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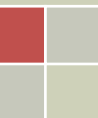
## **IKV BRIEF**

# **TURKISH-BELGIAN RELATIONS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE FROM THE EU PERSPECTIVE**

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# TURKISH-BELGIAN RELATIONS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE FROM THE EU PERSPECTIVE

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## Key Findings

- Belgium is among the EU Member States supporting Turkey's EU accession process albeit in a conditional way.
- There are currently approximately 220,000 people of Turkish origin living in Belgium.
- The trade volume between Belgium and Turkey has reached 5.7 billion dollars in 2015.
- In the period 2002-2015, the total amount of investment from Belgium to Turkey reached 8.7 billion dollars whereas Turkish investments in Belgium amounted to 311 million dollars respectively.
- As of 2014, there are approximately 500 Belgian companies operating in Turkey.
- In 2015, 620,000 tourists from Belgium visited Turkey.
- Belgium is a key ally of Turkey within NATO and a significant partner in its EU accession process.
- It is of critical importance for Turkey to develop further relations with Belgium, a founding member of the European Communities, in the context of its EU accession process.
- Belgium holds a special place in Turkey's EU accession process, as it is considered as the heart of the EU, hosting a majority of Euro-Atlantic institutions.



Turkey's relations with Belgium go back to the 1830s following the formal declaration of independence of the Kingdom of Belgium. In that context, Belgian entrepreneurs had realised various investments in the then Ottoman Empire and such investments would continue following the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. One very famous example of Belgian investment in Turkey is the Beyoğlu Tunnel in Istanbul which was built in the late 1890s. Both countries are NATO allies and have enjoyed solid and enduring relations in many areas. One should also stress that Belgium has been consistent in its support for Turkey's EU accession process under the condition that it fulfils all of the conditions required to join the Union.

### **A Brief History of Turkish-Belgian Relations**

Relations between Turkey and Belgium go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Ottoman Empire had formally recognised and established diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Belgium as a new member of the European family in 1837, seven years following its declaration of independence. In that context, treaties of friendship, trade and navigation were signed between the parties in 1838, 1840 and 1862 respectively<sup>1</sup>. Following the signature of the agreements, Belgium had strengthened its diplomatic representation within the Ottoman Empire by opening new consulates, apart from its embassy in Istanbul (such as the opening of its consulate in Beirut). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in the context of World War I, which would lead to the demise of the Empire, the Ottoman State acquired a number of weapons from Belgium which maintained a policy of neutrality during the war. The relations were pursued in all areas with the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey.

Belgium formally recognised the Republic of Turkey in 1925 by approving the Treaty of Lausanne. Bilateral relations were rather distant during the Atatürk and İnönü periods but would further flourish with the arrival of the Democratic Party in power in Turkey in 1950<sup>2</sup>. In that respect, a trade and payment protocol was signed between Turkey and the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union in 1955<sup>3</sup>. Relations between the parties have continued to expand in the following decades, with increasing Belgian investments in Turkey. Turkey and Turkish culture have gained further visibility among Belgians following the migration of Turkish workers into the country and an increase in Belgian tourists coming to spend their vacations in Turkey. One can say that bilateral relations, albeit sometimes experiencing some mild tensions, have continued in a very constructive and positive spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Savaş Sertel and Şahin Yedek, "Arşiv Belgelerine Göre Mili Şef Döneminde Türkiye-Belçika İlişkileri (1938-1950)", No:33, *The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies*, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Belçika'daki Türk Yerleşiminin Sosyal, Ekonomik ve Tarihi Boyutları", ihya.eu, Retrieved from <http://www.ihya.eu/avrupa/belcika-daki-turk-yerlesiminin-sosyal-ekonomik-ve-tarih%C3%8E-boyutlari.html>, 16.05.2016

<sup>3</sup> Embassy of the Republic of Turkey in Luxembourg, "Türkiye ile Lüksemburg Arasında İmzalanan Anlaşmalar, Protokoller ve Programlar", 09.02.2012, Retrieved from <http://luksemburg.be.mfa.gov.tr/ShowInfoNotes.aspx?ID=122007>, 18.05.2016



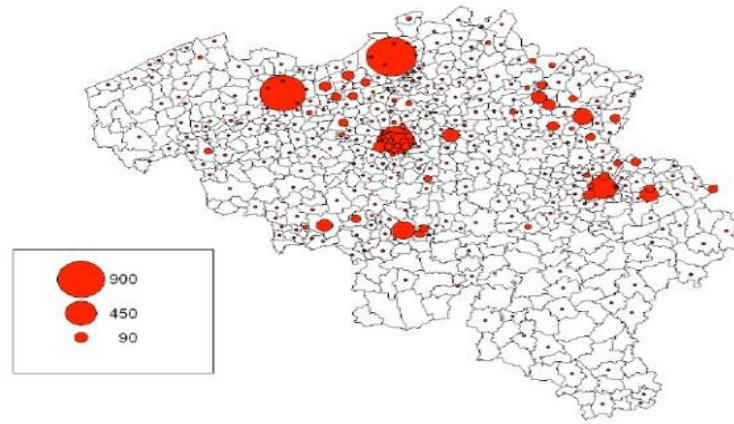
## Turkish Immigration into Belgium

In the 1960s, Belgium witnessed the arrival of an important migrant flow from Turkey. This was organised following the signature of a Labour Recruitment Agreement between the parties in July 1964<sup>4</sup>. As in Germany, the status of Turkish immigrants in Belgium was known as “guest workers” (*Gastarbeiter* in German), with the idea that they would not settle permanently in the host country. The majority of Turkish immigrants in Belgium came from the Emirdağ municipality of Afyonkarahisar in central Turkey<sup>5</sup>. In 1970, Turkish citizens were granted tourist visas and thus acquired the right to bring over their families with them. In contrast, with the 1980 coup in Turkey, bilateral relations were damaged and Belgian authorities brought legal restrictions to Turkish immigration.

Currently, Turkish immigrants constitute Belgium’s second largest foreign community. Undoubtedly, the presence of approximately 220,000 people of Turkish origin in Belgium has played a significant role in the development and evolution of bilateral relations. Furthermore, one should note that with the accession of Bulgaria into the EU in 2007, a significant number of Bulgarian Turks have also settled in Belgium which in turn has led to a further increase in the Turkish population in Belgium.

A large part of Turks in Belgium are living in Brussels and other large cities such as Antwerp, Gent, Liege and Charleroi. Whilst half of them live in the Flemish region, one fourth is present in Brussels and the remaining are scattered around the Walloon region<sup>6</sup>.

### Map: Turks in Belgium



Source: Belgian Institute of Migration (IRFAM), 2011

<sup>4</sup> John Fitzmaurice, “The Politics of Belgium: A Unique Federalism”, C.Hurst & Co. Publishers, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Johan Wets, “The Turkish Community in Austria and Belgium: The Challenge of Integration”, Turkish Studies (Routledge), 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Altay A. Manço, “Genç Türkler: 1990/2011 Gözlemleri Vasıtasıyla Belçika’ya Eklenmenin Değerlendirilmesi, Almanya ve Türkiye ile Mukayesesi”, IRFAM, 2012.

Moreover, the number of Turkish people acquiring Belgian citizenship has grown steadily in the last couple of years. In 2011, Belgium officially accepted dual citizenship, facilitating the naturalisation of many Turks living in Belgium who had to lose their original citizenship to acquire Belgian citizenship beforehand. Belgian-Turks are contributing positively to the economy of the country with their own SMEs and it is possible to see Belgian-Turks in a variety of areas such as politics, arts, trade and sports. Emir Kır, the mayor of Brussels' Saint-Josse municipality, Hadise Açıkgöz who had won the first place in a music contest on a Flemish TV channel, football player Önder Turacı, and Zeynep Sever who won the first place in Belgium's Beauty Pageant in 2003 are among the most prominent members of the Turkish community in Belgium.



*Brussels' famous Grand-Place with its large Turkish flower carpet at the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Turkish immigration in Belgium*

In 2014, a number of cultural activities were organised on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Turkish immigration in Belgium. In that context, there has been a lot of interaction between artists, entrepreneurs, politicians and academics from Belgium and Turkey. It is important to highlight the significant role played by the Yunus Emre Institute in that respect. The institute has been providing Turkish language courses and has contributed to the promotion of Turkey and Turkish culture in Belgium and other countries where it is present.

Since the 1960s, with the arrival of the first Turkish immigrants in Belgium, the country has become more multicultural and one can surely say that the Turks played a positive role in enriching Belgian culture. Similarly, Turkey's participation in the Europalia International Culture and Art Festival as a guest country in 2015 provided an opportunity for Belgians to gain an insight into the Turkish culture. It is of utmost importance to underscore the role played by Turkish associations in Belgium in that respect, which represent the rich mosaic of Turkey.

In December 2007, a survey conducted by King Baudouin Foundation, which is a renowned foundation in Belgium, reveals a striking picture regarding Belgian-Turks' views on Turkey's EU accession process. According to the findings of the survey, 30% of Belgians of Turkish origin support Turkey's EU accession while 34% oppose it. In contrast, 22.5% of those surveyed expressed that it wouldn't make any difference for



Turkey to be an EU Member or not. The remaining 10% voiced no opinion in that respect<sup>7</sup>.

Furthermore, another question which was asked within the framework of the survey was regarding the benefits Turkey would gain from EU membership. As such, 47% of those surveyed stated that EU membership would bring more democracy, 57% stated it would bring more job opportunities and 53% said that it would strengthen the protection of human rights in the country.

According to another survey aiming to analyse and shed light on the role played by the Turkish diaspora and Turkish associations present in Belgium, it appears that more than half of Belgian-Turks were born in Turkey and lived their first years there whereas 74% of them define themselves as being “Euro-Turks”<sup>8</sup>. Another point underlined by the survey is the fact that Turkish associations in Belgium actually have insufficient relations and links with EU institutions. In contrast, many representatives of Turkish associations have expressed their willingness to learn more about EU affairs and to follow closely Turkey’s EU accession process to be able to play a role in that respect. One may add that for such a role to be played by them, the support of Turkish authorities may be of some help.

### **Belgium’s Position vis-à-vis Turkey’s EU Membership Process**

Currently, Belgium and Turkey are enjoying strong and enduring ties in a wide range of areas. At the same time, it is important to note that Brussels is home to most EU institutions along with NATO and is often referred to as being the heart of Europe.

Belgium is one of the Member States which has been supportive of Turkey’s EU membership perspective on a conditional basis. As with other EU candidates, the Belgian government follows closely the reforms undertaken by Turkey in that respect. As such, one should remind that Belgium has welcomed the ongoing process aimed at revising Turkey’s Constitution on a basis of further democratisation<sup>9</sup>.

In 1999, when Turkey was declared a candidate state at the Helsinki Summit, the then Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and his group in the European Parliament (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe-ALDE) played a constructive role in that respect. There were actually two main reasons for Belgium’s support for Turkey’s EU candidate status at that time: the possibility to further strengthen the integration of

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<sup>7</sup> King Baudouin Foundation, “Belgian-Turks: A Bridge or a Breach between Turkey and the European Union?”, December 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Eme Özdora-Aksak, Juan-Carlos Molleda, “Immigrant Integration through Public Relations and Public Diplomacy: An Analysis of the Turkish Diaspora in the Capital of the European Union”, June 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Kingdom of Belgium, “Southern Europe: Turkey”, 2016, Retrieved from

[http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/world\\_regions/southern\\_europe](http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/world_regions/southern_europe), 27.07.2016





Belgians of Turkish origin into the mainstream society and the assumption that Turkey's membership would consolidate NATO and the EU and thus transatlantic relations<sup>10</sup>.

In this context, Belgium didn't pose any obstacles for Turkey in 2005, when negotiations for EU membership started and several times underlined the need for Turkey to take bold steps in the political reform process. In the second half of 2010, during its rotating EU term presidency, Belgium highlighted the necessity for Turkey to abide by all of the membership criteria in order for new chapters to be opened to negotiations. However, no chapter was effectively opened to negotiations during Belgium's presidency<sup>11</sup>. One can add that the overarching issue which was an obstacle in the opening of new chapters was the Cyprus question and the Greek Cypriot Administration's veto in the Council of Ministers.

Although bilateral relations have flourished in all areas in the late 2000s, this stance was tempered because of the migration crisis beginning in 2015 and Belgian officials further underlined the necessity for Turkey to abide by its international obligations and fulfil the criteria and benchmarks included within the framework of the EU acquis. For instance, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel indicated that Turkey had a long road ahead to join the EU and that the ball was in Turkey's court in that respect. Emphasising that human rights, independence of the judiciary and freedom of the press are core EU values; Michel indicated that some chapters could be opened as a result of a more frank dialogue between the parties<sup>12</sup>. In addition, the resolution passed by the Belgian Parliament in 2015 regarding the 1915 events caused unprecedented tension between the parties<sup>13</sup>. Although this has led to a diplomatic crisis, no sanctions have been applied.

Underlining that Turkey's EU membership could be achieved provided that it sufficiently fulfils all of the necessary criteria and fully transposes the EU acquis within its national legislation, Belgian officials have underscored the importance for further cooperation between Turkey and the EU with respect to preventing the passage of foreign fighters joining terrorist organisations at the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting held in March 2016. It is also important to note that the EU is predominantly preoccupied with trying to alleviate the consequences of the global financial and economic crisis which started in 2008 along with issues such as the refugee crisis and the fight against terrorism. Belgium has consistently expressed the necessity for stronger cooperation

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<sup>10</sup> Sait Akşit, Özgehan Şenyuva, Çiğdem Üstün, "Avrupa Birliği Ülkelerinden Türkiye'nin Üyeliğine Bakış", *CES*, November 2009.

<sup>11</sup> "Türkiye 6 aydır AB ile fasıl açamadı", *CNN Türk*, 03.01.2011, Retrieved from <http://www.cnnturk.com/2011/turkiye/01/03/turkiye.6.aydir.ab.ile.fasil.acamadi/601793.0/>, 10.06.2016.

<sup>12</sup> "Belçika Başbakanı Michel: Türkiye, AB Üyeliğine Çok Uzak", *Haberler*, 29.11.2015, Retrieved from <http://www.haberler.com/belcika-basbakani-michel-turkiye-ab-uyeligine-cok-7922705-haberi/>, 16.05.2016.

<sup>13</sup> "Belçika, Ermeni tasarısını kabul etti", *NTV*, 23.07.2015, Retrieved from <http://www.ntv.com.tr/dunya/belcika-ermeni-tasarisini-kabul-etti.q25nokedgUuYh2zW3ozL7w>, 13.06.2016



between Turkey and the EU in handling the refugee crisis, the fight against human trafficking, increased border controls and creating a safe zone within Syria.

### The Economic Dimension of Turkey-Belgium Relations

According to 2015 figures, with a GDP of 410 billion euros and a 1.4% growth rate, Belgium is one of the strongest and most stable economies in the EU. One can say that there have been significant improvements in economic relations between Belgium and Turkey recently. In this context, there has been a steady increase in Belgian investments in Turkey.

**Table 1: Turkey-Belgium Trade between 2011 and 2015 (in thousand US dollars)**

Year	Exports	Imports	External Trade Volume	External Trade Balance
2011	2,450,998	3,959,254	6,410,252	-1,508,256
2012	2,360,258	3,690,322	6,050,580	-1,330,064
2013	2,575,804	3,843,376	6,417,180	-1,269,572
2014	2,940,313	3,863,934	6,804,247	-923,621
2015	2,556,250	3,146,923	5,703,173	-590,673

*Source: Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Turkey, 2015*

In 2015, Turkish investments to Belgium reached 5.7 billion dollars<sup>14</sup>. The main goods that are exported to Belgium are as follows: transport vehicles, machines, textiles and grocery products. In contrast, Turkey's imports from Belgium consist mainly of chemical and other industrial products, machines and electrical devices. Furthermore, the total investment realised by Belgium in Turkey between 2002 and 2015 reached 8.17 billion dollars. In contrast, the total investment realised by Turkey in Belgium during the same period reached 311 million dollars.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, bilateral relations are based on solid ground and significant progress has been achieved in several areas. It can be argued that 220,000-strong Belgian citizens of Turkish origin are a key player in the Belgian economy as well as a contributing factor to the promotion of Turkey's image in Belgium. Turks have been present in Belgium for over 50 years and are very well organised thanks to cultural centres, associations and private companies. At the same time, there has been a steady increase in the number of Belgian tourists to Turkey, clearly showing that the popularity of Turkey has increased from the economic and cultural perspective.

In the context of the Europalia Festival 2015, Turkey was the guest country, contributing in increasing awareness and knowledge of Turkey among Belgian public opinion. An increasing number of tourists from Belgium will help in strengthening bilateral relations and notably stimulate investments from one country to another. Within this framework,

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, "Relations Between Turkey and Belgium", 2011, Retrieved from <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-belgium.en.mfa>, 08.06.2016.





the investments made by Belgium in Turkey have rapidly increased. Undoubtedly, this will help Turkish investors in increasing their presence in the Belgian market and promoting Turkish products in that respect. In order to enhance Belgium's support for Turkey's EU membership process, economic and cultural activities will have to be expanded furthermore. Moreover, it is of utmost importance for Belgian-Turks, especially Turkish associations to take a more pro-active role in Belgian society. This will be contribute to Turkey's image and reputation in Belgium and stimulate better relations between the parties.

