 2012).

Lately there have been moves to ensure these links spill over into the political sphere, with high-level visits and the signing of several partnership agreements in the past five years. In 2009, Prime Ministers Tusk and Erdoğan signed a Turkey–Poland Strategic Partnership Agreement that aims to further bilateral relations; the Polish–Turkish inter-parliamentary Friendship Group was established in 2012; and several memorandums of understanding have been signed between different ministries and other institutions.

**The Missing EU Perspective.** Although the overall picture of bilateral relations thus appears very positive, the real potential for a more developed political relationship remains unfulfilled. Indeed, part of the reason why the relationship is unproblematic is because Poland and Turkey remain at a distance from one another and the bilateral bond has yet to be given practical priority on their respective agendas. Turkey is preoccupied with its domestic reform process and the growing instability in its southern neighbourhood, in particular, in Syria. For Poland, its eastern neighbours and the crisis in the EU are likely to remain the priority for its foreign policy. This lack of activity is particularly true of the bilateral relationship within the framework of the EU.

Despite continuous declarations of support for Turkey's EU membership, Warsaw's attitude towards the issue has so far been limited to friendly rhetoric, lacking in concrete initiatives. Poland is a comparatively strong supporter of EU enlargement in general; however, it prioritises enlargement through the accession of the EU's eastern neighbours, and to the Balkans. Turkey, despite being an official EU candidate, is mostly viewed by Warsaw in strategic terms, as a NATO ally. The issue of Turkey's EU membership is not often prioritised by Polish policymakers, for whom Ankara's commitment to the transatlantic community's defence clause, and the maintenance of good bilateral relations, top the agenda.

After years of stalled relations with the EU, Ankara's interest in the accession process is also diminishing, and thus its relations with EU Member States, including Poland, are politically more distant. Because of EU visa rules, Turkish businesses and experts have not properly experienced Poland's dynamism. Moreover, the Turkish foreign policy establishment itself has not yet had grounds to consider Poland's influence in the EU. Poland's role as an active supporter of visa-free travel to the EU for the citizens of the Eastern Partnership and Russia is of course known (echoing Turkey's own active use of visas as a foreign policy tool; Poland has not only abolished its national visa fees for Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Moldovans, but has been one of the prime supporters of keeping their EU membership prospects open). Yet, Turkey seems to have overlooked the fact that Poland is likely to be a member of the emerging core EU, and is already acting as a bridge to non-eurozone members.

**Cementing the Bilateral Track.** Preparations for the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations are underway, and the occasion provides an opportunity to raise awareness, at the political and public levels, of the strategic importance of the bilateral relationship.

As regards bilateral relations, their stability in the face of domestic party-political changes creates great potential for focusing on long-term common interests. As a future transit country for natural gas to the EU, Turkey represents a crucial asset for Poland's energy security and diversification. Moreover, the pair share an interest in developing shale gas and LNG potentials. As they are seeking to invest and develop their domestic defence sectors, they can also consider greater cooperation in the defence industry, and in other military areas, such as cooperation over construction of their missile defence systems or the development of space programmes.

Transport has also emerged as one of the important areas that should be given long-term priority, as the high cost of travelling between the two countries is an obstacle for the development of bilateral trade and tourism. Strengthening the opportunities for exchange between the two countries in this way might provide a new basis for foreign policy cooperation as well. There is, for instance, the potential to diversify bilateral economic activities, which have until now been mainly concentrated in the infrastructure, textiles and transport sectors, and which could now find form in joint ventures in third party countries—something, that might contribute to the prosperity of their shared neighbourhood. Moreover, there is growing scope for more political foreign policy cooperation.

Turkey is a member of the group of friends of the EU's Eastern Partnership and a member of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. In addition, Turkey borders the South Caucasus, and it enjoys a visa-free regime with almost all the EU's eastern neighbours, allowing it to build closer contacts with their societies. Turkey's stalled relations with the EU were felt in these states. And for the same reasons, a strengthening of relations, within the framework of the EU, could be beneficial both to Poland and Turkey, and to the Union as a whole. Their cooperation may extend to assistance for building democratic regimes in the southern Mediterranean, where Turkey is one of the main players, and where Poland has already been sharing its experience of transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime.

**Recommendations: Boosting Cooperation within the EU Framework.** This shows that Poland should not content itself with the simple bilateral format when dealing with Turkey. With its relative inactivity in supporting Turkey's EU candidacy, Warsaw risks unwittingly becoming one of those "who lost Turkey." This will damage Poland's geopolitical ambitions, for as long as Ankara feels excluded from the EU, it will continue developing alternative regional strategies by deepening ties with other states in the region, including Russia, potentially sidelining the EU from the region's geopolitics. Faced with emerging powers, it is necessary to forge greater cohesion among all members of the transatlantic alliance, and rapprochement between the EU and Turkey would certainly improve EU-NATO cooperation and allow the alliance to deal with the new geopolitical balances.

Poland's efforts to strengthen Turkey's ties with the EU may also help end the deadlock in the accession process. Although Poland naturally has only limited influence in the EU, this is one area in which it can certainly have leverage. Poland is one of the few committed advocates of EU enlargement, and until its own accession to the EU in 2004, it had to cope with challenges similar to those now facing Turkey, not least concerning the negative public opinion of the existing Member States (immigration, cultural approach, less-developed regions in the east), as well as growing Euroscepticism. Thus, Poland is well placed to help diminish such scepticism about the benefits of EU-Turkey relations, in both EU and Turkish society.

Poland, however, is open to accusations from other Member States that it will not have to bear any negative consequences of the accession, for example in terms of immigration. In reality, this is an area in which Warsaw can lead by example. Currently, Poland is one of the most popular destinations for Turkish students. As the Polish student visa expires immediately after studies, however, it does not allow Turkish students to travel within the country beyond that time, or to gain first professional experience in Poland. Besides reforming the student visa, Warsaw might also consider lifting national visa requirements for Turkish service providers, as other Member States have done. Finally, Poland may consider applying similar policies for Turkish visa applicants as it does to its eastern neighbours—waiving visa fees and, actively advocating visa-free travel for Turkish citizens.