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Shaping the Future of Multilateralism

Persistent turbulence in
Turkey and the EU calls
for restored cooperation
for a post-pandemic world

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Published by Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, June 2021

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Persistent turbulence in Turkey and the EU calls for restored cooperation for a post-pandemic world

Turkey and multilateral institutions alike, including the European Union, were already struggling with political and economic crises in the years before the pandemic multiplied the sense of catastrophe. As they seek to pull themselves out of the depths of Covid-19, it is time to set aside the divisions that have long stalled progress for all of them, and seek recovery in cooperation and mutual benefit.

Germany and France's April 2019 initiative to create an [Alliance for Multilateralism](#), aimed at stabilizing the rules-based international order, now appears both more relevant than ever and at the same time naïve, considering the repeated failures to cooperate across national boundaries during the Covid-19 crisis. But even as countries were shutting borders, pushing aside global institutions, and pursuing their own nationalistic solutions, the striking lack of competence in their go-it-alone approaches made the coronavirus much deadlier and more destructive than it might have been otherwise.

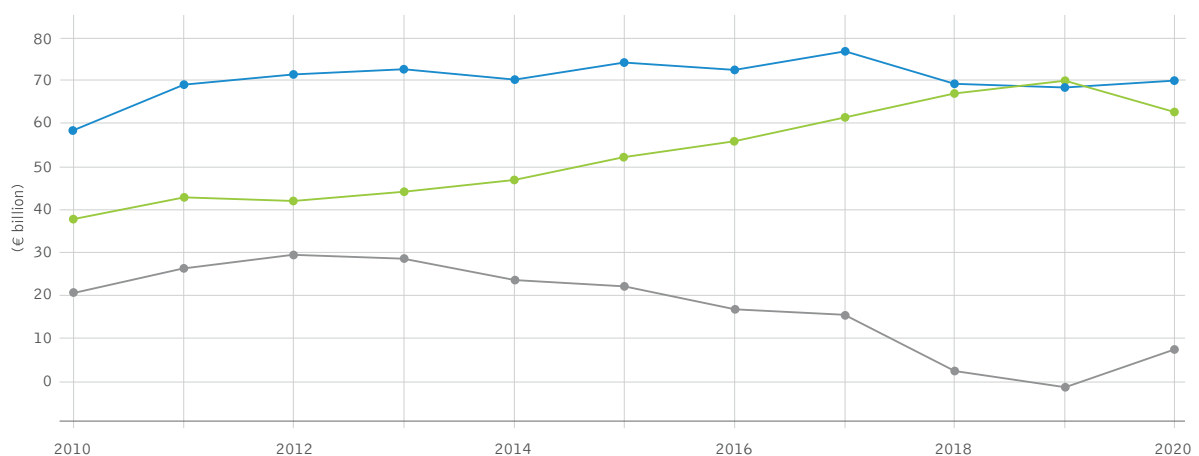
The catapulting of the World Health Organization (WHO) onto center stage by the global spread of the virus – exactly what this 70-plus-year-old structure was built for – demonstrated the importance of such multilateral institutions. But the political attacks that followed immediately from the Trump administration and other governments also exposed the inherent weaknesses of these institutions, namely their lack of authority and their vulnerability to politicization. Yet, even as short-sighted and populist national governments dismissed global institutions, the nationalists faltered in devising effective responses of their own. Even the astonishing speed at which governments and companies such as Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Sinovac mobilized to develop vaccines wasn't matched by systems to rapidly manufacture and distribute the shots. And [vaccine hoarding](#) by rich countries (some accumulating three times the amount their people would need) exposed the painfully deep inequalities across the globe.

Certainly, the depth of this global crisis and the failed responses worldwide were mainly due to the severity and scale of the pandemic. But it also was partly due to the crisis environment that already had characterized the pre-pandemic world. In particular, the Trump administration's aggressive stance towards a variety of global issues and challenges further damaged already crisis-riddled international institutions.¹ At the same

1 The extensive list of such policies included the renegotiation of NAFTA, the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), the U.S.-China trade war, the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord (one of the key actions triggering the Franco-German Alliance for Multilateralism), the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and reimposition of sanctions on Iran, the failed North Korea initiative, the rhetorical and diplomatic attacks on NATO, unilateral foreign policy action in the Middle East upturning previously negotiated UN positions, severe restrictions on immigration, and finally attempting to leave the WHO during the pandemic.

time, China, although a rising leader in the international arena, was adopting vague and inconsistent positions in many realms.² As a result, the legitimacy, role, and functioning of major multilateral institutions – from the EU in the refugee and Brexit crises to the WHO in the pandemic – came under severe question, leaving them unable to act effectively to stem various and proliferating forms of nationalism and populism.

Turkey also had long been in political and economic turmoil before the pandemic, which then deepened the crisis, including via [repeated plunges](#) in the value of the lira. Even before the onslaught of the coronavirus, Turkey’s deteriorating relations with the EU and the United States exacerbated domestic political tensions and damaged the economy. Resistance within the EU to prospective Turkish membership, disputes over Cyprus and, more recently, oil drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, and clashes over human rights and refugee flows all have eroded Turkey-EU relations.



EU-Turkey trade increased despite political volatility
EU trade in goods with Turkey, 2010 to 2020
 Source: Eurostat (online data code: ext_st_eu27_2020site and DS-018995)

As for Turkey’s ties with the United States, the Halkbank case, in which the United States alleged Turkey deliberately violated sanctions against Iran, and the rift over Turkey’s purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system rather than U.S.- and NATO-compatible systems (a dispute that threatened to trigger severe sanctions against Turkey) worsened the country’s already uncertain political and economic environment. Even though the [U.S. sanctions](#) imposed in December 2020 over the S-400s were lighter than Turkey had feared, the long-standing threat of such penalties had put extreme pressure on Turkey’s economy. Further unilateral decisions by the incoming Biden administration such as removing Turkey from the [F-35 program](#) indicate a continuity of intense relations in the foreseeable future.

2 One typical example was China’s policy towards the African continent. It [overtook the United States](#) in 2009 as the continent’s largest trading partner and offered massive [infrastructure lending](#). However, that high-level of commitment has cooled off as China aims to curtail its losses in the continent and disengage from the debt-financing initiative it [hitherto adopted](#).

Turkey's current trajectory has particular ramifications for its youth. In addition to unemployment, their futures are threatened by the deterioration in political freedoms, including increasing suppression of freedom of speech. As this spring's Boğaziçi University [protests showed](#), persistent attacks on democratic principles – President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan even went so far as to call the protesting students “terrorists” – create added motivation for youth emigration.

The remedy for this critical demographic – as for Turkey overall – is more, not less, integration into the world economy, particularly with the EU. Turkey enjoys a more balanced trade partnership with the EU than with China, and the EU focuses more on business sectors requiring skilled rather than low-skilled or unskilled labor. The Turkish government's current approach may be lacking the basic elements of democracy, but it does not have the luxury of adopting a Turkey-First mantra.

Improved relations with the EU as well as other international actors – and there is some indication Turkey is interested in improving ties – can play a key role in reversing the country's debilitating trends. At the same time, Turkey's inherent strengths in its size, its historical and geopolitical role in the region and beyond, its burgeoning and talented youth, as well as its recently highly damaged but longstanding institutional structures and experience have huge potential to enrich a more functional multilateral system.

Turkey and multilateralism: Whose rejection came first?

Turkey's discomfort with what it has often seen as inequities within multilateral institutions arguably goes back in part to the post-World War II creation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) at Bretton Woods. The institutions have always been [dominated](#) by the United States and a few other major powers such as the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, and France. “Third World countries” of the time (the nomenclature has since changed) essentially felt blamed for their own underdevelopment and were given recipes to “catch up” with the developed world.

Those flawed perspectives not surprisingly led to a number of crises, most importantly the debt crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which shaped the post-1980 politics of what is now known as the “Global South.” It was then that the World Bank and the IMF imposed their much-reviled “structural adjustment programs” – requirements to open markets and slash government expenses – to lower developing nations' debts with deep – and immensely damaging – spending cuts in areas such as education and social services. Those debilitating programs shaped the politics and economies of the Global South in such ways as to deepen the inequalities between the so-called developed and developing worlds.

As Turkey finally emerged from its debt crisis, it experienced a period of economic growth after 2001, along with much of the rest of the world. Favorable global economic conditions were accompanied by cheap international credit that flew into Turkey in the form of Foreign Direct Investment to fuel a construction- and housing boom. Turkey's manufacturing infrastructure and capacity also improved significantly in this period, though it lagged the real estate sector both in size and, more importantly, in political importance.

But the global financial meltdown of 2007 and 2008 threw the whole model into question, and the expansion first slowed down and eventually completely stalled in the second half of the 2010s. Because economic growth prior to 2008 failed to create employment necessary to distribute wealth among working and lower classes, the deterioration after the 2008 financial crisis had a greater impact on the lower and working classes.

The political dynamics underlying economic decision-making were evident as, for example, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan embraced real estate expansion, massive infrastructure projects, and the previously marginal mortgage-credit market to cement his master-builder image. He also removed restrictions on foreign nationals' legal right to purchase real estate in Turkey, effectively opening the market to international investors. After the 2008 crisis, he assumed more control over housing policy, but continued to promote its central role in economic development.

The collapse of the private housing market as well as the stalling of publicly funded large-scale infrastructure projects threw Turkey into a precarious position before the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, Turkey faced a number of new and acute challenges starting in the 2010s, including escalating human rights abuses and authoritarianism; a failed coup-attempt in 2016; centralization of governance following constitutional changes in 2017; declines in economic competitiveness; the resumption of the Kurdish conflict; and the rise of other regional conflicts in Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, Cyprus, and Azerbaijan. Many of these conflagrations also spun off a massive refugee influx to Turkey, mainly from Syria.

Severe diplomatic rifts with the United States and the EU also hurt Turkey's position in multilateral institutions. In addition to the two-year detention of the American pastor, Rev. Andrew Brunson, the S-400 and Halkbank issues were the top causes of ruptures with the United States and the EU pre-pandemic. And both reflected Turkey's rejection of multilateral institutions and mechanisms, even those of which it was a member – NATO in the case of the missiles, and the United Nations in the case of the sanctions against its close trading neighbor, Iran, that were at the heart of the bank crisis.

With the pandemic adding fuel to Turkey's political and economic fires, the economy suffered repeated shocks. The Turkish Central Bank failed to protect the value of the Turkish Lira vis-à-vis international currencies. The accelerating economic slide, resulting in last year's massive devaluation of the Turkish lira, led to the November 2020 sacking of the head of the Central Bank (the replacement himself was sacked after only four months in the post) and the minister of Treasury and Finance.

The economic chaos further eroded the Turkish public's trust in domestic and international organizations, as citizens struggled to understand what was happening and why, as well as the role, if any, of foreign governments or international institutions that had influence over or impact on Turkey's economy. This drop in public trust was partially due to the persistent coverage of the pro-Erdoğan media, which continually repeated the false notion that fluctuations in the Turkish economy were due to constant foreign intervention (colloquially and vaguely dubbed the "interest lobby").³

The plethora of pre-pandemic issues would have been daunting for any country, regardless of its might – as was evident in the struggles of the world's biggest powers. When the pandemic hit, these factors steered and limited Turkey's response. Highly dependent on economic activity for revenue, Turkey prioritized the economy over public health. Its response was ad hoc, pursuing measures that were demographically selective, inconsistent, and generally ineffective. Turkey ultimately logged some of the world's highest daily statistics for infections and deaths in late 2020,⁴ after countries such as the United States, Brazil, India, and Russia, as the second wave decimated Turkish society and its proud healthcare system.

The current trajectory of Turkey's international relations is not much more favorable. In addition to the December U.S. sanctions over the S-400s, EU leaders at a [summit](#) the same month agreed to draft limited sanctions against Turkey over the Eastern Mediterranean drilling dispute. Even though they postponed a decision to implement the sanctions until at least March, their following meeting,⁵ relations between Turkey and its largest trading partner, the EU,⁶ continue to be tense.

- 3** Sahap Kavcıoğlu, who was a columnist at the powerful daily *Yeni Şafak* before he was appointed as the current governor of the Central Bank in March 2021, was the most vocal defender of [this position](#).
- 4** Initial figures coming from Turkey at the outset of the pandemic were quite positive, [seeming](#) to show Turkey as among the least affected by the pandemic. International agencies and institutions viewed the statistics with extreme caution, though, and by [October 2020](#), the Ministry of Health acknowledged irregularities in classification of cases. According to the Johns Hopkins University [tracker](#) Turkey was 5th highest in the world in total infections, with more than 4.8 million confirmed cases, and 19th in deaths at more than 40,000 (accessed May 2, 2021).
- 5** The tone of the [report](#) published at the end of the March summit was significantly less contentious. Following a de-escalation initiative coming from all parties in the Eastern Mediterranean, the EU suggested the strengthening of ties, appreciated Turkey's role in the refugee crisis, promised close monitoring of the tension in the region and left the issue to be discussed again in the following June summit.
- 6** In 2019, the EU was Turkey's largest [trading partner](#) (accounting for 42.4 percent of Turkey's exports in value) and Turkey was the EU's fifth-largest trading partner, quite a feat considering the bloc's size. A trading volume of €40 billion puts the EU at the heart of Turkey's international trade policy. Additionally, Turkey's trade relationship with the EU is more balanced than that with [other top trading partners](#) such as Iraq, the United States, Israel, India and Russia.

Isolation and economic woes hit Turkey's next generation

Such deep structural problems hit Turkey's youth particularly hard. The official youth unemployment rate stood at 26.9 percent as of [January 2020](#). Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows the Turkish population between the ages of 15 and 29 who are not either employed or in education or training programs is 28.8 percent. This is by far the [highest](#) among OECD countries, where the average runs 12.8 percent. This statistic is particularly striking considering the higher-education capacity of Turkey has grown exponentially in the past 20 years. During that time, Turkey's total population increased about 30 percent to 84 million, while enrollment in higher education soared fivefold to 7.94 million.⁷

And yet, Turkey's economic structure provides few opportunities for this critical demographic, despite the nationwide push to increase youth employability through education. While the quality of education in the new institutions is widely questioned, the most acute issue is the mismatch between university graduates' skill sets and expectations on the one hand and labor market realities and requirements on the other.

Turkey's high-technology and other high-skill sectors have failed to blossom in recent years; value-added jobs account for only a fraction of the national economy. Finally, the influx of refugee labor⁸ to the low-skill sectors increases the difficulty of addressing that end of the labor market. The length of the Covid-19 crisis is putting even more pressure on the already vulnerable economy and the country's youth. While trust in national and international institutions is low, Turkey will most definitely need the help of international institutions to jump start its economy and begin to remedy its deep-seated problems when the pandemic ends.

7 Turkey's Council of Higher Education (CoHE) runs a database accessible at all times to track basic demographic information of the Turkish higher education system. These figures are assembled by the author using this [database](#).

8 As of March 2020, the total number of registered refugees was around 3.6 million. According to an [ILO report](#), in 2017 940,921 Syrians were in the workforce in Turkey, however 91.6% of this workforce was in the informal sector, mostly composed of low skilled work.

Hybrid multilateralism or the persistence of nationalism?

Interestingly, despite the EU movement in December toward sanctions on Turkey over the Eastern Mediterranean dispute, Erdoğan just days later expressed hope that the two sides could “[turn a new page.](#)” The comments were published just after a radical reorganization of the Turkish Central Bank and the Ministry of Treasury and Finance, and possibly constitute an acknowledgement of reality. Erdoğan, in the same speech, also called for legal reform that would address recent systemic injustices that disadvantage the majority of people in Turkey, though the extent or nature such a “reform” wasn’t clear. His statements also tend to be met with skepticism from many within and outside Turkey, considering the extreme centralization of power in the executive that resulted from the 2017 referendum. The lack of any convincing action to promote this reform other than establishing inter-ministry boards to oversee progress only adds to this skepticism, and as of April 2021, simply prompted further [criticism from the opposition.](#)

Such questions about the longer-term sustainability of Turkey’s institutional structure and whether it can adapt to a post-pandemic world are compounded by equally serious debate over what form the international order itself might take. The rise of non-Western powers led by China is posing a severe challenge to the existing structures. Ziya Öniş of Koç University in Istanbul and Mustafa Kutlay of City University of London call this new environment the [age of hybridity](#), in which “no overriding set of paradigms dominates global governance” and instead, systems are “fragmented, normatively inconsistent, and institutionally incoherent.” The U.S. National Intelligence Council made a similar point earlier this year in its quadrennial “[Global Trends 2040](#)” [report](#), saying, “No single state is likely to be positioned to dominate across all regions or domains, opening the door for a broader range of actors to advance their interests.” (page 90)

Such fluid conditions might provide an opening for countries like Turkey to have more influence, as they negotiate relations and pursue their interests with a range of global powers – the United States and the EU, but also China, for example. Turkey certainly needs to be part of any international order, but the international institutions need Turkey as well. Turkey will need more foreign direct investment to not only sustain its existing economic structure but also upgrade its technological infrastructure. This was already acknowledged prior to the pandemic, and some [initiatives](#) were put in place to both reduce imports of high-technology products and boost local production capacities. A 2020 [World Bank report](#) on the Covid-19 pandemic’s impact on the economy shows that Turkey’s high-tech sectors with the highest potential for employees to work remotely (information and communication technology, finance, and health) do not comprise more than 10 percent of total employment. Low-productivity and low-wage sectors, on the other hand, are responsible for more than half of total employment.

At the same time, Turkey's size and geopolitical positioning makes it an attractive market and a crucial political player. Turkey could use such dynamics to improve economic relations with the EU by also boosting investment in fields attractive to the bloc, such as green energy, agriculture, and manufacturing.

At the same time, Turkey will undoubtedly increase economic ties with China, which is already a major trading partner, though currently in a highly lopsided way, with a staggering \$17 billion-dollar trade deficit (\$2.9 billion of exports vs. \$20.7 billion of imports). With expanded trade will come deepening political relations (though I do not anticipate Turkey becoming a client state of China, as political sociologist Ayça Alemdaroğlu and political science professor Sultan Tepe project in an [article](#) in Foreign Policy magazine). This heightened engagement should not be met with suspicion by the EU or the U.S. On the contrary, it should be embraced as a new kind of pluralism, in which Turkey might play an important bridging role. That seems to be a desired path suggested by [mainstream media](#) favoring the Erdoğan administration, though this position seems exaggerated given the limited potential of the relations with China to replace those with the EU and the U.S..

Despite the significant and increasing depth of relations between Turkey and China, leaders in Beijing have demonstrated little apparent political strategy to frame their developing ties with the Mediterranean giant. Even though Turkey committed to China's Sinovac coronavirus vaccine early on, problems in delivery (of the [50 million promised](#), Turkey had only received [26 million shots](#) as of early May of 2021) and Turkey's later search for alternative sources of vaccine only [hurt](#) China's standing in Turkey's domestic politics. The political criticism of China is even more surprising considering Turkey's dependence on China for large [syndicated loans](#) used to support export financing. The China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) also supported Turkey financially in the economic fallout from the [pandemic](#).

Turkey's ability to work with the leadership in Beijing while keeping them at somewhat of an arm's length will leave room for Erdoğan to negotiate a rekindling of ties with [the EU](#) and [the U.S.](#) The EU, in particular, must find ways to improve its dialogue with Turkey instead of resorting so frequently to sanctions threats. The European refugee crisis proved Turkey's importance to the broader region and even to the stability of the European Union. It also established Turkey's capacity to respond to major cross-border emergencies.

However, Turkey should not be seen simply as a border buffer zone either. Expanding already deep economic relations could be a first step for mutual benefit. Investing in the green economy would seem to be a no-brainer, as the EU implements its ambitious [European Green Deal](#). Policy areas designated by this [deal](#) – increasing biodiversity, transforming agriculture with more sustainable food systems, renovating energy infrastructure, reimagining mobility, and eliminating pollution -- are obvious areas of cooperation. There is already some excitement in Turkey regarding the impact of this plan on [Turkey's exports](#), although the timeline and extent of this potential relationship remains

unclear. In any case, the existing EU-Turkey Customs Union, which dates to 1995, is extremely limited and a relic of a previous world order.

The post-pandemic world requires a radical rethinking of Turkey's relations with multilateral institutions, most especially with the EU. In fact, Turkey's EU accession process – it has been a candidate since 1999 and too long stalled – must be rekindled with some horizon in sight for full membership. To be sure, this depends on achieving reconciliation on a wide variety of issues, with differences over rule of law and human rights the largest items on agenda.

Turkey's political and economic elevation to EU standards would enable both sides to better situate themselves in the emerging age of hybrid multilateralism. In an alternative scenario, where the logic of the old-world triumphs, Turkey will remain as a country of persistent political crisis, with bilateral and transient partnerships saving the day but not addressing any of its long-term issues. Just as such a loss would not be limited to Turkey alone, likewise the benefits of partnership and alliances would be legion.

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Imprint

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Place of publication: <https://us.boell.org/> | <http://eu.boell.org>

Release date: May 2021

Editor: Viola Gienger, Washington, DC

Illustrations: Pia Danner, p*zwe, Hannover

Layout: Micheline Gutman, Brussels

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