



# **The Role of non-EU External Actors in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods: The case of Turkey**

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## Abstract

This paper analyses Turkey's influence as a non-EU external actor in political dynamics in the European Union's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. It assesses Ankara's discourses, behaviours, and tools as well as the impact on democracy promotion and authoritarian consolidation in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, North Africa and the Middle East. It examines how Turkey's foreign policy evolved from an initial emphasis on soft power and democratic inspiration—particularly in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings—to a more security-driven and interest-based approach amid its own democratic backsliding. The study shows how Turkey's influence has been shaped by domestic political developments, ideological affinities, security concerns, and shifting regional alliances. It draws comparisons between Turkey's engagement in the Southern Neighbourhood, where ideological and civilisational narratives were more prominent, and the Eastern Neighbourhood, where Turkey prioritised sovereignty and stability. It also maps the instruments Turkey uses—diplomacy, military presence, cultural diplomacy, and development cooperation—and the constraints posed by other actors and internal vulnerabilities.

## Introduction: Background and key features<sup>1</sup>

Turkey shares a neighbourhood with the European Union (EU), which the EU has conceptualized as its “Southern and Eastern neighbourhood”. This region comprises Eastern European and Mediterranean countries, including most of Turkey's neighbours, the exceptions being Iran and Iraq. In fact, Turkey designed a neighbourhood policy under the “zero problems with neighbours’ doctrine” of the then foreign affairs minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009 - 2014) which shares similarities with the EU's goal of building a ring of friendly, stable, prosperous, and well-governed countries. This report explores Turkey's approach to democracy, its relationship with neighbouring countries, and how it relates to the EU's approach to democracy promotion in the region.

Turkey's complex and ambivalent role is marked by several contradictions and peculiar situations. Firstly, Turkey is a Western country that is a member of NATO and a candidate country for EU membership (despite stalled negotiations), as well as a regional power in both South-eastern Europe and the Middle East. Secondly, Turkey holds elections, has a multiparty-political system and is member of the Council of Europe, but its record of political liberties and human rights has regressed as illustrated in the Worldwide Governance Indicators of the World Bank and many other political indicators. Therefore, many authors are now referring to Turkey as a case of “rising competitive authoritarianism” (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). Thirdly, Turkey's foreign policy traditionally emphasizes the respect of international norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference (Ulgen, 2012: 45-46), but it has not hesitated to break those norms in its immediate vicinity, such as its interventions in Cyprus, Northern Iraq, and, more recently, Syria (Kardaş, 2021).



Understanding Turkey's approach to democratization in its neighbourhood requires a preliminary assessment of the country's stakes in the region. With the aim of keeping it simple and identify comparable indicators, two tables (one per neighbourhood) summarise a series of indicators that allow us to measure the intensity of Turkey's relations with both neighbourhoods and with specific countries: (1) existence of land borders; (2) shared maritime basins; (3) significance as

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The content of this article was last updated in July 2023.

a trade market (countries accounting for more than 1% of Turkey's exports); (4) energy dependence (countries on the top-5 oil or natural gas suppliers, either in 2020 in 2010 or both, thus taking into consideration the impact of the conflicts initiated in 2011); (4) food security (countries on the top-5 cereals or fertilizers suppliers in 2010 and/or 2020); (5) belonging to regional organizations such as the Council of Europe, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation or the Union for the Mediterranean; (6) the deployment of Turkish troops in that country, be them in multilateral settings (e.g. UN missions) or unilateral or bilateral actions; (7) arms exports (whether the country or rebel groups within the country are listed as Turkey's arms clients according to SIPRI's arm transfer database (2010-2022) and/or has bought Turkish drones); (8) migration (top 10 nationalities among registered residents); (9) cultural links (whether these countries are home to significant Turkic-speaking populations); and (10) formalized cultural and cooperation links, noting whether Turkey has opened offices of its international cooperation agency (TIKA), its linguistic diplomacy institute (Yunus Emre), and its educational networks (Maarif foundation). The tables do not provide the exact data (e.g. the length of the land border or the amount of cereals imports) but whether they meet these criteria) and in cases in which criteria were met but due to political circumstances this is no longer the case (e.g. withdrawal or freezing on specific countries from a regional organization) this is also reflected.

**Table 1: Indicators of intensity of the relationship between Turkey and Southern Neighbourhood partners**

	 MOROCCO	 ALGERIA	 TUNISIA	 LIBYA	 EGYPT	 PALESTINE	 ISRAEL	 LEBANON	 SYRIA	 JORDAN
Land-borders	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Maritime basin	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Top-10 trade partner (2020 and/or 2010)	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Energy dependence (2020 and/or 2010)	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Food dependence 2020 (cereals and fertilisers)	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Formalised regional cooperation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Stop	Yes
Deployment of Turkish troops	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Arms exports	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Stop	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Turkic-speaking minorities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Foreign residents (top 10 nationality 2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
TIKA offices	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Yunus Emre centres	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Maarif foundation	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

**Source:** author's elaboration.

**Table 2: Indicators of intensity of the relationship between Turkey and Eastern Neighbourhood partners**

	 BELARUS	 UKRAINE	 MOLDOVA	 GEORGIA	 ARMENIA	 AZERBAIJAN
Land-borders	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maritime basin	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Top-10 trade partner (2020 and/or 2010)	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Energy dependence (2020 and/or 2010)	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Food dependence 2020 (cereals and fertilisers)	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Formalised regional cooperation	Stop	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Deployment of Turkish troops	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Arms exports	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Turkic-speaking minorities	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Foreign residents (top 10 nationality 2010)	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
TIKA offices	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Yunus Emre centres	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Maarif foundation	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

**Source:** author's elaboration.

After conducting this preliminary screening exercise, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, Turkey is relevant to and impacted by both its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. Secondly, Turkey has particularly dense relationships with three countries in the Eastern neighbourhood (Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Georgia) and five countries in the South (Syria, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt), fulfilling at least five of the identified criteria for measuring the intensity of the relationship. However, it is worth noting that intense relationships do not necessarily indicate cooperative ones, as exemplified by the strained relationship between Turkey and Syria. As a result, Turkey's stakes and capacity to influence political developments may vary depending on the nature of the relationship with each country.

## 1 Discursive and behavioural practices

The impact of Turkey's discourse and behaviours on political developments in both neighbourhoods depends on three factors: (1) the evolution of Turkey's own political landscape and whether the country was in the midst of a democratising trend or rather the opposite; (2) whether those political developments impacted its domestic security or that of Turkic-speaking communities in a particular country and (3) whether those in power or those in opposition had

some ideological connection with the incumbent government in Turkey which, during the period analysed, has always been in the hands of the AKP, Turkey's Justice and Development Party, which defines itself as a conservative political party that has roots and connections with Islamist movements. This section analyses how discourses and behaviours have evolved in the general conceptualization of Turkey's foreign policy, particularly in relation to those countries in which Turkey has more stakes and influence, as indicated in the introduction of this report.

Turkey's political trajectory has greatly influenced its approach towards political developments in the surrounding region. Several events have played a significant role in shaping Turkey's political evolution. In 2002, the AKP's victory in the general elections not only garnered support from its conservative base but also from liberal segments of society. This paved the way for the opening of accession negotiations with the EU in 2005, which was attributed to the progress made by Turkey in the areas of political freedoms, human rights, and minority rights.

Another pivotal moment in Turkey's foreign policy was the appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu as foreign affairs minister in 2009, who introduced the concept of a "new Turkish foreign policy", which included a greater emphasis on soft power assets, among which Turkey's democratic system (Aras, 2009). In fact, the think tank of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argues that Turkey modified the security-freedom balance in its foreign policy not only in the Middle East but in the Balkans too and stated that Turkey's promotion of and support for democracy can be seen in "Turkey's discursive and practical support for the civil uprisings that have led to power shifts in several Middle Eastern countries throughout 2011" (Yeşiltaş and Balcı, 2013: 11).

The notion of the **"Turkish model"** best exemplifies how Turkey's own democratization influenced its discourses and policies in its neighbourhood. The concept of the Turkish model is an old one, initially synonymous with secularism during much of the 20th century (Atunisik, 2005). However, over time, the idea evolved to encompass democratization, given that Turkey represents one of the few examples of democratic governance in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world. This narrative resonated not only in the Middle East but also in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The AKP's victory in the 2002 general election reinforced this narrative of the compatibility between Islam and democracy. Turkey's economic prosperity and the intensification of educational mobility, more flexible visa regimes and the export of Turkey's audio-visual production made possible what was also described as Turkey's demonstrative effect (Kirişçi, 2011).

Turkey's experience with democratization and modernization, which involved a series of reforms in the early 2000s, was being praised as a model for other countries. However, Turkish leaders have been cautious not to appear as imposing its model on others, recognizing that each country has its own unique history, culture, and political context. Instead, they have emphasized the idea of Turkey being a source of inspiration and a partner in supporting reform. An example of this is Erdogan's statement in front of an audience of Turkish journalists stating that "We are not presenting ourselves as a model, maybe we are a source of inspiration or a successful example in some areas" (quoted in Taspınar, 2012).

The Arab uprisings that started in 2010-2011 brought a new dimension to Turkey's democracy promotion and the very idea of the Turkish model and its place in the foreign policy doctrine. As summarised by Şaban Kardaş (2011: 2) "Ankara was initially caught by surprise but gradually moved to embrace the popular movements, coming to champion democratic legitimacy and respect for fundamental human rights as the cornerstones of the new regional order in the Middle

East” adding that it did so “at the risk of breaking ties with leaders with whom it had forged collegial ties”. This required a conceptual reframing Turkey’s foreign policy doctrine from “zero problems with neighbours” to “zero problems with the people that live in the neighbourhood” (Özcan, 2013: 9). The then minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu (2012: 3) argued that “we will extend our assistance to the people who rise up to demand such values [human rights, democracy, good governance, transparency and rule of law] because given our belief in the principles of justice and equality, we are convinced that they also deserve to have the same rights and privileges enjoyed by our own people”.

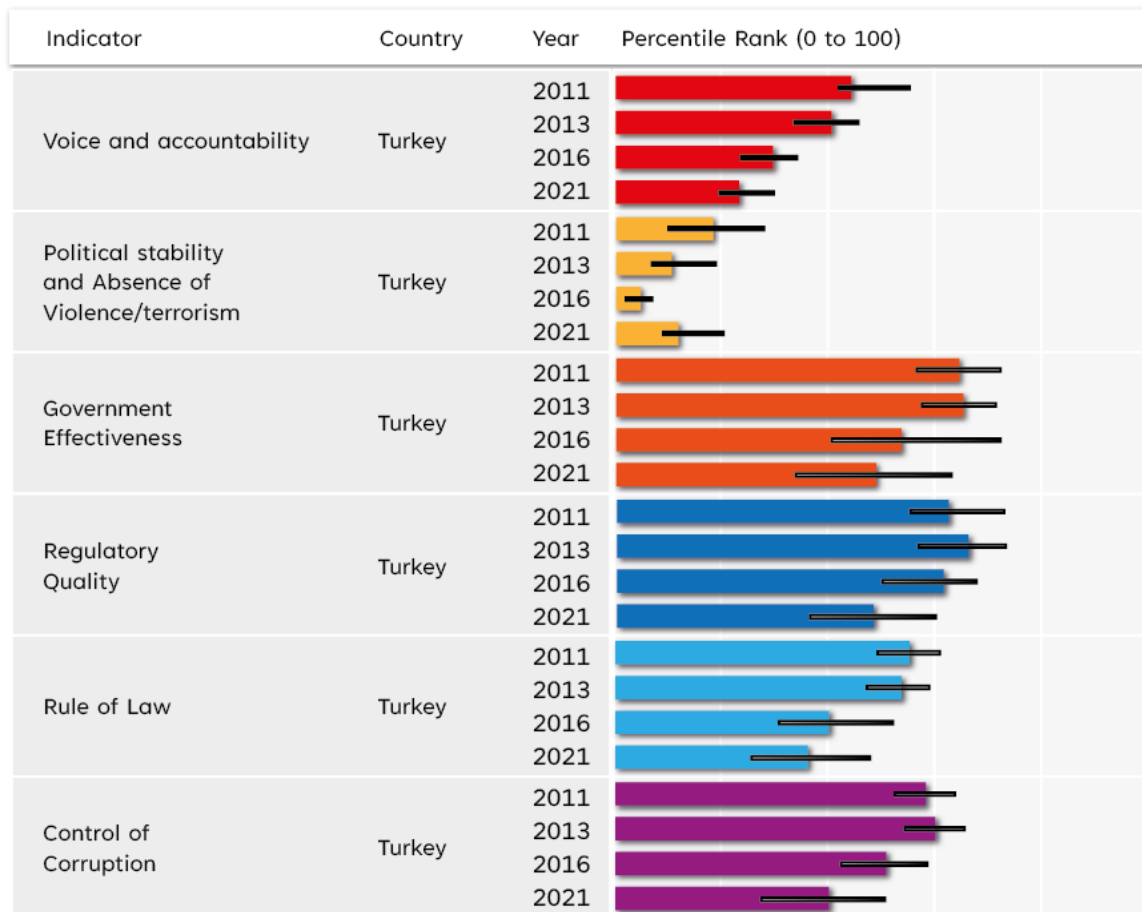
In this new context, the idea of the Turkish model acquired a whole new significance and even different meanings according to the emitters and recipients of such discourse. It could imply a model of civil-military relations (a topic that was at the centre of Egypt’s political debates), the empirical proof of the compatibility of Islam (and/or Islamism) and democracy and an example that economic growth and social welfare could be achieved.

The embrace of the idea of Turkey’s (democratic) model started to wane because of the major obstacles that were hindering democratic transitions in its neighbourhood and, even more importantly, because of Turkey’s regression in political freedoms. The repression against the Gezi Park protests in 2013 is conventionally referred as a turning point and the European Commission reports on Turkey had since then been increasingly concerned with Turkey’s political evolution (European Commission, 2022). The crackdown on protests is also said to have tarnished Erdogan’s image among Arab democrats (Macdonald & Amara, 2013).

Turkey’s democratic regression since 2013, which is well reflected in the decline in many political indicators (see the Worldwide Governance Indicators of the World Bank) and that some authors have referred to as a process of de-democratization (Coşkun, 2022). All this significantly limited Turkey’s capacity, credibility or even willingness to promote democracy beyond its borders and opened a new discussion not on the rise but on the fall of the Turkish model (Torelli, 2018).

Figure 1: Evolution of Turkey’s political indicators





**Source:** Worldwide Governance Indicators (World Bank).

Precisely because Turkey was portrayed as a democratising example or source of inspiration, such a regression would imply a new form of “authoritarian diffusion” which is still to be measured. In fact, SHAPEDM-EU could contribute to investigate whether the Turkish model lost appeal among liberals and pro-democracy activists in the two neighbourhoods, integrating how those groups assess the results for their countries and regions of the 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey.

### 1.1 The Southern Neighbourhood

Even before the Arab uprisings, we could observe Turkey’s distinct approach towards democracy promotion when Islamist parties were competing in elections. The best example is that of the 2006 elections in **Palestine** and the boycott of most Western countries on the Hamas-led government. Soner Cagaptay (2009) reported that the AKP government had called on Western countries to “recognize Hamas as the legitimate government of the Palestinian people” and that AKP officials had labelled Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas the “head of an illegitimate government”.

Despite Palestine’s peculiar case, the AKP’s approach in the pre-2011 democracy promotion was not part of Turkey’s discourses and practices. As summarized by Ziya Öniş (2014: 207) “the AKP’s basic message was that Turkey was willing to develop strong relations with key Middle Eastern states as equal partners on grounds of economic interests and a common cultural heritage. There was no explicit reference to democracy promotion or regime transformation. This approach, which essentially involved an arm’s length relationship, respecting the sovereign space of

domestic politics in existing Arab regimes, allowed the AKP elites to form strong relations with several authoritarian rulers in the region, notably al-Assad in Syria and Qaddafi in Libya”.

Yet. As the Arab region witnessed popular protests and uprisings against authoritarian regimes in 2011, Turkey became more audacious and vocal in expressing its views on which path its neighbours should pursue. The pace, intensity and direction of the messages and the policies significantly varied across countries and in different contexts as exemplified in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt and Syria.

In the case of **Tunisia**, which was the first country to experience massive demonstrations and political change, Turkey’s initial reaction was like the rest of the international community: silence. Only when Ben Ali had left for exile and the country started to evolve towards a democratic transition did Turkey upgraded its presence in and engagement with this North African country. One of the peculiarities is that it did so building on the ideological affinity between the AKP and Tunisia’s Islamist party, Ennahda and Erdogan’s personal friendship with Ennahda’s leader, Rachid Ghannouchi. This contributed to the perception of part of Tunisia’s polarised political class that Turkey’s newfound interest in Tunisia’s democracy was largely driven by ideological considerations (Massy, 2013). The visits of Erdogan to Tunisia were not only those of a head of government and then head of state but also visits by a political leader with a political or partisan agenda which contributed to further polarise Tunisia’s political debates (Soudani, 2017).

The prevalence of the ideological factor has played a significant role in Turkey-Tunisian relations in the last decade. Therefore, despite Turkey’s waning emphasis on democracy in its relations with Arab countries since 2015 and its own democratic backsliding, the defence of Tunisia’s democracy has never disappeared from Turkey’s official discourse. The best example is Turkey’s reaction to Kais Saied decision to suspend and dissolve the parliament, which was qualified by Erdogan as “thought-provoking for the future of Tunisia and is a blow to the will of the Tunisian people” (Hürriyet Daily News, 2022).

In comparison with Turkey’s low-profile during the first anti-regime demonstrations in Tunisia in December 2010 and January 2011, Erdogan’s remarks in support of the demonstrations against the Mubarak regime in **Egypt** were exemplary of Turkey’s shift in tone from stability promoter to an advocate of political change. In a televised speech, Erdogan called on Mubarak to listen to the people’s demands for change and to seek a solution at the ballot box (Reuters, 2011). However, by September 2011, Erdogan witnessed the limits of his political influence. During a visit to Egypt, he stated that he was a non-secular Muslim but was the prime minister of a secular state and added that he hoped there would be a secular state in Egypt; this statement was considered by the Muslim Brotherhood as interference in Egypt’s local affairs (Al Arabiya, 2011). The 2013 coup d’état that ousted the Muslim-Brotherhood president, Mohamed Morsi, was another high in Turkey’s discourse on the protection of democracy and rejection of military coups.

Interestingly, Turkish leaders linked these events in Cairo with the Gezi Park protests, to justify the harsh repression against demonstrators by implying that Istanbul’s protests were not “a sudden burst of anger against Erdogan, but part of a pre-planned coup scheme just like the Tamarod (rebellion) movement in Egypt is seen to be” (Akyol, 2013). Turkey also offered shelter to political opponents to the Al-Sisi regime, and a governmental spokesperson tried to reassure them that they would be treated as refugees (Al Arabiya, 2013). Since summer 2013 political and

diplomatic relations were several strained. Turkey recalled its ambassador in August 2013 and, in a process of diplomatic escalation, in November 2013 Egypt expelled Turkey's ambassador. Turkey's leadership strong ideological preferences as well as the deterioration of relations following the 2013 events significantly reduced the resonance of the "Turkish model" among Egyptian audiences (Aydın-Düzgit and Assem Dandashly, 2022).

As it happened with many other countries with whom Turkey had strained relations in the 2010s, there have been attempts to mend ties with Egypt. This is based on the realisation that previous policies did not produce the expected results and the "notion that the region has entered a post-Arab Spring era, in which the role of political Islam protagonists has significantly decreased" therefore "lessening the impact of the fierce political and ideological conflict between Turkey and the Arab Gulf states and Egypt" (Dalay, 2022: 5). This process gained traction in 2023 and was exemplified with a bilateral meeting between Turkey and Egypt's foreign ministries in Cairo in March. Directly connected with this reconciliation process, Turkey asked Egyptian opposition channels to "tone down criticism of the Egyptian government" (Duvar English, 2023). This was preceded by unconfirmed information on the alleged arrest of Muslim Brotherhood members in Turkey (Abdulrazek, 2022) which, if confirmed, would be indicative of a clear shift towards authoritarian collaboration.

Of all the countries that experienced social and political uprisings in 2011, **Syria** was the one that was more consequential for Turkey, if only because of its 911 km long border. Moreover, despite longstanding tensions, the two countries had made progress in the first decade of the 2000s, coinciding with the succession of Hafez Al Assad by his son, Bashar Al Assad. Syria recognised the border with Turkey, ceased its support to the PKK and many bilateral were signed and a first meeting of First Meeting of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council Between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Republic of Turkey took place in Damascus in December 2009. Turkey's first response when demonstrations erupted was more cautious than in the case of Egypt. Turkey's leaders tried to persuade Syrian president Bashar Al Assad to make some concessions but did not call him to step out from power until Erdogan stated that he had run out of patience in August 2011 (BBC News, 2011). Turkey then began to strengthen its support to opposition movements, for instance hosting the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces created in 2012, in what has been one of the most evident ruptures with Turkey's traditional role as a promoter of the status quo. This coincided with a gradual downgrading of diplomatic relations: Turkey's ambassador in Damascus was recalled in March 2012 – one year after the first protests erupted – and a special envoy for Syria was tasked with this file from Ankara.

Turkey's outlook to the Syrian crisis started to change in 2015. This was due to several factors, among which Turkey's own democratic backsliding but also changes within Syria favouring the prevalence of security concerns have gained precedence over freedom or democracy. As Aleppo fell under the control of President Assad in 2016, the international community mobilized to combat Islamic State organisation (IS), while Syrian-Kurdish militias consolidated their power in the north of the country, Turkey revisited its policy towards Syria. This coinciding with the dismissal of Davutoglu as foreign minister, thus proving "a graceful exit to Erdogan from the Syrian morass" (Tremblay, 2016). Turkey's national security interests have overshadowed any considerations of human rights or democracy in its Syria policy since 2015. This is evident in Turkey's military interventions in northern Syria, which have no regard for democracy promotion, and recent discussions of normalizing relations with the Assad regime (Zaman & Al-Kandj, 2022)

and contacts between high level intelligence and security officials of both countries (Daily Sabah, 2022). Should this trend continue, Turkey could no longer claim to be supporting democracy in Syria and could evolve towards authoritarian collaboration or, depending on Turkey's own political evolution, authoritarian convergence.

## 1.2 The Eastern Neighbourhood

Democracy or democratisation has never been a priority in Turkey's foreign policy discourse towards the EU's **Eastern Neighbourhood** even though Turkey's model of democratisation was once suggested as a possible model for parts of the post-Soviet space during the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks (Walker, 2005). In contrast, Turkey's policy towards Eastern Europe places greater emphasis on other international norms, such as the respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and calls for multilateral cooperation, particularly in the Black Sea region. Moreover, Turkey's emphasis on the compatibility of democracy and Islam does not resonate in non-Muslim countries in Eastern Europe. The cases of Ukraine and Azerbaijan best illustrate Turkey's ambivalent position regarding democracy in this region.

In 2004, Turkey did not play a prominent role during **Ukraine's** Orange Revolution and the political developments in Ukraine did not have a significant impact on the relations between Turkey and Ukraine. Before the uprisings, the two governments had signed a Joint Action Plan that established a framework for cooperation in various fields, and following Viktor Yushchenko's election in 2004, high-level visits took place where Turkey reiterated its support for Ukraine's Western orientation and its aspirations for integration with European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. However, the true test of Turkey-Ukraine relations came after the Euromaidan protests in 2014, which coincided with the Gezi Park protests, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and Moscow's support for secessionist movements in the Donbass region. These events presented a far greater challenge to the relationship between Turkey and Ukraine as Turkey had to harden their stance vis-à-vis Russia.

Yet, Turkey's reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was one of unequivocal condemnation. As a neighbouring country and a member of NATO, Turkey viewed the annexation as a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Somehow, it awoke Turkey's status quo international reflexes. Turkey's principled position was not based or justified in terms of democracy or authoritarianism but on the respect of international norms. The only caveat is that Turkey also expressed concerns with regards to the political and civil rights of the Crimean Tatars, a Muslim and Turkic-speaking minority with historical ties to Turkey and whose members overwhelmingly rejected Russia's annexation (Aydin, 2014). It is also worth noting that the conflict erupted in a moment in which Russia-Turkey relations were strained, mainly since they were supporting opposing sides in Syria.

The relationship between Turkey and Ukraine has remained strong in the wake of Russia's invasion in February 2022, with Turkey continuing to support Ukraine's territorial integrity. While Turkey has not imposed sanctions on Russia, Ukrainian leaders have consistently portrayed Turkey as a friendly country, mainly due to Turkey's principled position in support of Ukraine's sovereignty and the consistent military support, particularly through the sale of drones before and after the 2022 invasion. President Erdogan has been vocal in calling for Russia to withdraw from the lands it has occupied since 2014 and return Crimea to its rightful owners. Interestingly, Turkey's support for Ukraine is not often presented as a clash between democracy and

authoritarianism, unlike the messaging from other Western countries. The case of **Belarus** confirms this trend. Unlike other European countries, Turkey kept silence regarding the massive repression against political opponents following the fraudulent elections of 2021.

The lack of emphasis on democratisation or criticism of authoritarianism is most evident in Turkey's cozy relationship with the government of Ilham Aliyev in **Azerbaijan**, despite the hardening of authoritarianism in the country. This is a case that could easily qualify as authoritarian support. Already in 2003, Turkey provided support to Aliyev during Azerbaijan's political transition, despite criticisms that this could consolidate an anti-democratic trend (Torbakov, 2003). The motto "one nation, two states" symbolizes the closeness of the relationship between the two countries, and Turkey's military and diplomatic support for Azerbaijan's war effort in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war (September-November 2020) further exemplifies this alliance. In fact, this relationship was discursively upgraded from a strategic partnership to a strategic alliance in May 2022 (Hurriyet Daily News, 2022). In this process, not only Azerbaijan looked for Turkey's cooperation, but Ankara also actively sought Baku's cooperation to undermine the reach of Gülenists (the community of followers of the preacher Fethullah Gülen who are accused of having instigated the 2016 coup in Turkey) abroad and the deportation of members of this group (Paksoy, 2018).

Authoritarian collaboration between Turkey and Azerbaijan reached other areas that are relevant for the SHAPEDEM-EU project such as of **gender**. In this area, it is worth signalling that Turkey's decision to withdraw from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, popularly known as Istanbul convention, has been referred as an additional obstacle for Azerbaijan to sign it (Safarova, 2021). On the **energy** front, bilateral cooperation has also increased. Turkey imports energy from Azerbaijan and Turkey aims at placing itself as the transit for Azeri and Turkmen gas to Europe (Soudani, 2017). This goal that has become even more strategic after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the price increase of hydrocarbons in the global markets and the EU's attempts to diversify its suppliers.

## 2 Turkey's toolbox

After analysing the discourses and practices surrounding major political changes in Turkey's neighbouring countries, it is important to highlight the tools that Turkey mobilises to influence political developments in the region. While this summary does not aim to present an exhaustive account of how each tool has been used in every instance, it does provide insight into the various instruments the Turkish government has at its disposal, along with illustrative examples where applicable.

Turkey has a long-standing and robust **diplomatic presence** in both neighbourhoods. In the 1980s, Turkey broadened its diplomatic footprint in the surrounding neighbourhood, which was further reinforced by the fall of the Soviet Union and coincided with political openings in Turkey under Turgut Özal's leadership. Under Ismail Cem's term as foreign affairs minister (1999-2002) and during AKP's governments since 2002, the upscaling of Turkey's diplomatic presence has continued. Nowadays, Turkey has one of the largest networks of embassies and consulates in both neighbourhoods. For instance, Turkey has consulates in non-capital cities such as Odessa (Ukraine), Comrat (Moldova), Ganja and Nakhichevan (Azerbaijan) and Batumi (Georgia). Interestingly Turkey is also the only country to have opened a consulate in Misrata (Libya). This

vast and decentralized diplomatic network in neighbourhood countries provides Turkey with a privileged access to local elites in areas where diplomatic representation is rare.

Turkey has also employed **diplomatic and economic bilateral agreements** as a diplomatic tool to strengthen and diversify its relationships with different governments in the region. As seen in the previous section, Turkey's signing of such an agreement with Ukraine coincided with the political openings following the orange revolution. Political causality is even clearer in the case of Tunisia, with the establishment High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) between Turkey and Tunisia in December 2012 and whose first meeting was held in June 2013 during one of the most critical moments of Tunisia's transition. This move could be interpreted as an action to support that transition or an attempt to support one group (Ennahda and the two secular parties with whom it shared power) in that critical phase. Yet, other agreements took place coinciding with authoritarian regressions as exemplified by the upgrading of Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation since 2018. Therefore, the signature of those agreements is not an indication of the willingness to support democracy or autocracy and should be analysed as the manifestation of evolving and adapting political priorities.

In addition to its bilateral efforts, Turkey has also invested heavily in **multilateral regional frameworks of dialogue and cooperation**. One example is the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), whose headquarters are in Istanbul. Another is the organization of Turkic states, which has served as a platform for cooperation and coordination among Turkish-speaking countries. Turkey has actively participated in other regional fora in which does not have a leading role, but which have a strong political meaning such as its participation in the Council of Europe. Turkey has also played an active role in older organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations, where it has often positioned itself as the voice of larger groups of countries and advocated for broader causes such as the plight of Palestine. Turkey's uses its participation in some of those bodies such as the Council of Europe to reinforce the message that it is a democratic system, and it invests in others to pursue political objectives that are unrelated to democracy or authoritarian support, but which may indirectly and unintentionally affect political developments in third countries that are also part of those regional or multilateral bodies.

Over time, Turkey's **political instruments** have undergone changes to suit its evolving political landscape. The most evident case is the very idea of **Turkish model**, which gained prominence between 2011 and 2013, has also transformed. During the AKP governments, the Turkish model emphasized the compatibility of democracy and Islam. There was a strong political motivation to support democratic transitions in countries where Islamist parties had a chance of heading or participating in the government. Thus, the **AKP's** international connections, both formal and informal, became an instrument of Turkish foreign policy in some countries. **Personal connections** between leaders also played a crucial role, as seen in the Erdogan-Ghannouchi connection in the case of Tunisia. Furthermore, **Erdogan's popularity** was boosted by his vocal support of Palestine and criticism of Israeli politics, thereby strengthening Turkey's political toolbox.

While ideological affinity has played a minor role in the Eastern neighbourhood, it is very relevant in Turkey's relations with the Southern neighbourhood. Some scholars and analysts have suggested that Turkey's foreign policy has adopted a more civilizational framework in the Middle East (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2011), or referred to the idea of a "sunnified" foreign policy to refer to the fact that in Iraq, Syria, and even Lebanon, Turkey has supported Sunni Muslim groups over Shia rivals (Idiz, 2013). Other voices argue that Turkey consciously attempted to avoid the

sectarianisation of its foreign policy (Kösebalan, 2020). Turkey's government and diplomacy has actively engaged on reaching out to religious and sectarian leaders from third countries. This has been coupled with initiatives by governmental agencies such as TİKA and Turkey's state-run Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) to support foreign policy priorities in third countries (Tremblay, 2018). The leader of Diyanet has been actively engaged in backing those foreign policy choices as exemplified by his visit to the reconquered city of Susa in Azerbaijan (Diyanet, 2021). An illustration of TİKA's importance of TİKA within Turkey's foreign policy is that the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hakan Fidan, had served as its director during the first Erdogan government (2003-2007) even if he is best known for his role as the head of the National Intelligence Organization (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MİT).

Turkey has been able to deploy various instruments in the realm of **security**. Its army is among the most robust in the region, and the country has recently emerged as a major player in the arms industry (Bakir, 2021). Despite initial reluctance, Turkey took part in **NATO's** operation in Libya and was also involved, albeit with some disagreements with its partners, in international attempts to eliminate the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Military capabilities have gained traction in recent years, exemplified by Turkey's **unilateral military interventions** in Northern Syria, starting with Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016. Furthermore, Turkey's **drones**, which proved critical in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Libyan civil conflict, are also playing a significant role in Ukraine's resistance to Russia's aggression.

Economic relations tend to be affected by political turbulences, but they are more resilient as evidenced in Turkey-Egypt trade relations (Adly, 2013). Investment, rather than trade, seems to be a more relevant indicator of Turkey's politically motivated economic relationships. Turkish firms, often with strong public support, tend to invest in countries with whom political relations are satisfactory, and may be compromised in the event of a political crisis. Egypt is a prime example of this, as many of the projects that were being discussed in 2013 did not materialize due to the political crisis between the two countries after the July 2013 coup. However, as relations between Turkey and Egypt have recently begun to thaw, Turkish investors are showing a renewed interest in Egypt. In any case, compared to other global and regional actors, such as the Gulf states, which are able and have been willing to bailout friendly governments in the region, Turkey lacks the financial resources necessary to do so and, instead, is actively looking for this financial support and investment from the Gulf.

What makes Turkey a unique case are its considerable **soft power** assets, which extend far beyond the concept of the Turkish model. Notably, the country has made a significant investment in education through the **Maarif Foundation**<sup>2</sup>, which has become increasingly crucial due to the government's efforts to curb the activities of Gülenist groups, particularly in the education sector. Moreover, Turkish governmental agencies like **TİKA** are active in development cooperation, while the **Yunus Emre Institutes** promote linguistic and cultural diplomacy. None of those instruments are specifically designed to support democracy. Unlike other Western countries, Turkey lacks specific instruments within its Ministry of Foreign Affairs or other governmental departments with such a goal. In fact, the unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that specifically focuses on democracy and human rights primarily handles relations with the Council of Europe and is largely occupied reacting to legal cases against Turkey in the European Court of Human Rights.

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<sup>2</sup> The Maarif Foundation is a public foundation which aims at sharing Turkey's experiences in the educational field.

Yet, soft power tools which are abundant within Turkey's diplomatic toolbox serve Turkey to project messages, create networks and diffuse ideas which, depending on the geographical and temporal context, could either support or sustain political change or the maintenance of the status quo.

In a similar vein, mobility is also a crucial element of Turkey's soft power, as its **visa facilities** and **Turkish Airlines'** extensive network of connections have helped to foster people-to-people relations and enhance the country's global image. This accessibility provides Turkey with a distinct advantage in improving international relations and bolstering its reputation, particularly in comparison to countries such as the European Union, which may present more significant barriers to travel.

In addition to analysing Turkey's capabilities and assets, it is crucial to consider the tools that neighbouring countries can utilize to constrain Turkey's actions. In the Middle East and the South Caucasus, countries may form counter-alliances with regional partners such as Russia, Iran, or Gulf countries, and cooperate on intelligence, police, and border management to limit Turkey's influence. Moreover, Turkey's energy dependence makes it vulnerable to the policies of oil and gas suppliers, which could affect the country's foreign policy. For instance, Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan is critical in this regard, as Ankara relies on Baku's energy resources, and Azerbaijan makes more investments in Turkey than the other way around. Thus, these dependencies may explain the nature of this relationship as much as the personal connections between Erdogan and Aliyev or the rhetoric of "one nation, two states".

Finally, Turkey's ability and willingness to use its political toolbox to influence the region can be constrained by the strategies of other regional or global powers, as well as its own vulnerabilities. For example, Russia, a key player in Syria and a long-standing partner in energy, agriculture, and tourism, has many levers to pressure Turkey if it perceives its policies to be against its interests. The 2015 sanctions Russia imposed on Turkey following the downing of a Russian warplane that allegedly entered Turkish airspace from Syria demonstrate this point and can explain Turkey's prudence vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, Turkey's efforts to attract investment and financial support from Russia and the Gulf countries to address its economic and financial challenges may also explain some of its more conciliatory positions in areas where there have been disagreements.

### 3 Conclusion

Assessing Turkey's contribution to supporting democracy or reinforcing authoritarianism is a challenging task as the country's actions have shown a complex mixture of both. Traditional Turkey's reflex of preserving stability did not aim at promoting authoritarianism itself, nor democratisation. Yet, it had effects on both directions depending on the peculiarities of each case: this is particularly visible in the two cases analysed in the Eastern Neighbourhood: Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Moreover, when those conservative reflexes were overcome by Turkey's will to become a regional leader and/or support political and ideological allies in the Middle East, this implied a discursive support to ongoing democratisation processes and vocal condemnation of authoritarian practices. Gradually, as security conditions in Turkey's southern borders deteriorated, democracy support discourses and practices were replaced by security-related priorities (Altunisik, 2020). The failure of Islamist parties to consolidate themselves as central political forces in the transitions initiated in 2011, and the need for pragmatic cooperation with wealthy or influential countries in the region, has led to water down Turkey's democracy support



rhetoric, Tunisia being a lonely exception. It is too early to say, but this shift could eventually lead to forms of authoritarian collaboration.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this case is how changes within Turkey's democratic framework have indirectly affected political developments beyond its borders. When Turkey was engaged in political liberalization, civil oversight of the military, and minority rights (1999-2012), this directly or indirectly empowered advocates for political reform in the neighbourhood. However, Turkey's backsliding on democracy since the 2013 Gezi protests has indirectly and unintentionally weakened the forces of change in neighbouring countries, depriving them of one of the models they used to invoke. As a result, during the last two decades Turkey's influence on political developments in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the MENA has oscillated from democracy to authoritarian diffusion.

This assessment of Turkey's alternate and inconsistent support to authoritarian regressions and democratisation processes in different contexts and times, coinciding with the shrinking space for political dissent in Turkey contributes to the debate on whether countries with serious democratic deficits can promote democratisation. This paradox has previously been researched by authors such as Senem Aydın-Düzgit (2020) and this preliminary assessment of Turkey's political discourses and practices in the two neighbourhoods confirms the idea that this can happen *if and when* opportunities for strategic gains from democratization abroad arise.

The implications of Turkey's complex role in democracy promotion and authoritarian consolidation extend beyond its borders and have important implications for other international actors, such as the European Union (Toygür et al, 2022). Firstly, the EU should acknowledge that Turkey is a relevant partner in both neighbourhoods, that political elites in those countries have a certain opinion on Turkey's role and that the distance between Turkey and the EU in foreign policy matters has increased in the last decade. Secondly, the EU cannot automatically consider Turkey a like-minded partner or a force pursuing contradictory goals, as Turkey's stance towards democracy promotion significantly evolved over time and varies from one country to another. Thirdly, Turkey's case highlights the importance of diffusion, and the EU can therefore learn from it that its own performance in promoting and preserving democracy will have an impact beyond its borders. Fourthly, whether Turkey reverts its democratic regression or reinforces authoritarian trends will have effects beyond its borders. Finally, the mutual dissatisfaction of Turkey and the EU as partners can be reversed, as relations have experienced many ups and downs in the last decades, and both share a neighbourhood. Overall, the complexity of Turkey influence in political developments in the MENA region, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus demonstrates the need for nuanced and context-specific approaches should the EU be willing to forge coalitions to support democracy in the two neighbourhoods.

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