

# **Business Take on Türkiye-EU Relations in 2024: A Call for Renewed Integration - Nur Beler Levi**



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The international order is undergoing profound transformation. Geopolitical fragmentation, the resurgence of populism, and the externalization of migration challenges have undermined global cooperation. Simultaneously, economic pressures and technological disruptions are redefining power structures.

Europe is at a critical juncture, facing intensifying competition in strategic

sectors like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and clean energy technologies. These areas are pivotal not only for Europe's economic competitiveness but also for its security architecture and strategic autonomy.

As Turkish business community, we believe that the challenges faced by Türkiye, the EU, and the broader transatlantic community are deeply interconnected. Both, the EU and Türkiye face the task of balancing innovation-driven developments with normative values, addressing rising socioeconomic tensions, and building resilience against external shocks. Within this context, the relationship between Türkiye and the EU is not merely a bilateral matter but a strategic imperative for both sides.

The prevailing sentiment from the business sector both from the Türkiye and Europe side, particularly as voiced by the Confederation of European Businesses namely [BusinessEurope](#) (*on several occasions, in its messages to December 2023 European Council and March 2024 European Council*)<sup>i</sup>, is a strong call for reinvigorated cooperation and deeper integration. This includes the formulation of a robust policy for European open strategic autonomy, which must incorporate a more effective framework for Türkiye.

As also highlighted in the Budapest Declaration on a New European Competitiveness Deal, issued on November 8, 2024, during the EU Leaders' informal summit, business as usual is no longer an option. This shift should be reflected in concrete policies, including those toward Türkiye.

In line with the European Commission's Joint Communication of November 2023 underscoring the EU's interest in enhanced cooperation with Türkiye, defined steps forward can be summarized under four axes:

## **1. Modernizing the Customs Union**

The Customs Union, which came into effect on December 31, 1995, has stood for nearly three decades as the cornerstone of economic cooperation between the EU and Türkiye. Over this period, bilateral trade has witnessed remarkable growth, increasing eightfold and solidifying a mutually beneficial relationship. Today, Türkiye ranks as the EU's fifth-largest trading partner, while the EU remains Türkiye's largest, underscoring the enduring significance of this economic partnership.

Unfortunately, the current EU-Türkiye Customs Union, while foundational, is insufficient to address today's challenges. As also demonstrated in the 2014 World Bank Report [\*"Evaluation of the Turkey - EU Customs Union"\*](#)<sup>ii</sup>, the business community sees tangible positive results by completing comprehensive modernization to address institutional challenges, include services, the digital economy, and sustainability. The existing framework risks both political regressions, by alienating Türkiye from the EU, and technical inefficiency, by exacerbating divergences in standards and policies.

A modernized Customs Union would address trade policy asymmetries, foster a more equitable trade environment, and align Türkiye with the EU's complex regulatory agenda, including the Green Deal and the Digital Single Market. The modernization should encompass an improved dispute resolution mechanism and address issues in procurement, intellectual property rights, and state aid. Furthermore, aligning with the EU acquis through modernization would enable European companies to diversify and nearshore production more effectively. As the new trade agreements, such as the EU's trade agreements with Canada and Japan also demonstrate the transformative impact of modernized frameworks, this is an urgent priority for Türkiye-EU relations as well.

## **1. Reactivating High-Level Dialogues**

Continuous dialogue is vital for addressing emerging challenges. Following the EU-Türkiye High-Level Trade Dialogue in July 2024, the initiation of a High-Level

Economic Dialogue holds promise for advancing economic integration.

Regular consultation meeting, such as the regular Customs Union Joint Committee meetings and high level meetings such as Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's participation to the Gymnich meeting in August, demonstrate the value of these constructive discussions in fostering mutual understanding. Moreover, establishing platforms for continuous dialogue in critical areas such as energy, transportation, and trade are essential for turning political will into tangible progress.

## **1. Strengthening Political and Security Cooperation**

Another key dimension of the EU and Türkiye enhanced collaboration is foreign policy and security to address shared challenges. Recent global events, including the conflict in Ukraine and shifting dynamics in the Middle East, underscore the urgency of building a unified and strategic approach to regional security.

Türkiye's strategic position—bridging the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East—renders it an indispensable partner. Structured dialogues, incorporating the UK, Norway, and non-EU states like Ukraine, should focus on counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and defence technology innovation. Germany's recent approval of arms exports to Türkiye, de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean and Berlin's removal of its veto against the sale of Eurofighter jets to Türkiye in November, can be considered as promising signals for developments. Building on these initiatives, the EU and Türkiye could establish a joint framework for protecting critical infrastructure and aligning cybersecurity standards.

## **1. Enhancing Economic Integration**

Key areas for strategic economic cooperation include value chain resilience,

digital economy and data flows, circular economy, net-zero industry partnerships, critical raw materials, and technological standards. Aligning Türkiye with the EU regulatory standards is essential to ensure resilience and competitiveness in shared value chains.

Europe is at risk of falling behind, threatening its economic prosperity, strategic autonomy, and security. The strategic reports of former Italian Prime Minister and European Central Bank President Mario Draghi and former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta have sounded alarm and emphasized the necessity for the EU to prioritize strengthening its Single Market in this global landscape. In this context, Türkiye is a potential key player in the EU's competitiveness agenda. Strategic alignment could bolster Europe's standing in critical domains like artificial intelligence and renewable energy technologies, while also enabling nearshoring opportunities.

### **A Path Forward: The Need for a Value-Driven Integration Partnership**

The evolution of EU-Türkiye relations from a value-driven partnership to a transactional framework has resulted in significant missed opportunities, particularly in areas requiring long-term collaboration. This shift, evident since the mid-2010s with the stalling of accession talks and increasing focus on migration over broader integration, driven by short-term political calculations, has eroded the conditionality that once anchored transformative reforms in Türkiye. Reclaiming a value-based approach is essential to address shared challenges and unlock the potential for mutual growth. Upcoming EU summits, including the European Council meeting in March 2025, provide a crucial window for action. European and Turkish business leaders advocate for a return to a value- and rules-based framework. Excluding Türkiye or relegating its role outside the accession framework limits the collective ability to address challenges effectively, risking significant repercussions for regional stability and the global liberal democratic order. The business communities in both Türkiye and the EU strongly advocate for renewed and deepened integration, with the modernization of the Customs Union serving as a pivotal starting point.



Nur Beler Levi received her BA in sociology (Honors) from Boğaziçi University in 2005. She completed her senior year at Northwestern University, as an exchange student. Before receiving her MA in International Relations from Sussex University in 2007, she worked as a researcher at the World Trade Center Chicago Office. In 2007, she joined Türkiye Business Association ([TÜSİAD](#)) Brussels Representation as a specialist. In 2008, she transferred to TÜSİAD Headquarters in Istanbul as an expert in External Relations Department. She is currently serving as the *EU Projects Director* in TUSIAD, managing TUSIAD activities in France, UK and Germany. Additionally, she is the treasurer of [Institut du Bosphore](#), Franco - Turkish think tank established in 2009 in Paris under the initiative of TÜSİAD, to strengthen France - Türkiye - EU triangular relations. She served in Young Presidents Organisation (YPO's) Board from 2019 - 2022. She attended "Third Sector Foundation Philanthropy Professions" Program in 2015 and is a philanthropy fellow. Within the framework of the program, she represented Third Sector Foundation in the Stockholm International Philanthropy Symposium. She participated in training programs including "Young Professionals Academy" organized by the UN International Labor Organization in 2014.

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