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# EXPRESSION OF (NON-)IDENTIFIED LITHUANIAN-TURKISH INTERESTS

## IN THE COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND TURKEY

Policy Paper

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### *Summary*

- The increasing role of Turkey in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Lithuania's newly actualised interests in the Middle East mean that Ankara's behaviour is becoming an increasingly important factor in the foreign policy of Vilnius.
- Although Turkey's NATO membership, interdependence with the EU, and influence in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries create a continuing need for pragmatic cooperation, Ankara's current strategic orientation conflicts with the long-term interests of both Vilnius and the West at large, namely in maintaining and extending a rules-based multilateral international order.



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- The complex dynamics of confrontation and cooperation that define the relations between the West and Turkey are evident in the East Mediterranean conflict between the two parties, that escalated last summer and was rapidly stabilized by the end of the year.
- The inherent limits to sustainable cooperation between Vilnius and Turkey are well illustrated by Ankara's two-fold relationship with Moscow, in which localised conflicts co-exist with multiple cooperation initiatives enabled by Erdoğan and Putin's personal relations and convergent outlooks on international politics.
- Lithuania should be selective in its cooperation with Turkey and focus on cooperation in institutionalised multilateral formats and on strengthening pro-Western groups in Turkish society.
- It is expedient for Vilnius's decision-makers to look for ways to promote trilateral business cooperation between the EU, Eastern Partnership countries, and Turkey, renew and expand the EU-Turkey migration deal and customs union, and develop EU-Ankara cooperation within the scope of European 'green deal' policy.

## Introduction

The shared neighbourhood between the European Union and Turkey covers a dynamic and strategically important geopolitical space, namely the South Caucasus-Black Sea and East Mediterranean-Middle East regions. In recent years, Ankara's foreign policy in these regions has been particularly active, multifaceted, and often controversial. From the sharp conflict with the EU over the establishment of territorial waters in the East Mediterranean to full support for Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh war or the export of unmanned aircraft to Ukraine, Turkey has become an increasingly important player in a region of great significance to the West, Russia, Iran, and, increasingly, China.

Turkey's growing role in the common EU-Turkey neighbourhood creates the need to assess the interaction of Turkish and Lithuanian inter-

ests in the region. Ankara's policy has become an important factor for Vilnius in pursuit of its foreign policy goals. First, Turkey remains an important NATO ally and an important partner in bilateral economic cooperation with the EU. Second, Turkey plays an increasingly prominent role in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood – the region Lithuania has long-distinguished as its foreign policy. Accordingly, further efforts of Vilnius to support the integration of the Eastern Neighbourhood countries into the Euro-Atlantic area will depend on the goals and activities Turkey pursues in the region. Finally, the hybrid attack that shocked Lithuania this summer, in which the Belarusian regime weaponized irregular migration from the Middle East and Africa, focused Vilnius's attention on the situation in these regions. Accordingly, EU-Turkey cooperation on migration policy issues has become of particular relevance for Lithuania.

This study analyses the development of Vilnius and Ankara's interests in the common EU-Turkey neighbourhood with regard to long-term trends in EU-Turkey relations, policies pursued by Turkey's incumbent president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the interaction of these processes with international policy developments since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The insights presented in the research elaborate the study on Lithuanian-Turkish bilateral security relations published by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre in August 2020 on the possibilities for Vilnius to strengthen the existing and/or to discover new levers of influence over Ankara. The main recommendations of the previous study remain relevant: Lithuania should seek to further deepen bilateral security cooperation on the basis of the concept of a unified NATO Eastern Flank, develop multilateral cooperation formats with the EU Eastern Partnership countries, support deeper EU-Turkey economic cooperation, and emphasise the commitment to the protection of national minorities in bilateral relations. This study updates the analysis that substantiated the previous recommendations by taking into account the changed factual circumstances of Lithuania-Turkey relations since 2020.

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first provides a brief review of the main events, trends, and developments in Turkey's politics in 2020-2021. The second part considers the evolution of Lithuanian and Turkish interests in the common EU-Turkey neighbourhood, i.e. in the South Caucasus-Black Sea and East Mediterranean/Middle East regions. The study concludes with recommendations for decision-maker.

## 1 Intensive years for Turkey: 2020-2021

In recent years, Turkey's relations with the West have been marked by complex dynamics of cooperation and conflicts, changes and continuity. Owing to its size and geographical location, Turkey remains a strategically important member of NATO and a partner of the EU. However, cooperation with the West has been impeded by president Erdogan's transformation of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy since 2016, characterised by the strengthening of Islamic nationalism, increasing restrictions on democratic institutions and human rights, growing activism of Ankara in regional conflicts, and partial disassociation from the West.

New events and processes since 2020 drive the need to further rethink the context of Western-Turkish relations. The most important of these is the global Covid-19 pandemic but multiple other developments – such as Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election or the discovery of natural gas resources in the Mediterranean and Black Seas – also influence the prospects of future cooperation. Meanwhile, the biggest fires in the history of Turkey in the summer of 2021 demonstrate the increasingly prominent impact of climate change in the EU-Turkey neighbourhood. Below, I analyse how these events interact with Turkey's long-term domestic and foreign policy processes.

### 1.1 *The dual Covid-19 crisis has strengthened pre-existing political tensions*

Ankara's efforts to manage the simultaneous health and economic crises brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have not been fully successful – neither policy-wise nor politically. Turkey's future prospects are consequently marked by uncertainty and public confidence in the leadership of Erdoğan and the ruling

Justice and Development Party (AKP) has fallen sharply. As the opposition strengthens, these processes trigger further restrictions on political rights in the country.

#### **The ongoing health crisis:**

- Almost 6.5 million Covid-19 cases and almost 60,000 deaths attributable to the virus have been recorded in Turkey. Although the number of deaths is relatively low, medical experts question the reliability of the data provided by Ankara, as up to 68% of excessive death cases may have been unaccounted for since the outbreak of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>
- The effect of the restrictions on population movements at the very beginning of the pandemic was not short-lived.<sup>2</sup> By December 2020, the number of infection cases in Turkey was estimated at 30,000 per day and the country's hospitals were overcrowded.
- The vaccination campaign, which began in January 2021, was initially faster than in the major Western countries. In March, national restrictions were lifted, including quarantine requirements for foreign tourists. However, by this time the new strains of Covid-19 had already started to spread in Turkey, so the infection rates shot up to record highs: about 55,000 cases and about 350 deaths per day. After a short rebound, today the number of daily new cases again reaches 30,000, and Turkey is experiencing its fourth wave of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Long-term currency crisis:**

- Although Turkey's economic indicators appear to be relatively strong – GDP grew by 1.8% in 2020 and the general public deficit remained relatively small<sup>4</sup> – Ankara's efforts to encourage the economy have aggravated the country's ongoing currency crisis.<sup>5</sup> Since 2017, inflation has exceeded 10% every year, reaching 12% in 2020.<sup>6</sup> Inflation was exacerbated by the lending boom that

began after the Central Bank's decision to decrease the interest rate to 8.25% in hopes of countering the pandemic crisis.

- After relative normalisation at the end of the year, the currency crisis escalated again in March 2021, when Erdoğan fired the Governor of the Central Bank (the third such firing in two years) Naci Ağbal because of the latter's decision to raise interest rates.<sup>7</sup> The decision to replace Ağbal, who resolutely managed the crisis, with an AKP loyalist caused concern among investors, and the lira lost 15% of its value.
- Efforts of private domestic banks to support the value of the lira by selling their foreign exchange reserves worsened the country's economic risk assessment even further.<sup>8</sup> Although the lira appreciated slightly in July 2021, the unpredictable and politicised monetary policy of Ankara suggests that stabilisation will be short-lived.

#### **Declining public support:**

- In general, the public support of the AKP and its supporter Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) today is as low as 45%, i.e. almost 10% lower than during the last election.<sup>9</sup>
- From October 2020 to April 2021, public confidence in the government's handling of the health crisis fell from 60% to 45%.<sup>10</sup> The popular pessimism over the condition of the country's economy, with unemployment and inequality in the country rising for a decade and the lira crisis counting its third year, is confirmed both by large-scale surveys and focus group research.<sup>11</sup>
- The popularity of the AKP was also dented by Erdoğan's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention: according to opinion polls, more than 50% of the Turkish population did not support such a move; organisations defending women's rights and other opposition movements across the country staged civil protests.

### **Growing and increasingly united opposition:**

- As it loses public support, Erdogan's government also faces stronger and more cohesive opposition in domestic politics.
- In recent years, the main opponents of the AKP, the Republican People's Party (CHP), has been joined by several parties led by former members of the AKP elite. In turn, the CHP has successfully transformed from a markedly secular to a more inclusive party with greater tolerance of Islam's role in public life in order to become more attractive for various voters and coalition partners.<sup>12</sup>
- The main opposition party is also effectively using the platform its leaders have after winning the 2019 municipal elections in Turkey's major cities. The leadership of the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul during the pandemic has been favourably compared to the government's handling of the twin health and economic crises, contributing to the growing dissatisfaction with Erdogan's rule.

### **Intensifying political constraints:**

- With increasing pressure from the opposition and declining public support, Erdoğan's regime intensified its efforts to restrict civil liberties and opposition rights.
- In July 2020, Turkey mandated strict requirements for content control on social networking platforms, threatening to ban their activities in case of non-compliance. At the end of the year, Turkey endorsed a new law on the prevention of terrorism, which provides the state with extremely broad powers to control the activities of non-governmental organisations.<sup>13</sup>
- In March 2021, the Turkish Constitutional Court agreed to consider a request to prohibit the activities of the country's main pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP).<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Ömer Faruk Ger-

gerlioğlu, one of the most prominent HDP leaders, was expelled from the parliament and later imprisoned because of a social media post published in 2016. These steps represent a continuation of a broader campaign to remove HDP leaders from office in majority-Kurdish municipalities.

In summary, Ankara faces significant and multifaceted challenges as its attempts to manage the impact of Covid-19 on public health, the country's economy, and the popularity of Erdoğan's regime. Although the president remains the unquestioned leader of the AKP and the strongest politician on the right, Erdoğan's positions in domestic politics have weakened significantly. This can partially account for the intensification of Turkey's regional and foreign policy, analysed in the next part of this chapter.

## **1.2 *Ankara's activism in regional policy***

Turkey's foreign policy in 2020-2021 can be defined by two trends: active if selective public diplomacy campaigns in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and an increasingly involved regional policy. While Ankara's active foreign policy has arguably increased its geopolitical standing, Erdoğan's regime remains vulnerable to the risk of isolation from Western partners. In recent months, Ankara's sensitivity to this risk has created an opening for a new phase of stabilisation of the Turkey-West relations.

### **Pandemic public diplomacy:**

- Ankara has intensified its public diplomacy, including with Western societies. The most vivid example of this trend was Turkey's humanitarian aid to pandemic-stricken countries: from March 2020, disproportionately during the first months of the pandemic, Ankara sent medical equipment to about 70 countries.<sup>15</sup>

- In providing humanitarian aid, Turkey prioritized countries in which it seeks to increase its soft power: the countries of the former Ottoman Empire (excluding Greece and Armenia, with which Turkey is in conflict), the countries of with majority-Turkic populations, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and its key Western European partners.<sup>16</sup> In brief, Turkey sought to seize the crisis opportunity to strengthen or improve its image in the societies of countries important to Ankara's foreign policy.

#### **Increasingly active involvement in regional policy:**

- In 2020–2021, Turkey has been deeply engaged in regional politics, acting in all geographical directions and in all policy areas. In recent years, Turkey has strengthened its support for Libya, continued the occupation of the northern part of Syria, carried out natural gas exploration missions in East Mediterranean, supported Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, deepened bilateral military and industrial relations with Ukraine, promoted cooperation with the Maghreb, and initiated a partial reset of relations with Egypt.<sup>17</sup>
- Such regional activism reflects a broader ambition to consolidate Turkey's status as an independent and autonomous geopolitical player, while partially distancing itself from the institutional constraints that accompany cooperation with the West.
- These initiatives have had mixed consequences. While Ankara's contribution to Azerbaijan's military dominance over Armenia has significantly strengthened Turkey's image as a regional leader; Turkey's involvement in East Mediterranean has prompted a severe conflict with its Western partners, forcing both sides to seek de-escalation by late 2020.

#### **Complicated development of relations with the West**

- The perceived need to stabilise relations with Western partners was further reinforced by Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election. Erdogan's regime received Biden's criticism and his broader ambitions to form a coalition of democracies as a signal that Ankara would face new demands to improve its human rights and rule-of-law record if it seeks constructive cooperation with Washington.
- Just a month after Biden's victory, the United States imposed sanctions on Turkish institutions and officials in charge of defence planning as a penalty for Ankara's decision to acquire Russia's S-400 missile systems in violation of the principles of joint defence within NATO.<sup>18</sup> The S-400 controversy illustrates the main dilemma of Erdoğan's strategic reorientation, i.e., the tension between the pursuit of independent foreign policy and the risk of isolation from its partners. Already back in 2019, Turkey was removed from NATO's F-35 fighter jet programme.
- Accordingly, by the end of 2020/early 2021, Erdoğan expressed his desire to "open a new page" in relations with the West, met with EU ambassadors to Turkey, and initiated high-level meetings in Brussels.<sup>19</sup>

Although a significant reset in Turkey-West relations cannot be expected, the current search for a new "positive agenda" stands as the best opportunity to reach limited but mutually beneficial agreements across various policy areas. This also provides a favourable moment for Lithuania to assess and express its interests regarding the form and the specific objectives of multilateral and bilateral cooperation with Turkey. Given the long-term focus of Vilnius on the EU Eastern Partnership countries and its growing concerns about the situation in the Middle East, the key area of concern in the cooperation agenda between the West and

Turkey should be constructive relations in the common EU-Turkey neighbourhood. The next part of the study examines Lithuanian and Turkish interests in this region, as well as the opportunities for and the main risk factors to further successful cooperation.

## 2 Interests of Vilnius and Ankara in the common EU-Turkey neighbourhood

The common EU-Turkey neighbourhood includes two regions that differ significantly in their geography, history, and geopolitical position. Accordingly, this part of the study is divided into two subsections. The first analyses Vilnius and Ankara's interest in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood and specifically in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. The second subsection examines the conditions and the outlook for Lithuanian-Turkish cooperation in the East Mediterranean/Middle East region.

### 2.1 *Vilnius and Ankara's interests in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood*

Support to the efforts of the EU Eastern Neighbourhood countries to strengthen democratic processes and pursue Euro-Atlantic integration is one of the most prominent priorities in Lithuania's foreign policy. Vilnius consistently supports NATO "open door" and EU enlargement policies, shares expertise concerning legal and institutional reforms, promotes economic cooperation, and supports civil society initiatives; it also prioritized the Eastern Neighbourhood countries when providing humanitarian aid during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>20</sup> Lithuania's active and multifaceted cooperation with the EU Eastern Neighbourhood countries is based importantly on the strategic thinking that their democratisation and Euro-Atlantic

integration would increase Lithuania's national security, open more opportunities for economic cooperation, and strengthen a coalition favourable to Vilnius's interests in Euro-Atlantic structures.

So far, the Euro-Atlantic integration process of the Eastern Neighbourhood countries has been marked by mixed results.<sup>21</sup> Despite the established forms of institutionalised cooperation in that have been enacted during recent decades and the growing volume of trade with the EU, the Western orientation of the Eastern Neighbourhood countries varies widely, with Belarus *de facto* severing its ties with the EU. Further, there is no consensus within the West on the preferred form of long-term relations with the Eastern Neighbourhood: although Lithuania and other Northern-Eastern European countries support the perspective of NATO and EU membership, Western European capitals are extremely cautious about further EU enlargement.

Considering the uncertainty of the long-term relations between the West and Eastern Neighbourhood countries, as well as Lithuania's limited financial and human resources, Vilnius should seek to prioritise areas of political cooperation with the greatest potential impact in each country, taking into account its reform potential.<sup>22</sup> Lithuania also needs to make more active use of the opportunities for cooperation with third countries, where such cooperation may indirectly promote or contribute to the realisation of Vilnius's interests in the region.

In this regard, Turkey can be an important and effective partner to Lithuania, especially given Ankara's growing role in economic and security policy in the region. However, Lithuania must analyse Turkey's activity in the region must to be analysed against the latter's broader foreign policy strategy. Since Turkey's current strategic orientation is not easily compatible with Lithuania's fundamental interests, Vilnius should develop and pursue an agenda of selective cooperation with Ankara.

### Ankara is an important economic partner for the countries of the region

Turkey has been Georgia's largest trading partner (with total bilateral trade amounting to \$1.85 billion in 2019) for multiple years now, and the Turkey-Azerbaijan Free Trade Agreement, signed in September 2020, should increase the bilateral value of trade and investment between the two countries to \$15 billion.<sup>23</sup> Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia also participate in regional infrastructure projects (such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, opened in 2017), have signed visa liberalisation agreements, and promote student exchange. The huge investments in joint infrastructure also make Azerbaijan the largest investor in Turkey. Turkey is Ukraine's third most important export destination; Ankara and Kyiv are in the final stages of negotiations on a free trade agreement, which will double bilateral trade to \$10 billion.<sup>24</sup>

Energy cooperation is a particularly important element considering Turkey's overall economic role in the region. Like Lithuania, Turkey has long been concerned with the problem of energy dependence on Russia. Ankara thus perceives the deepening energy relations with Baku as an opportunity for diversifying its energy sources: since 2020, Azerbaijan is the largest supplier of natural gas to Turkey. Although Turkey's ambitions to become a re-

gional energy hub have so far been more easily realizable in energy transit than in production, in 2020 Ankara discovered natural gas reserves in the Black Sea, estimated at 320 million cubic meters, and presented plans to put it on pump by 2023.<sup>25</sup> International markets have so far been cautious about these prospects, given uncertain operating costs. Therefore, in the short term, the main questions related to Turkey's natural gas production in the shared EU-Turkey neighbourhood will revolve around the production of natural gas in the East Mediterranean (see next section).<sup>26</sup>

### Turkey's growing role in regional security policy

Ankara and Baku have established a deep and comprehensive partnership in defence and security. Turkish and Azerbaijani forces conduct regular joint exercises and share expertise and intelligence; the defence ministers of the two countries have been holding regular meetings for 13 years already.<sup>27</sup> In order to modernise its military and defence systems, Azerbaijan has also been constantly importing arms and other technologies from Turkey. Although Russian technologies still form the basis of Azerbaijani military capabilities, Ankara was Baku's fourth largest trading partner in military capabilities in 2011–2020.<sup>28</sup> Cooperation in security policy reflects a broader political and strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey, based on the so-called "two states, one nation" principle.

**Table No. 1:** Turkey's trade with key partners in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, billion USD (% of total imports/exports)

	Imports		Exports	
	2019	2020	2019	2020
Azerbaijan	2,88 (4,61 %)	0,41 (0,2 %)	1,76 (3,45 %)	2,09 (1,2 %)
Georgia	0,24 (0,39 %)	0,39 (0,17 %)	1,65 (3,23 %)	1,46 (0,86 %)
Ukraine	2,4 (2,29 %)	2,59 (1,3 %)	2,15 (1,15 %)	2,09 (1,2 %)

Sources: tradingeconomics (2020), Observatory of Economic Complexity (2019).



The importance of the Ankara-Baku partnership was particularly evident during the Armenian-Azerbaijani war in Nagorno-Karabakh in the autumn of 2020, which concluded with Baku taking over 80% of the region that had been controlled by Armenia since 1994.<sup>29</sup> During the active phase of the conflict in September-November, Azerbaijan effectively and extensively used unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) purchased from Turkey and relied on Turkish military expertise.<sup>30</sup> In September, exports of Turkish military equipment to Azerbaijan exceeded \$75 million, which is more than three times of those during the whole of 2019.<sup>31</sup> At the outbreak of the conflict, Ankara expressed its unconditional support for Baku and condemned Armenia's actions.<sup>32</sup> According to some analysts, Azerbaijan was also helped by Syrian mercenaries mobilised and coordinated by Ankara.<sup>33</sup>

The close relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey was reaffirmed after the conflict, when Baku invited Ankara to participate in the peacekeeping mission and in the negotiations for a long-term solution to the conflict together with Moscow.<sup>34</sup> Azerbaijan also nominated Turkey as a candidate for the chair of the Minsk Group for solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (in addition to the already involved US, France, and Russia) and supported Ankara's proposals for a new quadrilateral negotiation format between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moscow, and Turkey.<sup>35</sup> In June 2021, Ankara and Baku signed the so-called Shusha Declaration, in which the two capitals committed themselves to further strengthening their defence cooperation, including an agreement to assist each other in the event of aggression from third countries.<sup>36</sup> During the visit to sign the declaration, Erdoğan announced plans to establish a new conflict resolution platform involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia, Russia and Turkey.<sup>37</sup> In brief, Turkey's support for Azerbaijan has been essential to the latter's success during

the conflict, and Baku, in turn, supports Ankara's ambition to establish itself as one of the architects of the region's geopolitical order.

Although Turkey's bilateral relations with other countries in the region cannot compare with the strategic partnership between Baku and Ankara, military cooperation with Kyiv and Tbilisi has also expanded significantly in recent years. Since 2017, Turkey and Georgia have been developing military cooperation in a tripartite format with Azerbaijan and conducting exercises to prepare for the defence of important regional infrastructure.<sup>38</sup> Turkey is also an important supporter of Georgia's project to modernize its military capabilities: in December 2019, the countries signed a Military Financing Cooperation Agreement, under which Ankara undertook to allocate \$15 million for the development of Georgia's defence capabilities.

Cooperation with Kyiv is similarly intensifying. Turkey, together with the United Kingdom and the US, is supporting the reconstruction of the Ukrainian navy.<sup>39</sup> In 2019, Turkey sold six Bayraktar UCAVs (used prominently in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) to Ukraine; Kyiv is in talks to acquire another 48 and plans to keep several of them at a Donbass military base. In 2020, the countries signed an agreement on joint production of turbine engines used in military aviation and are negotiating plans for joint production of military ships and a military transport aircraft. Turkey has also increased the imports of military technology and subsystems (such as helicopter engines) from Ukraine and has begun to integrate them in national defence systems.<sup>40</sup> The new Turkish Akinci UCAV, for example, is the result of military-industrial cooperation between Turkey and Ukraine.<sup>41</sup>

### **Turkey's role in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Ankara's wider strategic orientation**

The intensifying cooperation with Kyiv and Tbilisi is in line with Ankara's long-term foreign policy direction and reflects Erdoğan's growing ambitions in the region. Strong and independent Georgia and Ukraine would help Turkey's goal to reduce Russia's influence in the region and, accordingly, to strengthen Ankara's own role in designing the region's geopolitical order. Territorial integrity and sovereignty are fundamental principles of Turkey's "independent" foreign policy; accordingly, Ankara has never officially recognised the annexation of Crimea and the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (support for Ukraine on Crimea is also attributable to Turkey's focus on the Turkic people, including the Crimean Tatars).<sup>42</sup> Finally, in assessing the increased threat of isolation from the West, Ankara also sees support for Ukraine and Georgia as a way to gain favour among Western partners, especially the US.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, Turkey has advocated for Georgia and Ukraine's membership in NATO and expressed support for the so-called Crimean Platform, initiated by the President of Ukraine and supported by Biden as a mechanism to ensure protection of the rights of Crimean Tatars.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be misguided to overestimate Turkey's willingness to risk a serious and open confrontation with Russia.<sup>45</sup> For example, although Turkey does not recognise the annexation of Crimea, it supports the outcomes of the Minsk process, viewed widely as unfavourable to Ukraine.<sup>46</sup> Ankara's desire to control Moscow's influence in the region should be understood not as a principled stance towards Russia but as the continuation of Turkey's ambition to establish its own influence in the region. It is clear today that both countries are satisfied with bilateral relations in which various cooperation initiatives coex-

ist with persistent localised conflicts. Indeed, this results directly from the fact that playing an active role in the region serves as a key legitimisation narrative for both Erdoğan and Putin's regimes: since both leaders recognise the risks of open confrontation to their shared interest in retaining regional influence, they are generally able to maintain pragmatic cooperation, including through regular personal dialogue.<sup>47</sup>

Turkey's relations with Russia, based on the logic of great power competition, is not the only factor limiting the possibilities for sustainable cooperation with Ankara in the Eastern Partnership region. The close relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan reflect the compatibility of the authoritarian regimes of Erdoğan and İlham Alyev and strengthen their respective power in domestic politics. Accordingly, even if, for example, Ankara's support would help modernise the Azerbaijani military in line with NATO's best practices and lessen Russia's relative influence over the country, it would not help Lithuania's broader interests in supporting democratic reforms in Eastern Partnership countries, would not bring Azerbaijan closer to Euro-Atlantic integration, and would clash with the declared normative commitments of Lithuania's foreign policy. Although Ukraine and Georgia report better results in democracy and corruption indices<sup>48</sup>, the systemic influence of oligarchs in both countries, as well as the politicisation of the principle of the rule-of-law pose the threat that Turkey's growing influence in the region will also exacerbate the democratic backsliding in these countries.

### **Prospects for Lithuanian-Turkish cooperation**

This situation forces us to think about Lithuania's possible expectations regarding Turkey's role in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood accordingly. It is not realistic to expect Ankara to develop a consistent approach to Russia. At the same time, it is not worth believing that Tur-

key's growing influence in the region will help its countries to further disengage from Moscow's influence and reorient to the Western political space. For example, although Turkey and Russia supported different sides during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the victory of Azerbaijan (supported by Ankara) only strengthened Armenia's geopolitical dependence on Moscow.<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that the victory of Nikol Pashinyan in the early elections in Armenia in June promises some stabilisation of relations between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia, with Yerevan seeking to implement necessary economic and institutional reforms; however, despite Pashinyan's relative pro-Western orientation, the need for Armenia to maintain close relations with Russia in the short-term is effectively unquestionable.<sup>50</sup>

When thinking of possible cooperation between Lithuania and Turkey (both in bilateral and multilateral formats), it is necessary to select areas that would have the least risk of strengthening the non-democratic or anti-democratic trends in the region and strengthen or enable Western orientation in the region. The best opportunities for such initiatives can be found through economic cooperation.<sup>51</sup> Turkish businesses operating in international markets are interested in transparent and predictable international trade rules, and are thus inclined to support the country's Western orientation and institutionalised multilateral cooperation more broadly. For this reason, deepening the cooperation between EU and Turkish business associations in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood can create new opportunities for economic growth as well as for the development of a western business culture in the region.

In security policy, Lithuania and Turkey can deepen their relations, share expertise, and identify opportunities for larger-scale cooperation in the defence industry by actively participating in multilateral military cooperation formats with the Eastern Partnership countries.

This year, Lithuania and Turkey jointly participated in the NATO *Agile Spirit 2021* exercise held in Georgia and in the NATO *Sea Breeze 2021* exercise in the Black Sea.<sup>52</sup> Such cooperation within the Alliance should be welcomed and may be complemented by cooperation in smaller-scale formats. As far as possible, it may be productive to intensify ground military exercises in Ukraine (*Three Swords*) and to encourage Turkey's involvement in them.<sup>53</sup> Considering the common interest in defending critical regional infrastructure from attacks by third countries, Lithuania could seek opportunities to share expertise with Turkey in this area. Meanwhile, the possibilities for Lithuania to acquire Turkish UCAVs, recently discussed among the policymakers of the two nations, should be assessed with caution, taking into account the political implications of the possible deal.<sup>54</sup> This is especially relevant as the successful deployment of this technology during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could not necessarily be reproduced in Lithuania, which does not have similar long-term experience of bilateral military cooperation with Turkey.<sup>55</sup>

In sum, three insights can be highlighted regarding the interaction of Lithuanian and Turkish interests in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood. First, although both countries seek to reduce Russia's influence in the countries of the region, the fundamental strategic goals of Vilnius and Ankara are not the same. Due to its normative and interest-based commitments to expanding the institutionalised international order, Lithuania holds that Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine should continue to pursue internal reforms and deepen Euro-Atlantic integration. Meanwhile, Turkey favours a less institutionalised regional order, in which the major powers of the region (Russia, Iran, and possibly China) would resolve emergent conflicts in flexible cooperation formats. Second, despite these differences, Turkey's growing influence in the region can be harnessed to encourage

deeper Euro-Atlantic integration of the Eastern Partnership countries, with Lithuania and its Western partners promoting trilateral economic cooperation and specialised military cooperation programmes. Third, while Turkey has demonstrated a steadily growing attention to the EU Eastern Neighbourhood, the Western community lacks a long-term strategic vision for the region. Accordingly, although cooperation between Turkey and the West in the region should be welcomed, it has not been and is unlikely to be the key driver of EU-Turkey relations or a key factor in determining Turkey's position within NATO. In other words, although it is beneficial for Lithuania to maintain cooperation with Turkey within the formats provided by the EU and NATO, the future relations between Turkey and the West will primarily depend on other items on the common agenda. Perhaps the most important of them – the shared neighbourhood in the East Mediterranean/Middle East region – is discussed in the next part of the study.

## 2.2 *Vilnius and Ankara's interests in the East Mediterranean/Middle East region*

Unlike the EU Eastern Neighbourhood, the East Mediterranean/Middle East region has never been clearly identified as a priority of Lithuanian foreign policy. However, the events in recent months, when the Belarusian regime directed flows of refugees and migrants from the Middle East (mostly from Iraq) to Lithuania seeking to destabilise the country and disrupt the activities of state institutions, have forced Vilnius to become more involved both in bilateral cooperation with the Middle Eastern capitals and in discussions on Middle East policy in EU and NATO formats. At the onset of the crisis, the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised two visits to the Middle East: to Iraq, the country of origin of more than half of all

refugees and migrants (2803 out of 4141<sup>56</sup>) who arrived in Lithuania in recent months, and to Turkey. This visit marks a new stage in Lithuania-Turkey relations, where the issues of migration and Middle East policy are becoming an important part of the general agenda of bilateral cooperation.

Of course, these issues have long been of the highest priority on the cooperation agenda between the West and Turkey, and Ankara was a key partner for the EU in managing migration flows in 2015–2016. Nevertheless, Lithuania has so far been focused on other areas of the common EU Turkey policy agenda: economic cooperation, the renewal of the customs union, visa liberalisation, and the importance of Turkey in the common European security architecture. The subsections below present an overview of the shared and conflicting interests Turkey, Lithuania, and their EU partners have in the Middle East, as well as what positions Vilnius should occupy in the future discussions on EU-Ankara cooperation in this region.

### **EU-Turkey conflict in the East Mediterranean**

The main source of the tension in EU-Turkey relations in recent years has been the situation in the East Mediterranean. Over the last decade, Egypt, Italy, Israel, and Cyprus have discovered new natural gas resources in the region. Ankara always perceived the plans of these states to develop liquefied natural gas projects as a threat to its long-term ambitions to become a regional energy hub and, in 2018, sent its navy to prevent a ship of the Italian-based company *Eni* from drilling for gas in Cypriot territorial waters.<sup>57</sup> In the wake of Turkey's blockade, Italy drew closer to Egypt and Cyprus and set up the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, to which it also invited the French energy giant Total, but not Turkey. Given Paris' support for Turkey's regional rivals Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Marshal Khal-

ifa Haftar's coalition in Libya, which opposed the Turkey-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), Ankara treated the regional gas cooperation format as hostile to its interests.

Tensions over the production of natural gas, intertwined with the logic of regional conflicts, have also renewed long-standing disputes between Greece and Turkey. First, Ankara opposes Greece's attempts to demarcate its territorial waters and airspace on the basis of the total area surrounding the Greek islands, which number more than 3000, with some only a few kilometres off the Turkish coast. Second, further angering Athens, Turkey expresses support for the right of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not recognised by the international community, to produce natural gas in Cypriot territorial waters on an equal footing with the Republic of Cyprus – i.e., Greek Cyprus.<sup>58</sup>

In 2019, Ankara escalated the situation by sending its gas operation mission, accompanied by the Turkish navy, into Cypriot territorial waters. In response, Paris and Nicosia signed an agreement to deploy their warships at a naval base in Mari.<sup>59</sup> In parallel, Turkey signed an agreement on territorial waters with Libya's GNA, under which Turkey's exclusive economic zone in the East Mediterranean was extended to the northern shores of Libya, ignoring important Greek islands, including Crete.<sup>60</sup> The agreement also committed Ankara to support GNA in the conflict with the Libyan National Army (LNA).<sup>61</sup> At the end of 2019, the EU set up a sanctions mechanism intended to limit Turkey's actions in the region.<sup>62</sup> In January 2020, France formally joined the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, stirring up Turkey's discontent. In February, Ankara, in violation of the provisions of the 2016 migration agreement, began sending migrants to the Greek islands.

In August 2020, as a response to Turkey's continued exploration for natural gas in Cypriot territorial waters, Greece and Egypt signed a similar agreement on the boundaries of their exclusive economic zones, greatly restricting Turkey's jurisdiction in the Mediterranean. At the end of the summer, the conflict reached a new point of tension when Turkey sent its navy to the Greek-owned island of Kastelorizo.<sup>63</sup> Tensions in the region were further exacerbated by the controversial and provocative elections, marked by polarising rhetoric, in Turkish Cyprus in the autumn of 2020, perceived by the EU as undermining the search for an agreement on Cyprus.<sup>64</sup>

However, at the end of the year, the EU and Turkey moved towards de-escalation. Although in December 2020 the European Council condemned Turkey's actions and imposed limited sanctions on some Turkish officials,<sup>65</sup> Ankara was also offered a prospect of renewed cooperation were it to discontinue confrontational actions.<sup>66</sup> As Biden's victory in the US raised uncertainty about the future of American-Turkish cooperation and with rapidly growing numbers of Covid-19 cases at home, Turkey accepted the proposal to stabilise the situation. Ankara agreed to hold initial bilateral talks with Greece at the end of January 2021, a high-level meeting with the EU in early April, and negotiations on Cyprus in a UN format in late April. In March, before meeting European leaders, Erdoğan emphasised the importance of a partnership with the EU and presented a "human rights action plan" to improve the protection of democratic and civil rights in Turkey.<sup>67</sup> At the European Council meetings held in March and June, EU leaders welcomed the de-escalation of the conflict, and the EU launched technical cooperation on the Customs Union and the preparations for negotiation on migration, counterterrorism, climate change, and regional policy.<sup>68</sup>

### **The persistent need for cooperation on migration**

The need for effective bilateral cooperation is also driven by the approaching expiration of the 2016 EU-Turkey migration pact. Given the high interdependence on migration issues, both parties have an interest in renewing and expanding the agreement. However, the 2016 agreement has left many on both sides quite dissatisfied. Ankara blames the EU for being slow to fulfil its pledges to allocate funding of 6 billion EUR (only 3.8 billion EUR of the pledged amount was allocated to Turkey in February 2021), which is currently distributed to various organizations working with refugees, but not through direct bilateral intergovernmental channels.<sup>69</sup> Within the EU, the agreement has been criticised for failing to guarantee the rights and protection of refugees. Although the EU agreed to provide additional 3 billion EUR of funding to Turkey in spring 2021, questions remain about the scope of the future agreement, the form of distributing the aid, and additional conditions for Ankara.<sup>70</sup>

Even if the current stabilization has so far produced relatively few tangible results and may be overturned,<sup>71</sup> it is nonetheless welcome from Lithuania's perspective. The main issues of the new "positive agenda" – the agreement on managing migration flows and the renewal of the Customs Union – are in line with Vilnius' interests. Lithuania can constructively contribute to the negotiations of the new EU-Turkey migration pact by highlighting the need to control for the potential weaponization of migration flows by third countries. Because of their regional situation, both Lithuania and Turkey are vulnerable to migrant flows deliberately organised at a state level; Ankara also does not want to become an intermediate stop for illegal migration, since this would damage the country's reputation of stability and reliability.<sup>72</sup> Cooperation in this area would not only reduce the risk of such cases, but also ena-

ble sharing mutually beneficial expertise and deepen relations between the EU and Turkey at the technical level.

### **Need to ensure stability in the Middle East**

Of course, a sustainable solution to the migration crisis in the Middle East requires restoring security and stability in Syria. Turkey is currently hosting 3.6 million refugees from Syria. As dissatisfaction with the burden this places on the economy grows among the Turkish citizens, Ankara is interested in preventing new flows of refugees and migrants.<sup>73</sup> However, the overlapping crises in the region almost inevitably promise new waves of migration from Afghanistan and Lebanon, where about 800,000 refugees from Syria currently reside.<sup>74</sup> In search for a solution, Turkey sought to establish a "safe zone" in northern Syria: by October, Turkey had been unsuccessfully trying to reach an agreement with the US; at the end of the month, Ankara reached an agreement with Moscow and Moscow-backed Damascus government.

It is important to emphasise that Turkish intervention in Syria is motivated not only by migratory pressure, but also by the expansionary ideology of Erdoğan's regime and the need for internal legitimisation. Control of the territories of northern Syria is an integral part of Turkey's narrative as a resurgent regional power. It is thus crucially important for Ankara to ensure that these territories do not fall into the hands of the Kurdish-led Syrian democratic forces.<sup>75</sup> For this reason, at the end of 2019, Ankara arranged a military intervention in Idlib, the last urban area held by Syrian rebels. In early 2020, Turkey exercised a second intervention and reached a cease-fire, but no agreement on the governance of the territory could be reached.<sup>76</sup> Since the EU and the US are committed not to start reconstruction and stabilisation, which would help the Damascus regime, without a

political agreement on the future of Syria, and since Turkey opposes the involvement of the Kurds in multilateral negotiations on a resolution on the Syrian war, reaching a political agreement on Idlib is extremely complicated. However, the EU could include various support programmes in Turkish-controlled northern Syria (excluding Idlib) in the negotiations package for the new migrant pact, ensuring effective monitoring and allocation of funds specifically for civilian and humanitarian projects. If such aid from the EU could reduce the possibility of unsustainable migrant flows to Turkey, Lithuania could consider supporting this position with its allies.<sup>77</sup>

Turkey also conducts regular interventions in northern Iraq, a process driven by Erdogan's effort to eradicate the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the region. Recently, Ankara has concentrated on the Sinjar district, which is the subject of a long-standing dispute between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Iraqi government.<sup>78</sup> The PKK established a military base in Sinjar back in 2015. Since then, and especially in recent years, Turkey has significantly expanded its military presence in Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>79</sup> and regularly organises military raids in Sinjar. At the beginning of 2021, Erdoğan threatened to carry out a full-fledged military intervention.

The cooperation between Vilnius, Brussels, and Baghdad in effort to curtail Minsk's hybrid attack on Lithuania and stop regular flights from Iraq to Belarus this summer demonstrated the importance of an effective central government in Iraq to the entire EU. As such, Lithuania and its Western partners should be particularly sceptical about Turkey's intentions to escalate military operations in northern Iraq (especially in Sinjar, where an agreement with the regional government in October 2020 restored Baghdad's official influence in the province) to prevent them from discrediting the Iraqi government and contributing to

the destabilisation of the situation in the country. While communicating this position in its bilateral relations with Ankara, Vilnius should emphasize the wider importance of stability in Iraq to the shared interests of Turkey and its Western partners.

### **Climate policy as a new cooperation agenda**

Given the fragile progress in resolving the tensions in East Mediterranean and the difficulty in finding sustainable solutions to the persistent migration pressures, the EU-Turkey "positive agenda" needs more items where fruitful cooperation is possible. Climate policy may prove to be one such area, and Lithuania should support deeper cooperation in this field. Following the widespread wildfires that devastated Turkey this summer, the salience of climate change and its consequences is high among Turkish citizens and policymakers. The EU should seize this opportunity and put climate policy prominently on the agenda of its Turkish policy. First, since the EU has already unilaterally committed to the so-called "green transition," it can offer Turkey help and guidance in adapting to the upcoming regulatory and economic changes in the EU single market. Second, the EU could assist Turkey in its goal to reduce energy dependence on Russia by helping Ankara develop and deploy renewable energy infrastructure and technology. This would also reduce the relative importance of natural gas reserves in Turkey's energy policy, which partially accounted for the East Mediterranean conflict in 2020, and thus contribute to the stabilisation of long-term relations. Third, cooperation on climate issues would intensify relations between Lithuanian, EU, and Turkish business and non-governmental organisations – i.e., societal groups that tend to support Turkey's Western orientation. Since this directly contributes to Lithuania's long-term strategic goals vis-à-vis Turkey, Vilnius should support greater EU-Turkey cooperation on cli-

mate policy, either as part of the broader negotiations on the renewal of the Customs Union, or in separate formats.

### 3 Conclusions and recommendations

The preceding analysis of the Lithuania and Turkey's interests in the shared EU-Turkey neighbourhood suggests two overarching conclusions. First, although Turkey's growing role in regions important to Lithuania increases the latter's need for pragmatic relations and offers new opportunities for specific cooperation initiatives, Ankara's current strategic orientation is inconsistent with Vilnius's long-term and fundamental interest in supporting and strengthening the rules-based multilateral order and democratic norms in global politics. Second, and relatedly, although it is expedient for Lithuania to support the de-escalation of tensions between the West and Turkey and seize the opportunities it provides, the relative thaw may be short-lived. Accordingly, Lithuania's agenda of cooperation with Turkey should be selective in the short term and, where possible, focused on initiatives that contribute to the sustainability of cooperation in the long term. Such an agenda can best be developed by working within and through the EU, NATO, and other multilateral formats. More specifically, the following recommendations for Lithuanian decision-makers can be proposed:

1. In the EU Eastern Neighbourhood region, Vilnius could support tripartite cooperation between business associations from the EU, Turkey, and the countries of the Eastern Partnership programme. Turkish business associations that are well acquainted with EU rules and laws could share their expertise and best practices with the institutions and business groups of the Eastern Partnership countries that seek closer regulatory alignment with the EU. The strengthening economic relations would also create more demand and more opportunities for student exchange and joint vocational training programme. Such shifts would further strengthen the need to implement the visa liberalisation agreement between Turkey and the EU, which has been largely stagnant since 2016.<sup>80</sup> Lithuania should mobilise such initiatives through appropriate EU instruments and initiate other multilateral frameworks for sharing expertise with Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey, and the EU representatives.
2. In addition to traditional cooperation in multilateral NATO exercises, Lithuania can encourage Turkey's deeper involvement in institutionalised defence cooperation by initiating targeted multilateral expertise sharing formats related to the protection of regional infrastructure, including cyber infrastructure. More specifically, Lithuania could promote cooperation between the Baltic States and Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, whose trilateral military cooperation focuses specifically on managing threats to regional infrastructure. In pursuing this goal, Lithuania should coordinate closely with Poland, which has significantly deepened its defence and military-industrial cooperation with Turkey in recent years.<sup>81</sup>
3. Lithuania should actively support the renewal of the EU-Turkey migration pact and initiate its amendments to ensure the prevention of weaponization of migrant flows. Considering the mutual interest of the EU and Ankara in preventing migration flows organised by third countries via the Turkish territory, Vilnius may propose a framework on cooperation in identifying entities responsible for organizing migrant flows, in preventing their activities, in ensuring the proper supervision of and assistance to migrants involved in these activities, and in developing orderly repatriation mechanisms.



4. During the negotiations to update the EU-Turkey Customs Union, Lithuania could also focus more attention to the integration of refugees residing in Turkey into the national economy. Further trade liberalization is in line with Lithuania's long-term interest in promoting open economic exchange based on international agreements, while the economic integration of refugees in Turkey is necessary to ensure that Ankara does not lose political will and the ability to fulfil its responsibilities outlined in the EU-Turkey migration pact. Accordingly, Vilnius could support proposals for the establishment of preferential trade conditions in sectors with a high integration of refugees, such as agriculture.<sup>82</sup>
5. Lastly, Lithuania should actively support placing climate policy high on the EU-Turkey cooperation agenda and join specific policy initiatives where possible. More specifically, given Lithuania and Turkey's shared experience and interests in reducing energy dependence on Russia, Vilnius can initiate forums for civil servants, business representatives, and civil society leaders to share expertise on the topics of energy diversification through the development and adoption of renewable energy sources.

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