

# Tensions mount after EU freezes talks on Turkey's membership

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After the European Parliament's vote on November 24 to freeze talks on Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU), tensions between the EU and the Turkish government are escalating to unprecedented dimensions.

This conflict is a continuation of the tensions between Ankara and its NATO allies that led the major imperialist powers to tacitly back the failed July 15 coup against Erdogan. The motion freezing the talks—adopted by 479 for, 37 against, and 107 abstentions—criticized the state of emergency President Recep Tayyip Erdogan imposed after the coup.

The Turkish government responded by lashing out with criticisms of the EU. On November 26, Erdogan said, “The [Turkish] government and parliament can extend the length of the state of emergency. What's it to you? Does the European Parliament rule this country or the government [of Turkey]? Know your limits! Those days are over.”

Apparently referring to EU support for exiled Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen, whose supporters Erdogan accuses of launching the coup, and for Kurdish nationalists, whom he claims are terrorists, the Turkish president denounced the European Parliament for “inviting terrorist groups.” He added that Turkey would continue to “go its own way no matter what they say.”

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim echoed Erdogan's accusations of EU complicity in terrorism, saying: “First of all, the EU should decide on whether it will ally with Turkey or terrorist organizations that are freely wandering around Europe.”

Even before the EU Parliament vote, Erdogan had threatened that Turkey could respond to EU pressure by opening its western border and letting Syrian refugees go to Europe en masse. “You cried out and

began to say ‘What will we do when Turkey opens the border gates?’, when 50,000 refugees turned up at the Kapikule [Turkey's border with Bulgaria]. Look here, if you go further, those border gates will be opened. You should know that,” he said.

Erdogan also threatened the EU in 2015 that Turkey could open its borders with Greece and Bulgaria and send Syrian refugees to Europe, if a Turkey-EU deal was not reached. A few months later, in March 2016, the Turkish government reached an understanding with the EU. In this dirty deal, Ankara agreed to take back refugees from Greece in exchange for EU financial aid and a pledge of visa-free travel for Turks to Europe. The visa-free deal has not come about, however.

Erdogan had also threatened on November 20 that he might ally with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—a China-led security alliance including Russia and several Central Asian states originally called the “Shanghai Five”—and break with the EU and NATO. “Turkey should first of all feel relaxed about the EU and not be fixated” on joining it, Erdogan said. “Some may criticize me but I express my opinion. For example, I have said, ‘why shouldn't Turkey be in the Shanghai Five?’”

The Turkish state of emergency is deeply reactionary. Erdogan has used it to arrest tens of thousands of people—not only coup supporters inside the state machine, but journalists and opposition politicians. However, the EU's criticisms of the Erdogan regime's policies are not motivated by democratic or humanitarian concerns, but the geopolitical interests of the major European imperialist powers.

One of the first responses to Ankara's threats came from Germany's Foreign Ministry, whose spokeswoman Sawsan Chebli declared in a November 25 news conference that the EU should not freeze

Turkey's negotiations. "It is important that we do not freeze the accession negotiations because that would only further damage the relationship between Turkey and Europe, and that would not be in the interest of Turkey or of Europe," she said.

German Prime Minister Angela Merkel's spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer has also voiced growing concern, saying: "We see the EU-Turkey agreement ... as a success for both sides. And the continuation of this agreement is in the interest of all parties."

Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, said that Europe should refrain from giving lessons to Turkey on the issue of migration, while urging Erdogan to carry out "necessary reforms." Speaking to *Euronews* on November 26, Juncker described Turkey as "a crucial ally" and added that this was "not only because of the refugee crisis."

The EU has tried to lay the main burden of the Syrian war on Turkey, while Ankara is pursuing its own reactionary and expansionist agenda by using Syrian refugees for political leverage.

The escalating dispute between Ankara and its Western allies, however, is not limited to Turkey's EU membership, or to one or another tactical consideration in the Syrian war. It is a result of a fundamental international process: the breakdown of world capitalism and the imperialist drive to war, which has its own objective economic and social laws, independent of the will of this or that leader.

Deep relations between the Turkish bourgeoisie and its NATO imperialist allies were forged during the Cold War. Turkey has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1949 and of NATO, the US-led anti-Communist and anti-Soviet military alliance, since 1952. It was a founding member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in 1961, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in 1973. Ankara first applied for membership to the European Economic Community, the predecessor of the EU, in April 1987.

Twenty-five years after the collapse of the USSR, however, amid an ever-deepening global capitalist crisis and after a quarter century of US-led wars from the Balkans to Africa and the Middle East, these relations are in deep crisis.

Ankara's involvement in the US-led war in Syria and Iraq has not resolved but only escalated the difficulties

it faces at home, with deepening mass unemployment, rising prices, growing indebtedness and poverty. Moreover, the regime-change operation led by the United States in Syria, where it is allied with Syrian Kurdish militias, has brought Ankara's main concern, the century-long Kurdish question, to the fore.

On the brink of an economic collapse that it feared would trigger an explosion of anger that has been accumulating in the working class for years, Ankara also felt threatened by Western-backed Kurdish secessionism. It was in this context of deepening international and social tensions, and after Turkey nearly provoked a war with Russia by shooting down a Russian jet over Syria last year, that the attempted military coup took place on July 15.

The attempted coup against Erdogan, backed, or at least acquiesced to, by the main imperialist powers, notably Washington and Berlin, was a major blow to Turkish-Western relations. Parallel to the imperialist drive to re-divide the Middle East through ongoing wars in Iraq and Syria, it played a great role in Ankara's recent decision to embark on a quest for new partners in the SCO, and the collapse of Turkey's attempts to join the EU.

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