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## Original scientific article

### THE CRISIS OF CONDITIONALITY AND DEPRIVATION OF SUPPORT IN ENLARGEMENT POLICY: INSIGHTS FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION -TÜRKİYE RELATIONS

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#### ABSTRACT:

This study argues that Türkiye's accession negotiations with the European Union (EU) have been subject to a distinct conditionality framework compared with those of other candidate countries. A novel conditionality model emerges in Türkiye's accession process, characterised by the systematic withholding of political, financial, and institutional support, constituting *deprivation-of-sup-*

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port. This article conceptualises the term as the fourth model of conditionality. Deprivation-of-support in enlargement refers to conditionality without commitment, presence without benefit, and candidacy without progress. Crucially, the continued nominal maintenance of the accession framework, despite its practical emptying, constitutes the defining characteristic of this fourth conditionality strategy. Evidence drawn from the post-2016 period — including Türkiye's exclusion from visa liberalisation, its marginalisation in the F-35 programme, the asymmetric burden of managing Syrian refugees, and its progressive isolation from the Western Balkans enlargement wave. The study further argues that the deprivation-of-support model, when set against the EU's permissive engagement with stabilitocratic regimes in the Western Balkans, in which democratic deficits are tolerated in exchange for geopolitical loyalty. It reveals a significant asymmetry in the EU's conditionality practice and offers a normative template for the consistent application of negative leverage across the enlargement framework.

**KEYWORDS:**

Türkiye; European Union; Enlargement; Accession negotiations; Deprivation of support; Conditionality

**SAŽETAK:**

U članku se objašnjava teza da su pristupni pregovori Republike Turske sa Evropskom unijom (EU) bili podvrgnuti posebnom okviru uslovljavanja u poređenju sa drugim državama kandidatima. U procesu pristupanja Turske oblikuje se novi model uslovljavanja, koji karakteriše sistematsko uskraćivanje političke, finansijske i institucionalne podrške, odnosno lišavanje podrške. Ovaj članak konceptualizuje navedeni pojam kao četvrti model uslovljavanja. Lišavanje podrške u kontekstu proširenja podrazumijeva uslovljavanje bez obaveze, prisustvo bez koristi i kandidatski status bez napretka. Ključno je da upravo kontinuirano nominalno održavanje pristupnog okvira, uprkos njegovom praktičnom pražnjenju od sadržaja, predstavlja osnovno obilježje ove četvrte strategije uslovljavanja. Dokazi iz perioda nakon 2016. godine — uključujući isključenje Turske iz procesa vizne liberalizacije, njenu marginalizaciju u programu F-35, asimetričan teret upravljanja sirijskim izbjeglicama, kao i njenu postepenu izolaciju u odnosu na talas proširenja na Zapadni Balkan — ukazuju na postojanje takvog obrasca. Studija dalje tvrdi da model lišavanja podrške, posmatran u odnosu na permisivni angažman EU prema stabilitokratskim režimima na Zapadnom Balkanu, u okviru kojeg se demokratski deficiti tolerišu u zamjenu za geopolitičku lojalnost, otkriva značajnu asimetriju u praksi uslovljavanja Evropske unije i nudi normativni obrazac za dosljednu primjenu negativnog uticaja u okviru politike proširenja.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:**

Turska; Evropska unija; Proširenje; Pristupni pregovori Lišavanje podrške; Uslovljavanje ;

## INTRODUCTION

The European Economic Community (EEC), having successfully implemented the Treaty of Rome in the 1960s, faced a pivotal decision in 1962 when Spain applied for membership. The Birkelbach Report of 1961 initially introduced the principle of conditionality.<sup>1</sup> This report pointed out the importance of the European Convention on Human Rights (1950). It established adherence to the Convention as a prerequisite for aspiring member states. Consequently, junta in Spain and Salazar's authoritarian regime in Portugal...had their applications rejected despite Germany's full support.<sup>2</sup> This crucial juncture marked the inception of what would subsequently be referred to as conditionality, requiring candidate states to align their standards with those of the EU for membership.

Conditionality developed via the successive enlargements of 1973, 1981, and 1986. For example, in the 1981 and 1986 enlargements, the Community mandated solely independent elections and a democratic constitution. It gained clarity both in its textual articulation and in its implementation instruments, notably during the accession processes of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries following the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc.<sup>3</sup> In 1993, the EU set out the conditions and principles of membership, known as the Copenhagen criteria.<sup>4</sup> Over time, conditionality extended beyond candidate countries to encompass relations with third countries, as evident in initiatives such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and as a mechanism to monitor member states' adherence to EU norms and fiscal regulations, formalised into regulation in 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Türkiye is the most complex scenario and has incited the greatest debate over the EU's enlargement policy and conditionality framework. The literature analyses Türkiye–EU relations by using several paradigms. The membership/accession framework, based on Copenhagen criteria, emphasised democratisation, rule of law, and institutional conditionality, shaping reform expectations.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent studies argue that relations have become more transactional/pragmatic,<sup>7</sup> with short-term negotiations and interest-based exchanges, as shown by ad hoc cooperation during crises such as the migration crisis.<sup>8</sup> The strategic

partnership approach, a third strand, views the relations through geopolitical alignment,<sup>9</sup> security and strategic calculations,<sup>10</sup> rather than membership conditionality. However, the EU's partnership discourse and Türkiye's pursuit of strategic autonomy present tension.<sup>11</sup> Literature often discusses the conflict between normative values and material interests.<sup>12</sup> Finally, recent studies suggest new and contentious paradigms for these interactions. De-Europeanization<sup>13</sup> politicised partnership models,<sup>14</sup> and Türkiye's search for non-Western orientations<sup>15</sup> could rupture and redefine relations. Therefore, the literature argues that Türkiye–EU relations should be regarded as a competing and periodically shifting frameworks rather than a linear process.

Given the research focus on candidate countries, the assessment primarily centres on the conditionality mechanism. It begins by dissecting the principle and reviewing the three established conditionality models. It subsequently illustrates the inadequacy of these models in explaining the dynamics of Türkiye's accession process. This study subsequently introduces a fourth model, deprivation-of-support, and offers empirical evidence for its applicability in the post-2016 period. The article finishes by examining key counterarguments and situating the proposed model within the broader context of the conditionality literature. In doing so, it engages with the phenomenon of stabilitocracy in the Western Balkans — the EU's practice of tolerating autocratic governance in exchange for regional stability and geopolitical alignment — as a revealing point of contrast that both underscores the asymmetry of current EU conditionality practices and illuminates the broader normative potential of the deprivation-of-support model.

## **THE PRINCIPLE OF CONDITIONALITY AND ESTABLISHED MODELS**

Euro-Atlantic integration constitutes a framework of solidarity, originally developed in response to the threat posed by the USSR that has resulted in the formation of a pluralistic security community among North Atlantic countries.<sup>16</sup> Conditionality serves as a mechanism by which candidate states synchronise their political, economic, and legal frameworks with the EU's model, developed

over many decades. The Europeanisation literature, which includes top-down norm transfer, institutional adaptation, and societal change, provides the theoretical models for this conditionality.<sup>17</sup> These models, delineated by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier as external incentives, lesson drawing, and social learning, reflect variations in the characteristics and attributes of candidate countries.<sup>18</sup> These frameworks outline the strategies the EU employed in the enlargement process.

The EU mostly uses the external incentive approach, in which candidate countries receive significant assistance to fulfil EU criteria in return for prospective membership. In addition to this dominant model, the EU utilises lesson-drawing and social-learning approaches, contingent upon the candidate's characteristics and reform path. The lesson-drawing model requires candidate countries to independently address challenges by imitating the actions of EU member states, thus actively embracing EU norms and principles. This model highlights the EU's civilising impact. The social-learning model contrasts with the external incentive model. The EU abstains from coercion or direct involvement, choosing to persuade political elites to adopt its ideals through communication, diplomacy, and engagement across multiple platforms.

These three models have functioned as the principal analytical frameworks for comprehending EU enlargement. They were principally formed through the examination of CEE cases, where conditionality functioned in a rather standard manner. The potential for membership acted as a significant incentive for domestic change, and EU assistance was proportional to the applicants' success. The post-2004 enlargement experience illustrates that this framework necessitates modification when addressing situations characterised by a distorted incentive structure, uncertain membership prospects, or a candidate state's reform trajectory that significantly diverges from EU expectations.<sup>19</sup>

Schimmelfennig proposes three criteria that are essential to the effectiveness of external conditionality.<sup>20</sup> First, the conditionality mechanism must provide the target state with the promise of membership to be effective. Furthermore, a clear and tangible membership objective is imperative for the negotiation pro-

cess. For instance, although the ENP seeks to avoid repeating the EU's rhetorical entrapment in further eastern enlargement, it ironically creates conditions for procedural entrapment, particularly for neighbouring countries that aspire to membership.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, Schimmelfennig underscores the importance of conceptual coherence in EU enlargement decisions, emphasising the necessity for candidate states to accurately anticipate the rewards for fulfilling the conditions.<sup>22</sup> Notably, during Türkiye's negotiation phase from 2005 to 2011, the EU criticised what it perceived as unfulfilled commitments in some chapters, leading to mutual mistrust and a gradual erosion of reform motivation.

Schimmelfennig emphasises the importance of the target state's minimal compliance costs for the efficacy of conditionality.<sup>23</sup> Türkiye's experience highlights this feature, especially the connection between the Cyprus issue and its membership prospect, which created a significant compliance cost and made the negotiation process unsustainable in its early stages. The combination of high compliance costs and the diminishing credibility of membership created conditions that were fundamentally different from those in which the three models had been theorised.

## **TÜRKİYE'S EU ACCESSION PROCESS: THE ANATOMY OF A DEADLOCK**

Türkiye submitted its application for full membership in the European Community (EC) in 1987 and was subsequently recognised as a candidate country in 1999. As part of the ongoing accession process initiated on October 3, 2005, 35 chapters have been designated for negotiation. As of 2026, only 16 chapters have been opened, while one chapter, Science and Research, was provisionally closed on June 12, 2006. The last chapter to initiate negotiations, Financial and Budgetary Provisions, dates back to 2016, indicating a significant stalemate that has persisted for almost a decade.

Furthermore, the Council has suspended eight chapters because of issues related to the Greek-administered Southern Cyprus Administration (GSCA), while

the GSCA has unilaterally blocked six additional chapters. The EU has been backing the Greek party in the Cyprus dispute. Türkiye has sought to negotiate without recognising GSCA, an EU member state. The EU considered the Turkish prohibition on a Cypriot-flagged ship docking in 2006 a violation of the Customs Union.<sup>24</sup> In practical terms, the negotiations reached a deadlock due to this recognition quest as a critical juncture. Out of 35 negotiating chapters, only five remain significantly open to negotiation. Currently, 14 chapters remain inaccessible due to the Cyprus issue, stemming from the Brussels decision to set a negotiation date contingent on the signing of an Additional Protocol that extends the Customs Union to 10 new member states.<sup>25</sup> This protocol posed a dilemma for Türkiye, as compliance would imply recognition of GSCA, a move that was incompatible with Türkiye's traditional policy, particularly since the establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). To address this issue, Turkish diplomacy proposed a compromise by signing the Additional Protocol alongside a Declaration that stressed it did not constitute recognition of the GSCA. Nonetheless, the Council released a Counter Declaration emphasizing Türkiye's need to implement the Customs Union without discrimination, essentially requiring recognition of the GSCA.<sup>26</sup> An important stalemate occurred in February 2006, that is, just four months after full membership negotiations between Türkiye and the EU, actually began, when Türkiye denied access to a vessel registered under the GSCA, leading the EU Council to suspend negotiations on eight chapters. On December 8, 2009, GSCA unilaterally blocked an additional six chapters, exacerbating the deadlock.

After the parties spent three years discussing how to resolve this issue, a 'positive agenda' to revitalise Türkiye-EU relations was implemented as a new initiative in 2012. Recognising the standstill of the process, this new mechanism articulated its objective as to keep the accession process of Türkiye alive and put it properly back on track after a period of stagnation.<sup>27</sup> Of course, the civil war that began in Syria played a significant role in reaching this agreement. From the EU's perspective, it was important to restore its strained relations with Türkiye to address a potential refugee crisis. Türkiye also viewed this as an opportunity to mend relations, and the necessary conditions for the Positive Agenda were established.

Despite efforts to mitigate tensions and foster progress, the Positive Agenda yielded limited results. The Türkiye–EU Readmission Agreement, signed in December 2013, has been implemented, albeit with ongoing challenges. Progress on the Visa Liberalisation Dialogue has been particularly constrained. While Türkiye has fulfilled 66 of the 72-roadmap benchmarks, the remaining six — primarily concerning the fight against corruption, counter-terrorism legislation, protection of human rights, and data protection arrangements — have proven politically intractable.<sup>28</sup> As for the modernisation of the Customs Union—another aspect of the Positive Agenda—no concrete progress has been made.

Despite significant Europeanisation efforts in the early 2000s - when Türkiye enacted sweeping constitutional reforms, abolished the death penalty, strengthened minority rights, and restructured civil-military relations - in the subsequent decade, Türkiye underwent a process of de-Europeanisation.<sup>29</sup> The trend of de-Europeanisation is experimentally evidenced through several metrics. According to the Economist's Democracy Index, Türkiye ranks 103rd out of 167 nations.<sup>30</sup> V-Dem ranked Türkiye 140th among 179 countries in its Liberal Democracy Index.<sup>31</sup> The European Commission's last report on Türkiye concluded that accession negotiations with Türkiye have remained at a standstill since 2018. The Commission further noted, the EU's serious concerns about the continued deterioration of democratic standards, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and respect for fundamental rights were not addressed.<sup>32</sup>

The prevalent structural assumption that underpins the conditionality mechanism across all three models (external incentives, experiential learning, and social learning) has not been corroborated by historical evidence in Türkiye: The EU maintains a credible and consistent commitment to membership as the ultimate reward for candidate compliance. It is precisely this assumption that begins to unravel.

The external incentives model functioned, albeit imperfectly, during the reform-intensive period of 2001–2005.<sup>33</sup> However, following the opening of accession negotiations and the emergence of structural blockages—particularly those stemming from the Cyprus dispute—the EU's material and political

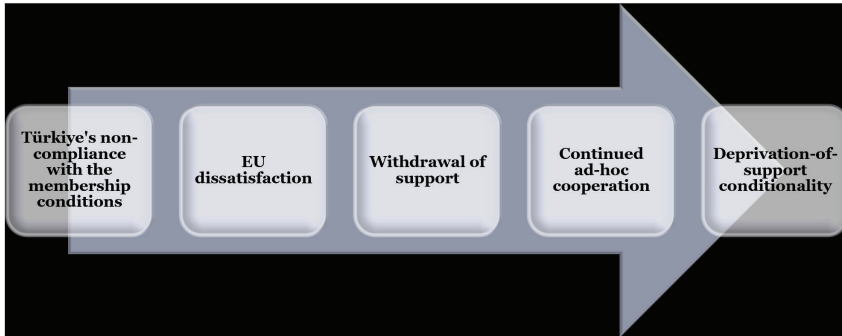
support progressively diminished rather than intensified, inverting the logic of the external incentives model. The lesson-drawing model is also challenging to implement in the post-2016 context. Türkiye's path of democratic regression during this period signifies not only a failure to replicate but also a deliberate deviation from European normative standards. The conditions under which lesson drawing might function, namely a reform-oriented government with genuine aspirations for membership, are conspicuously absent. According to the social-learning model, communicative engagement and a degree of mutual trust between the EU and Türkiye gave way to a war of words.

The post-2016 period has been characterised instead by institutional estrangement: the European Parliament's repeated calls to suspend negotiations,<sup>34</sup> the stalling of the Visa Liberalisation Dialogue, and Türkiye's exclusion from key Euro-Atlantic initiatives have collectively undermined the interactional infrastructure upon which social learning depends.<sup>35</sup> As the EU Council itself acknowledged, Türkiye had been moving further away from the European Union, with accession negotiations having effectively come to a standstill.<sup>36</sup> In 2016, the European Parliament intensified its reproaches toward Türkiye by referring to Cyprus, the core principles (democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights), socio-economic and sustainability reforms, regional cooperation, and good neighbourly relations, and called for restrictive measures under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.<sup>37</sup>

The three established conditionality models cease to function as explanatory tools, necessitating of a distinct form of conditionality. The EU's response to Türkiye's de-Europeanisation has not taken the form of either renewed engagement or formal disengagement. Instead, as the following section argues, the EU has adopted a posture of structured withdrawal of support - maintaining the formal architecture of the accession relationship while progressively emptying it of substantive content. This article seeks to conceptualise this strategy as deprivation-of-support (Graph 1).

Graph 1

*Process of the deprivation-of-support*



The fourth model proposed in this study must be situated within this broader comparative framework. It does not merely describe a bilateral anomaly in EU–Türkiye relations but reveals a structural inconsistency in the EU’s practice of enlargement conditionality. Juxtaposing the Türkiye case with the EU’s simultaneous engagement with the Western Balkans further highlights the analytical insufficiency of the established models. As Bieber<sup>38</sup> has established, the EU has effectively condoned democratic regression in return for regional stability and geopolitical alignment. This phenomenon, termed *stabilitocracy*, describes a logic of conditionality that is structurally inverse to that observed in Türkiye. Whereas the EU withholds benefits from Türkiye despite the latter’s demonstrated strategic indispensability, it extends permissive engagement to Western Balkan governments despite their failure to meet democratic reform benchmarks. The persistence of this asymmetry across the same post-2016 period in which the deprivation-of-support dynamic crystallised in the Türkiye case suggests that the two phenomena are analytically connected.

## DEPRIVATION-OF-SUPPORT AS A CONDITIONALITY MODEL

The concept of deprivation-of-support refers to a conditionality strategy whereby the EU exerts pressure on a candidate state not by providing incentives, normative guidance, or persuasive dialogue, but by systematically withholding political, financial, and institutional assistance. Unlike the established

models and a logic of positive engagement, deprivation-of-support operates according to a logic of negative leverage: The presence and absence of solidarity themselves serve as instruments of conditionality. This model is distinguished from a simple rupture or a freeze in relations by one critical feature: The formal continuation of the accession framework on paper.

If the EU were merely seeking to terminate the relationship with Türkiye, the most straightforward course of action would be to formally suspend or close the negotiations. The fact that such an outcome has not occurred despite repeated proposals to do so within the European Parliament.<sup>39</sup> Although the enlargement framework made this possible and was implemented against Georgia, it has not been put into practice in the Turkish case. Türkiye remains nominally a candidate country. However, the costs of non-compliance are rendered visible through the accumulation of withheld benefits - including visa liberalisation, chapter openings, financial pre-accession instruments, and diplomatic solidarity - rather than through explicit punitive measures.

In this regard, we can conceptually differentiate deprivation-of-support from adjacent notions in the literature. It differs from negative conditionality, as discussed in ENP frameworks.<sup>40</sup> It applies specifically to a candidate state within the formal accession architecture (*de jure*) where the membership incentive has not been formally revoked (*de facto*). It also contrasts with conditionality fatigue, which refers to the gradual diminishment of EU commitment resulting from an overburden of enlargement.<sup>41</sup> The withholding of support appears deliberate and targeted rather than incidental. The model is perhaps closest in spirit to what Schimmelfennig describes as the breakdown of credible commitment.<sup>42</sup> Yet it goes further by arguing that this breakdown is not a failure of conditionality but a reconfiguration of it. The relationship is based on adapting to circumstances in which positive engagement is politically infeasible but formal termination is strategically undesirable.

A systematic comparison across five analytical dimensions can render the distinctions among the four conditionality models more precise (Table 1): The EU's primary mode of engagement, the logic of leverage employed, the formal status

of the accession relationship, the conditionality function, and the actor logic.<sup>43</sup> Deprivation-of-support departs from all three in its directionality: the EU is passive due to its withdrawal of support, the leverage is negative, the accession relationship is formally maintained but substantively emptied, and conditionality functions through the accumulation of unrealised benefits - what might be termed the cost of withheld solidarity.

TABLE 1

*Comparative Typology of EU conditionality models*

| Model                  | EU Enlargement                | Leverage Logic                    | Accession Status                      | Conditionality Function                 | Actor Logic    |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| External-Incentives    | Active material engagement    | Positive and reward-based         | Credible and progressing              | Compliance through rewards              | Rationalist    |
| Lesson-Drawing         | Passive normative reference   | Normative and emulation           | Open but non-committal                | Norm diffusion through emulation        | Cognitive      |
| Social-Learning        | Active dialogic engagement    | Normative and persuasion          | Open and inter-active                 | Norm internalisation through persuasion | Constructivist |
| Deprivation-of-Support | Passive withdrawal of support | Negative and exclusion-cost-based | Formally open but politically stalled | Compliance pressure through exclusion   | Strategic      |

Deprivation-of-support refers to a strategy in which the EU neither provides support nor imposes sanctions. While nominally upholding the accession framework (de jure), Brussels strategically withholds its support (de facto). Consequently, it represents negative conditionality in its passive form. The mechanism through which this strategy operates may be summarised as follows: the EU creates a sustained exclusion cost by denying Türkiye and the benefits that would normally accrue to candidate status. In theory, this incentivises Turkish decision-makers to recalibrate their domestic and foreign policies in a direction more compatible with European ideals. The EU’s official posture, maintaining formal candidate status while refusing substantive engagement, is precisely what the deprivation-of-support model theorises.

While this article does not seek to adjudicate the effectiveness of deprivation-of-support, at a theoretical level, it is possible to specify three criteria against which its effectiveness could be assessed in future empirical research. First, **observable recalibration**: The model may be considered effective to the

extent that it produces measurable shifts in Turkish domestic and/or foreign policy toward greater alignment with the Copenhagen Criteria benchmarks or Euro-Atlantic norms. For example, indicators of democratic backsliding could return to normal, rule-of-law reforms could resume, or security arrangements that do not work could be dropped (such as the S-400 acquisition). Second, **elite cost-benefit signalling**: The model is deemed functional if the Turkish government clearly references accession-related costs in domestic and foreign policy discussions, suggesting that the withheld benefits are a significant factor in the government's strategic considerations. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's appeal for an immediate and tangible enhancement of relations - explicitly referencing visa liberalisation and the modernisation of the Customs Union - constitutes *prima facie* evidence of such signalling.<sup>44</sup> Third, **persistence of asymmetric engagement**: The model can be differentiated from complete disengagement if the EU continually upholds the formal framework of membership while withholding significant benefits, even while functional collaboration in migration and security escalates. The continued publication of annual progress reports assessing Türkiye against Copenhagen benchmarks, despite the practical standstill of negotiations, is consistent with this criterion.

### *EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE*

The empirical application of the deprivation-of-support model can be organised across three interconnected dimensions: withholding (i) political support, (ii) financial support relative to the burden undertaken, and (iii) institutional support. Together, these dimensions illustrate a sustained and cross-domain pattern of exclusion that exceeds what could be attributed to bureaucratic inertia or to mutual disengagement alone.

**Political Support Withholding**: The immediate indication of political deprivation pertains to the post-2016 coup attempt. When Türkiye's democratic institutions were challenged by the most severe political crisis in its modern history, the EU's response was notably restrained. It was limited to rhetorical expressions of concern about subsequent rule-of-law developments rath-

er than to substantive solidarity with the democratic order that had survived. The Visa Liberalisation Dialogue exacerbated this asymmetry. The benchmarks Türkiye failed to fulfil, primarily about counter-terrorism legislation, due to the security environment in the post-coup attempt period.<sup>45</sup> The EU thus withheld a major political reward (visa liberalisation) at precisely the moment when Türkiye's compliance costs were at their highest.

The marginalisation of Türkiye within the broader EU enlargement dynamics is another illustration. While Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkan states have progressively integrated into the EU's enlargement architecture —most notably driven by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine— Türkiye has been conspicuously excluded from this renewed engagement. A 2025 draft report from the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee recognised recent diplomatic overtures from Ankara, including President Erdoğan's remarks regarding a new chapter in EU-Türkiye relations, but determined that these statements were not accompanied by the substantive reforms necessary to meet the Copenhagen criteria.<sup>46</sup> The EP rapporteur for Türkiye, Nacho Sánchez Amor, has noted the paradox explicitly: the more you appear as a 'partner' with the EU, the less you are treated as a 'candidate country'.<sup>47</sup> In another recent statement, he said, Membership is about democracy, whereas partnership is about interests.<sup>48</sup> The statements capture the institutional ambiguity at the heart of the deprivation-of-support model.

The geopolitical dimension of political deprivation is exemplified by disputes over the F-35 and Eurofighter. Despite its longstanding financial contributions and NATO partnership status, Türkiye's exclusion from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme was a direct consequence of its acquisition of Russian S-400 air defence systems. In this dispute, the majority of EU member states, as NATO members, aligned with the USA rather than with Türkiye.<sup>49</sup> In a similar vein, Germany blocked the sale of Eurofighters to Türkiye for many years due to rising authoritarian tendencies and concerns about foreign and security policy.<sup>50</sup> EU member states, in other words, did not merely fail to support Türkiye's position; they actively facilitated its exclusion.

**Financial Support Withholding:** The financial dimension of deprivation-of-support is perhaps the most thoroughly documented dimension from an empirical perspective. Türkiye has been the largest refugee-hosting nation globally for almost a decade, now accommodating roughly four million individuals, primarily Syrians.<sup>51</sup> Overseeing this population entails high economic, social, and political costs that exceed the financial assistance the EU provides in return. The EU-Türkiye Statement of March 2016, concluded amid acute migration pressure at EU borders, led to the establishment of the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye, which mobilised €6 billion between 2016 and 2019. By 2022, the EU had directed close to €10 billion to assist refugees and host communities in Türkiye.<sup>52</sup> While these figures appear substantial in absolute terms, Ovacık, Ineli-Ciger, and Ulusoy state that the EU Member *States have failed to fulfil most of their pledges under the Statement*.<sup>53</sup> It underlines that there are no concrete steps either in visa liberalisation or in the modernisation of Customs Union. This selective fulfilment - providing migration management funds while withholding political and institutional rewards - exemplifies the transactional logic of deprivation-of-support.

Following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in late 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Ankara on December 17, 2024 and announced an additional €1 billion in migration-related funding, bringing the cumulative total to approximately €10 billion since 2011. Yet when President Erdoğan *requested an immediate and tangible improvement of relations between Türkiye and the EU* - specifically citing the lifting of restrictions, the resumption of high-level dialogue, the modernisation of the Customs Union, and progress on visa liberalisation - von der Leyen offered no substantive concessions on accession-related matters.<sup>54</sup> Significantly, one analysis of the meeting noted that the EU's engagement was *moving forward only on migration*. The accession process remained *firmly in the freezer* even as economic cooperation and migration management funds advanced.<sup>55</sup> This structural pattern - financial engagement conditional on migration management, political disengagement upon accession - is the hallmark of the deprivation-of-support as a conditionality strategy.

**Institutional Support Withholding:** Türkiye is the only candidate state in the

EU enlargement framework lacking a visa-free regime, a fact that holds both practical and symbolic significance. In 2024, Turkish citizens submitted approximately 1.17 million Schengen visa applications, ranking Türkiye second worldwide, behind only China.<sup>56</sup> The absence of visa liberalisation is a daily, tangible reminder of Türkiye's exclusion from the benefits of candidate status. The data on visa applications reveal a further dimension of institutional deprivation. The rejection rate for Turkish applicants stood at just 3.9% in 2015, rose to 16.1% in 2023, and declined only marginally to 14.5% in 2024.<sup>57</sup> The increasing rejection rate following the 2016 signifies a measurable reduction in institutional support. Turkish citizens face the repercussions of the conditionality impasse not in theoretical diplomatic language, but in the tangible restriction of mobility rights afforded to nationals of nearly all other candidate countries.

The EU–Türkiye High-Level Dialogue has been suspended since 2019. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), although officially designated for Türkiye, has been predominantly repurposed for migration management and humanitarian aid.<sup>58</sup> The expansive context of enlargement exacerbates this isolation. Following Bosnia and Herzegovina's acquisition of candidacy status in 2022 and the initiation of active accession negotiations by Ukraine and Moldova in June 2024, Türkiye has not only been sidelined but also effectively marginalised from the core of the EU's enlargement discourse.

Official EU documents continue to preserve the normative architecture of conditionality even as its practical application has narrowed. The European Council website states explicitly that, while the overall *EU–Türkiye relationship is framed by Türkiye's EU candidate status, the accession negotiations are currently at a standstill*, while annual progress reports continue to assess Türkiye against Copenhagen Criteria benchmarks.<sup>59</sup> This simultaneous maintenance of the formal framework and the emptying of its substantive content is precisely what the deprivation-of-support model theorises: Conditionality without commitment, presence without benefit, candidacy without progress.

## ADDRESSING COUNTERARGUMENTS

The first (*process-oriented*) criticism is based on the assumption that Türkiye-EU relations offer no prospects for enlargement. This assumption highlights the issue of the principled inapplicability of ‘deprivation of support’, as a new conditionality model. One may argue that the two players’ connection has been reduced to ad hoc cooperation in the absence of any institutional structure. For the EU, Türkiye has become, like third states, a partner in foreign economic ties and a country with which cooperation is built through ad hoc agendas. This argument ignores the institutional processes that distinguish Türkiye-EU relations from those with third actors, including neighbouring ones (the Association Agreement, the Customs Union, and the visa liberalisation process). Indeed, even if the relationships are dysfunctional and not purpose-driven, they are nevertheless institutionalised from a *de jure* membership perspective. Thus, the accession process is politically halted but institutionally active. Second, Türkiye’s situation is a unique case resulting from the suspension of enlargement. The fact that the mechanism is institutionally inoperative does not change the fact that it is a ‘model’ of (non)enlargement. As previously stated, the model’s core feature is uncertainty. Thus, ‘dead accession’ does not necessarily mean ‘terminated accession’.

The second (*Türkiye-oriented*) criticism suggests that Türkiye’s own agency is underplayed. It is Türkiye, not the EU, that has primarily driven the derailment of accession through democratic backsliding and the adoption of foreign policy positions incompatible with Euro-Atlantic alignment. The enlargement process has practically come to a halt because Türkiye has failed to meet its commitments on Cyprus. Therefore, debating the dead process in the candidate country, in light of the EU’s enlargement agenda, results in a subject-object mismatch. While this criticism is valid—given that Türkiye is the party responsible for the failure—it ignores the EU’s response. As with Georgia, the EU has not shown a willingness to abandon negotiations or suspend candidate status. In summary, the process has remained in limbo, neither fully functioning nor completely dead. ‘Deprivation-of-support’ comes into play exactly at this point: the EU is no longer offering rewards in exchange for reforms (positive condi-

tionality); however, by not formally ending the process, it is using the threat of ‘withdrawing or suspending existing support and statuses’ (negative conditionality) as a foreign policy tool to keep Türkiye within certain bounds.

A third (*reciprocal oriented*) criticism holds that what this study describes as deprivation-of-support is better understood as the de facto disengagement of both parties from a relationship. Under this reading, the EU is not deploying a conditionality strategy. It is simply withdrawing from an accession process that has failed, while maintaining its formal architecture for reasons of institutional inertia and diplomatic convenience. Türkiye, in turn, has long ceased to prioritise EU membership as a strategic objective. As evidenced by President Erdoğan’s September 2023 statement, the EU was endeavouring to break away from Ankara and that Türkiye could part ways with the EU if necessary.<sup>60</sup> This significant criticism cannot be completely disregarded. However, several factors contradict this criticism. First, the EU has persistently opposed the formal cessation of the accession process, despite having the institutional capacity and political impetus to enact such a decision. The EU Council and European Parliament have consistently refrained from formally concluding negotiations. This restriction aligns more with a calculated strategic decision than with simple inertia. In other words, deprivation-of-support is not an ad hoc reaction but a sustained and institutionalised pattern. Secondly, the EU has maintained engagement with Türkiye in areas of direct interest, particularly in migration management and security collaboration, while refraining from providing support in matters related to accession. This selective participation aligns more closely with a logic of conditionality than with complete disengagement. Third, and perhaps most tellingly, senior EU officials have continued to frame the relationship in terms of conditionality. Von der Leyen’s statement explicitly referred to Türkiye as a candidate country and spoke of *deepening the relationship* while simultaneously declining to make any accession-related concessions.<sup>61</sup> According to the EU rapporteur’s formulation, pro-democracy movements and citizens in the country believe Türkiye’s rightful place is in Europe. Therefore, the EU must be patient and wait for the moment when Türkiye returns to the accession track. This perspective sug-

gests that the EU continues to envisage conditionality as an ongoing strategy rather than a concluded one.<sup>62</sup>

The fifth (*EU-oriented*) criticism, prompted by the geopolitical turbulence of early 2026, holds that the deprivation-of-support model may be rendered obsolete by acute security crises. The EU may be compelled to transcend the rationale of negative leverage and offer substantial concessions over admission as Türkiye's strategic significance becomes evident. This new logic is evidenced by NATO's deployment of Patriot systems to Turkish territory in response to Iranian missile activity, and by renewed discussions of visa liberalisation driven by security imperatives. This objection warrants careful study. Nonetheless, the evidence from the 2026 crisis corroborates rather than refutes the model's predictions. Security cooperation has deepened precisely within NATO and bilateral frameworks, while the formal accession architecture has not changed. The EU's response to Türkiye's elevated strategic profile has been to intensify functional partnerships — in defence, migration, and energy — without translating this into accession chapter openings or progress on visa liberalisation. This pattern is consistent with the model's core claim that the EU maintains a posture of withholding support not despite, but in part because of, recognising Türkiye's strategic importance. Since Türkiye's indispensability undermines the credibility of any formal rupture, while preserving the leverage inherent in withheld benefits.

## CONCLUSION

Since 2016, the EU's membership negotiations with Türkiye have reached an impasse, a stagnation exacerbated by successive crises that have beset the negotiation process since its inception. Numerous analyses indicate that Türkiye has failed to meet the Copenhagen Criteria, the prerequisites for commencing negotiations, and has experienced a marked decline in comparative democratic indices. In the Economist's 2024 Democracy Index, Türkiye ranked 103rd out of 167 countries, while the V-Dem Institute placed Türkiye at 140th out of 179 in its 2023 Liberal Democracy Index.

This study has argued that the ongoing negotiations — despite widespread recognition that Türkiye falls short of the necessary criteria — can be interpreted as a form of political conditionality: Specifically, the deprivation-of-support. Türkiye's geopolitical significance, its indispensable role in European migration management, and its crucial position within the European security framework suggest that the EU deliberately seeks to maintain leverage by withholding political, financial, and institutional support, rather than renewing substantive engagement or formally closing the process.

The principal contribution of this study is conceptualising deprivation-of-support as the fourth model of EU conditionality. Unlike external-incentives, lesson-drawing, and social-learning, which all operate through positive engagement, this model operates through the deliberate absence of solidarity: A negative-leverage strategy that maintains the formal architecture of conditionality while emptying it of substantive benefit. The model is proposed to prompt decision-makers in Türkiye, recognised as rational actors in global politics, to instigate reforms towards a more transparent and accountable domestic political system and to align Turkish foreign policy more closely with Euro-Atlantic interests through a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis.

This article does not seek to answer definitively whether this strategy is effective. As the Erdogan–von der Leyen meeting in December 2024 illustrated, Türkiye continues to invoke its candidate status and strategic importance, while the EU offers financial and economic engagement without accession-related concessions. The relationship persists in a structurally frozen state, in which neither side has found an incentive to formally resolve it. This equilibrium is precisely what the deprivation-of-support model predicts: A relationship of conditionality without a plausible short-term exit, sustained by mutual recognition that complete neither integration nor formal rupture serves the parties' immediate interests. Turkish-EU process is still somewhat alive, but without an accession framework.

Several avenues for future research suggest themselves. First, whether deprivation-of-support constitutes a genuinely novel model or an extreme

variant of existing frameworks deserves further theoretical scrutiny, particularly by comparing it with other stalled candidacies such as Serbia or North Macedonia. Second, the effectiveness of this model - whether it incentivises reform in the target state - remains an open empirical question that longitudinal analysis could begin to address. Third, the conditions under which this model might transition into either renewed engagement or formal disengagement merit systematic investigation, particularly in light of the evolving geopolitical context following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has simultaneously increased Türkiye's strategic value and complicated the normative case for its exclusion from the EU's enlarged neighbourhood. Fourth, the Iran-Israel-US conflict that escalated in early 2026 constitutes a natural experiment for assessing the model's resilience under conditions of acute regional insecurity. In particular, whether persistent security pressure eventually moves the EU-Türkiye relationship away from deprivation-of-support and toward a qualitatively different logic of conditionality, or if it only strengthens functional collaboration while keeping the accession architecture unchanged. This question will become empirically tractable in the coming years. The preliminary evidence suggests the latter: security crises elevate Türkiye's bargaining position within NATO and bilateral frameworks, but they do not dissolve the structural barriers, such as democratic backsliding, the Cyprus impasse, and rule-of-law deficits that underpin the deprivation-of-support model.

Fifth, and perhaps most consequential for the broader conditionality literature, the deprivation-of-support model invites comparison with the phenomenon of stabilotocracy in the Western Balkans. Bieber has documented how the EU has, in practice, tolerated the autocratic consolidation of Western Balkan governments — most notably in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina — in exchange for their role as regional stability providers and their nominal distancing from Russian influence.<sup>63</sup> The stabilotocratic logic — whereby the EU relaxes its conditionality demands to retain the political cooperation of autocratically inclined governments — stands in stark contrast to the deprivation-of-support model applied to Türkiye.

In Western Balkan cases, the EU has effectively suspended the cost-of-exclusion mechanism and replaced it with a permissive engagement that prioritises geopolitical alignment over democratic reform. The result is a conditionality framework that has progressively lost its transformative function. The deprivation-of-support model offers an alternative template, because it operates through the sustained withholding of benefits rather than their unconditional extension: one in which the EU could, in principle, apply comparable negative leverage to stabilitocratic regimes within the Western Balkans accession framework, conditioning functional cooperation not merely on geopolitical loyalty but on measurable democratic progress. Whether the EU possesses the political will to operationalise such a model in a context where stabilitocratic governments serve its immediate security interests is, of course, a separate question. However, the Turkish case strengthens both the theoretical possibility of doing so and the normative case for it. The results stem from the specific setting of EU–Türkiye relations and therefore require additional validation in other accession scenarios. Future research can assess whether similar dynamics emerge in other enlargement cases, especially for Georgia, Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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<sup>40</sup> Sandra Lavenex, Frank Schimmelfennig, “EU democracy promotion in the neighbourhood: From leverage to governance?”, *Democratization*, 18(4), 2019, p. 885–909.

<sup>41</sup> Tanja A. Börzel, Frank Schimmelfennig, “Coming together or drifting apart? The EU’s political integration capacity in Eastern Europe”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24(2), 2017, p. 278–296.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig, “EU political conditionality after the 2004 enlargement: Consistency and effectiveness”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15(6), 2008, p. 921.

<sup>43</sup> Under the external-incentives model, the EU engages actively through positive inducements, leveraging the credible prospect of membership to motivate candidate compliance. The accession relationship is substantive and progressing. The EU acts by providing benefits, and compliance operates through reward. The lesson-drawing model involves a more passive EU posture: the leverage is normative rather than material, the relationship is open but self-directed and non-committal, and conditionality operates through emulation. The social-learning model likewise involves an active but non-coercive EU, employing persuasive, normative, and communicative engagement; the relationship is interactive, and conditionality operates through norm internalisation.

<sup>44</sup> Euronews, “Erdoğan pushes for EU-Turkey upgrade after meeting von der Leyen to discuss Syria”, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/17/erdogan-pushes-for-eu-turkey-upgrade-after-meeting-von-der-leyen-to-discuss-syria> (February 8, 2026).

<sup>45</sup> European Stability Initiative (ESI), “Visa roadmap scorecard – Turkey”, <https://www.esiweb.org/visa-roadmap-scorecard-turkey> (April 21, 2026).

<sup>46</sup> Stockholm Center for Freedom, “EP draft report says Turkey’s EU accession remains stalled over concerns on democracy, human rights”, <https://stockholmcf.org/ep-draft-report-says-turkeys-eu-accession-remains-stalled-over-concerns-on-democracy-human-rights/> (February 14, 2026).

<sup>47</sup> Turkish Minute, “EP rapporteur says visa-free travel for Turks depends on Ankara, criticizes ‘green passport’ workaround”, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2026/03/10/ep-rapporteur-says-visa-free-travel-for-turks-depends-on-ankara-criticizes-green-passport-workaround/> (February 10, 2026).

<sup>48</sup> Anka Haber, “Nacho Sanchez Amor: Türkiye’deki çoğulcu demokrasiyi koruyamıyoruz”, <https://ankahaber.net/haber/nacho-sanchez-amor-turkiye-deki-cogulcu-demokrasiyi-koruyamiyoruz-36c8bde5> (June 25, 2026).

<sup>49</sup> Cenk Özgen, Eren Alper Yılmaz, Ozan Örmeci, “F-35 crisis: Will Turkish-US defense cooperation continue?”, *Middle East Policy*, 29(2), 2022, p. 85–97.

<sup>50</sup> DW, “Alman hükümeti Türkiye’ye Eurofighter satışını engelledi”, <https://www.dw.com/tr/alman-h%C3%BCk%C3%BCmeti-t%C3%BCrkiye-eurofighter-sat%C4%B1%C5%9F%C4%B1n%C4%B1-engelledi/a-72280614> (April 2, 2026).

<sup>51</sup> European Council, “Türkiye”, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/turkiye/> (April 21, 2026).

<sup>52</sup> ReliefWeb, “The EU continues to provide much needed assistance to refugees and host communities in Türkiye”, <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/eu-continues-provide-much-needed-assistance-refugees-and-host-communities-turkiye> (February 12, 2026).

<sup>53</sup> Gamze Ovacık, Meltem Ineli-Ciger, Orçun Ulusoy, “Taking stock of the EU-Turkey statement in 2024”, *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 26(2), 2024, p. 154-178.

<sup>54</sup> Euronews, “Erdoğan pushes for EU-Turkey upgrade after meeting von der Leyen to discuss Syria”, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/17/erdogan-pushes-for-eu-turkey-upgrade-after-meeting-von-der-leyen-to-discuss-syria> (February 8, 2026) ; New Union Post, “Erdoğan wants to link military power to EU accession”, <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/04/11/erdogan-turkiye-military-eu-accession/> (February 3, 2026).

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<sup>62</sup> New Union Post, “Erdoğan wants to link military power to EU accession”, <https://newunion-post.eu/2025/04/11/erdogan-turkiye-military-eu-accession/> (February 3, 2026).

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