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# FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

## Belgium

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## 1. History of EU-Turkey Relations<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Belgium as a moderate supporter of Turkish EU membership

Since 1999, successive Belgian governments have officially supported the accession talks between Turkey and the European Union (EU). Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (1999-2008) of the Flemish liberal party (VLD) used to be a moderate, though active supporter in the public debate. This positive attitude of the liberals was joined by the Belgian green parties and – to a lesser extent – Christian democrat and social democrat parties. In most political circles and media, the reform agenda of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) government from 2002 to 2007 was positively received. Proponents believed that Turkish accession would strengthen the European economy and security, and bolster Turkish democracy. But all acknowledged that there was still a long way to go for Turkey to fulfil the political and economic criteria. Apart from the official standpoints at government level, within the political parties criticism to the idea of Turkish membership was often voiced. No political party actively campaigned for Turkish accession (with the exception of their candidates of Turkish origin). They also realized that the question was contentious within the public opinion, mostly because of Turkey's Islamic identity, fears for Turkish immigration, and the potential costs of integrating a poorer country into the EU. The then popular far-right party Vlaams Belang has always been vehemently opposed to Turkish EU membership.

In recent years (2015-2016), the Belgian government officially stuck to its position in favour of a continuation of accession talks. However, all governmental and opposition parties have become openly critical about Turkish membership. The main reasons are concerns about democracy, human rights and the rule of law under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP, which are perceived as having become more authoritarian. The heavy use of police forces during the Gezi Park protests (May-June 2013) was an important turning point in this regard. In the meantime, the right-wing Flemish nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) had gained a lot of support, to become the largest Belgian political party and the main party in government since 2014. This party and its civil society sphere are openly and actively critical of the Turkish AKP government on topics such as "Islamization", democracy, human rights, Kurdish rights and the Armenian question of 1915.

### 1.2. Islam, democracy and Kurds dominate the debate

In spite of the official Belgian position in favour of accession talks, in politics and society critical voices have never disappeared. Over the past couple of years, the general mood has become quite negative. The allegedly "incompatible" Islamic identity of Turkey is one narrative. Others involve

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<sup>1</sup> The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

the deepening problems of Turkish democracy, notwithstanding some past improvements such as rolling back the political power of the army and the abolition of the death penalty (which since the failed coup attempt in July 2016 is back on the agenda in Turkey); fears for an increase in Turkish immigration; fears for the high costs of integrating a poorer country into the EU (structural funds, agriculture, etc.); and concerns about the absorption capacity of the EU, including the future of EU decision-making in case of the accession of a sizeable country with a relatively nationalist elite and public opinion.

In the Belgian context, the Kurdish question has always been particularly sensitive, even though the Kurdish community is much smaller than the Turkish one. This sensitivity is particularly visible among the left (greens, extreme left, some social democrats) and the Flemish nationalists, as well as among many journalists and academics. The Flemish nationalists see analogies with the historic Flemish emancipation struggle and their own secessionist project. Since the 1980s, Belgium also served as an important centre of the Kurdish movement, including political cadres of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The Kurdish movement established extensive connections with Belgian politics, media and civil society. It was quite successful in combating the idea that the AKP was "solving" the Kurdish question. In the extensive media coverage on Turkey since the 2013 Gezi protests, the Turkish peace process with the PKK was hardly addressed. When clashes between the Turkish state and the PKK resumed in 2015, the Belgian media and political consensus was that President Erdoğan was mostly to blame for the failure of the peace process. The dominant discourse in Belgium did not attribute a major responsibility to the PKK.

Many media articles over the past months and years have interpreted the Turkish pressure against the presence and demonstrations of PKK and Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C) militants and sympathizers in Belgium as an unacceptable attempt to curb the freedom of expression and association in Belgium.

### **1.3. The shadow of the refugee deal over the EU-Turkey relationship**

In Belgium, one of the main concerns with regard to EU-Turkey relations is the EU-Turkey Statement on migration – the so-called refugee deal of 18 March 2016. The economic and energy relationship is less discussed in the public domain, but remains a priority for the government and the business community.

The Belgian government – which since 2014 is composed of liberals, Flemish nationalists and Christian-democrats – fully supports the March 2016 refugee deal. The Belgian government is willing to accept a limited number of Syrian refugees, but at the same time tries to reassure the population that numbers of refugees and migrants will not significantly increase. Therefore, it strongly hopes that the agreement will hold. However, government and opposition parties as well as media commentators regret that an agreement was made with an "authoritarian government". With its combined demands for financial support, acceleration of visa liberalization for Turks travelling to the EU, and reanimation of the EU accession negotiations, Ankara is widely – including

government parties – accused of “blackmailing” the EU. The greens and to a lesser extent the social democrats would like to see the EU hosting more refugees in order to be less dependent on “Erdoğan”.

## 2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

### 2.1. Fears that Turkey grows “anti-European”

In 2015-2016, the overarching concern was that Turkey, by drifting away from the EU, would become even “anti-European” in several respects. But hardly anybody sees a link between European positions that most Turks consider as not very friendly on the one hand and Turkish reactions on the other.

Secondly, the Belgian political scene and public opinion remain concerned about a collapse of the EU-Turkey refugee deal in case the EU adopts a tough stance against Turkey. However, more efficient border controls in the so-called “Balkan route” from Greece to the rest of the Schengen zone have given rise to the idea that Turkey’s political leverage over the EU has decreased.

The state of Turkish democracy continues to be a prominent topic in Belgian media and political debates based on an overwhelming consensus. The press has hardly dedicated critical analyses to the potential responsibilities of groups such as the old Kemalist guard, the PKK and Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), or the Gülen Movement. With regard to the 15 July 2016 failed coup attempt, Belgian politicians and media are much more concerned about the massive purges in the aftermath than the question of which groups and structures were behind the event. Reintroducing the death penalty in Turkey would be received very badly by Belgian politics, media and public opinion. This is widely regarded as a red line for the accession talks.

Another key topic in the Belgian debate is cooperation between Turkey and Belgium/EU on jihadi terrorism. According to the Belgian government, since 2012 Turkey arrested and/or deported about 60 Belgian Syria fighters and Daesh militants. Some perpetrators and accomplices of the interrelated Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks (carried out on 13 November 2015 and 22 March 2016 respectively) were deported and/or signalled by Turkey in advance. A few days after the Brussels attack, President Erdoğan publicly stated that Turkey had apprehended and deported a Belgian perpetrator months before – he had been able to walk away freely from the Dutch airport where he arrived due to miscommunications between Turkey, Belgium and the Netherlands. Consequently, the Belgian interior and justice ministers offered to resign, which was, however, not accepted by the Prime Minister. Hence, the Belgian authorities realize the importance of security cooperation with Turkey.

From the Turkish side, including President Erdoğan, strong discontent about Belgium’s attitude vis-à-vis the PKK is surfacing. Ankara complains about poor Belgian cooperation with regard to information on and prosecution and extradition of PKK militants. Another complaint is the Belgian government’s tolerance towards frequent public manifestations of PKK sympathizers with PKK

symbols. When Erdoğan claimed in November 2016 that Belgium was an important centre for PKK activities in Europe, this was promptly denied by Prime Minister Charles Michel. Still, open source information coming from Belgian and European security services and the Belgian judiciary points at a substantial PKK presence in Belgium. It is interesting to see whether Belgium will become tougher on the PKK in the coming months and years, or whether Turkey – with its already overstretched and much targeted police – will question its security cooperation with Belgium. A much similar dispute is in the making on the presence of cadres of the Gülen movement in Belgium.

There is a growing debate in Belgium on alleged interference of the Turkish government in Belgian domestic affairs. In Belgian media and politics there was much unease about a visit of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and AKP campaigning towards the Belgian Turkish community in the run-up to the Turkish 2015 parliamentary elections.

In the hours and days after the 15 July 2016 failed coup attempt, followers of Fethullah Gülen in Belgium were attacked and intimidated by supporters of the Turkish government. In December 2016, the Belgian branch of the Turkish directorate for religious affairs Diyanet was heavily criticized by some media and members of parliament because it had written a report for its Ankara headquarters on the presence of Gülen organizations in Belgium. This was considered as “espionage” and indicative of “Erdoğan’s long arm” in Belgium. The Flemish regional government has threatened to withdraw the official recognition and subsidies of Diyanet mosques. A widespread feeling among the rather conservative, nationalist and/or pro-AKP majority of Belgian Turks is that they face much more suspicion due to developments in Turkey. These are new phenomena.

## **2.2. Belgium remains silent on an alternative to full Turkish EU accession**

The current political and media consensus is that Turkish accession is not on the agenda in the foreseeable future due to the perceived rapid deterioration of democracy, human rights and rule of law in Turkey. Even though it falls beyond the timeframe of this report, it is noteworthy to indicate that in May 2017 the Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel openly called upon the EU to stop the accession talks. Former Belgian Prime Minister and current leader of the liberal group in the European Parliament Guy Verhofstadt proposes an “associate membership” instead of full membership. Interestingly, in Belgium there is hardly any public debate on the future of the EU-Turkey customs union.

## **2.3. The fall-out of the July 2016 coup attempt**

In 2015-2016 Turkey appeared very prominently in the Belgian news and public debate, due to the Turkish parliamentary elections of June and November 2015, the resumption of the war between the state and the PKK in July 2015, the refugee crisis, the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the ensuing purges, and the multitude of terrorist attacks.

The July 2016 failed coup attempt was widely discussed within the Belgian society. Yet, the massive purges against alleged members of the Gülen movement received the most attention. The reactions were very negative. The head of the Flemish regional government, Geert Bourgeois, for example, compared the purges with practices of Nazi Germany.

Most political parties, media and commentators reject what the Turkish government and opposition voices consider as evidence for a Gülenist lead role in the failed coup attempt, and generally consider the movement as harmless. When the Gülenist newspaper Zaman was closed in March 2016, there was an almost total Belgian consensus that this was a blatant violation of press freedom, without any critical question being posed about the network behind the newspaper and its role in the controversial trials against hundreds of military officers and secular and Kurdish journalists (Ergenekon, Balyoz, Kurdistan Communities Union). Accounts about an alleged anti-democratic Gülenist infiltration and power abuse in the Turkish state and judiciary tend to be regarded as AKP propaganda. Since July 2016, tens or even hundreds of Gülen sympathizers have fled to Belgium, which was already an important centre for the movement, among many other things, in the form of a Gülenist lobbying capacity vis-à-vis the EU institutions in Brussels. In addition, tens of Turkish military officers based at NATO headquarters in Belgium have asked for asylum. The coup aftermath is likely to remain very contentious in the bilateral relationship, and serves as a striking illustration of the diametrically opposed views of the EU and Ankara.

### **3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene**

#### **3.1. Contention and suspicion about Turkey's role in the region**

The role of Turkey in the Syrian conflict has raised major controversies in Belgium. Turkey's efforts of hosting over 2.5 million Syrian refugees is acknowledged and well perceived. Still, there has never been a profound debate in Belgium about the ethical foundations of concentrating refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries, and the extent of financial solidarity this policy should imply, given Turkey's challenges ahead in terms of housing, education, health and social security for its new inhabitants. In the Belgian debate, the EUR 6 billion promised by the EU is widely seen as a sufficient compensation. Additional Turkish demands are considered as blackmailing, even by Belgian governmental political parties.

At the same time, Turkey is criticized for supporting Syrian rebel groups, several of which are labelled as Islamist or jihadist. Allegations about cooperation between the Turkish government and ISIS have been widely covered in Belgian mass media. A prominent example are the images of an arms transport of the Turkish secret service heading to Syria released by the newspaper Cumhuriyet in May 2015 just before the Turkish legislative elections. Important Belgian media aired the claim of Cumhuriyet and others that the arms were destined for ISIS. Evidence for this destination was never provided, however. Other examples are the allegations that ISIS militants

could freely move across the Turkish-Syrian border, and Russian claims of a Turkish government role in ISIS oil trade. They were widely covered in mainstream media. These allegations have been very damaging for the image of Turkey in Belgium.

Another important source of criticism are the Turkish military operations against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, said to be the most effective ground force against ISIS. The consensual narrative in Belgian media and politics is that Turkey does not grant “the Kurds” any autonomy across the border, in order to avoid more Kurdish unrest in Turkey itself. Missing in this narrative is the evidence for strong PKK-YPG links, the fact that the YPG aims to conquer non-Kurdish lands too, and the actual political, economic and military Turkish support to the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq.

### **3.2. Belgium lacks a strategic vision about how to deal with today's Turkey**

The Belgian government does not openly reflect on the role of Turkey in NATO and in the EU-Russia-Ukraine relationship, on Turkey's role as an energy transit country, or on Turkey's potential to contribute to peace and stability in Syria and the wider Middle East.

In this context, the question would be whether Belgium reserves its vision for internal meetings of the EU, NATO and other relevant bodies, or does not possess a clear vision altogether. Apart from the well-known complaints about Ankara's domestic and external policies, from the media and civil society a strategic vision does not emerge either.

However, one could expect that relevant Belgian actors publicly reflect on how to deal with an important NATO partner having a president and governmental majority that they do not like, but may remain in power for quite a long time. None of both sides can neglect the huge win-win agenda for cooperation, including in terms of foreign policy.

For the time being, a highly conflictual atmosphere prevails, avoiding fresh opportunities for cooperation. Belgian media, political parties and members of parliament are still very much in a mood of uncompromising “Erdoğan bashing” – also for domestic consumption and electoral posturing. They lack a workable strategy for the future themselves, and would most probably be intolerant to any governmental policy deemed too soft, too empathic or too collaborative towards Turkey.

A big question mark is what will happen to the EU-Turkey refugee deal: if the EU did not deliver on financial support, reanimated accession talks and visa liberalization (which is in turn linked to a relaxing of Turkish anti-terrorism laws), would Ankara facilitate a new massive refugee flow to the EU? But how realistic would such a scenario be in light of the ethical dimension of crossing the Aegean Sea and enhanced controls by the EU of the borders between non-EU Balkan countries and the Schengen countries Slovenia and Hungary, which block the so-called “Balkan route”? These efforts seem to have decreased Turkey's leverage on the EU.

### 3.3. Belgium and EU slow to respond to Turkey's new diplomacy

Belgium does not have an active Turkey policy beyond the EU concertation. EU-Turkey cooperation faces serious difficulties because of the crisis of confidence between the two sides. The EU condemns the purges against Gülenists and other groups, as well as the crackdown on Turkish media. By contrast, Ankara considers the EU as insufficiently sensitive to the failed coup attempt and to what it refers to as the massive threat of the Gülen parallel state and PKK terrorism. In this context, Turkey has been seeking closer ties to Russia (including cooperation on Syria) and the incoming Donald Trump administration in the United States (US). Recent talks in Astana between Russia, Iran and Turkey to find a solution for Syria are other examples of a new Turkish diplomacy that seems to sideline the EU.

The rapprochement between Erdoğan, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump has caught the interest of some Belgian quality press. This development raises questions about the diplomatic role of a post-Brexit EU on a world scene dominated by controversial “strong leaders”. Again, the Belgian public debate on the geopolitical dimension of the new EU-Turkey relationship is still in an embryonic phase, and does not go beyond the observation that the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy has little grip on these developments. The basic problem is that it lacks a coherent strategy on how to deal with Erdoğan’s Turkey.

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