

# The Decarbonisation Agenda in Türkiye, the European Union and the Eastern Mediterranean

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## Climate Change Mitigation in the Eastern Mediterranean

### Abstract

*This paper examines the potential for accelerating the decarbonisation efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean region, with a specific focus on the role of Türkiye and its relationship with the European Union (EU). As the EU advances its ambitious European Green Deal (EGD) and aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, close cooperation with Türkiye becomes crucial due to its significant economic impact on the region and its unique ties with the EU. The paper suggests that the EU's foreign policy aspects of the EGD and the existing Customs Union framework with Türkiye could serve as key instruments in fostering a green transition that benefits the entire Eastern Mediterranean. By examining the policy advantages and potential incentives, the paper proposes avenues for collaboration to achieve the climate objectives set forth in the UN Paris Climate Agreement and to address the urgent need for sustainable development in the region.*

### Introduction

Mitigating climate change in the Eastern Mediterranean requires particular attention due to Türkiye's overall role. Türkiye accounts for 5.44% of European GDP (IMF World Economic Outlook database, 2023), Türkiye has significant economic impact on the region and is linked to the European Union (EU) by special relationships. The European Green Deal (EGD) aims to reduce the continent's net greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050 and to "decouple" economic growth from carbon emissions (European Commission, 2019). As stated in the latest assessment report of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we either start to decarbonise now, or it will be too late for our planet (Shukla et al., 2022). Also, the REPowerEU plan, published in May 2022 by the European Commission, states that there is a "double urgency" to transform the energy system of Europe, since European countries want to tackle the climate crisis as well as to end the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels (European Commission, 2022). The immediate situation is even more dire for the Mediterranean, a semi-enclosed basin that experiences warming at a rate that is 20% faster than the rest of the world (UNEP/MAP and Plan Bleu, 2020). Türkiye, itself, experienced a year of flash floods and forest fires in 2021. Accelerating the decarbonisation of the Eastern Mediterranean will require close cooperation of the Region's countries with Türkiye. The European Union could play a vital role in achieving this outcome through employing the foreign policy aspects of the EGD.

Representing a significant policy advancement toward the achievement of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, the EGD was formally announced by the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in December 2019 (European Commission, 2019). The EGD was itself strengthened by U.S. President Joe Biden's January 2020 assumption of office, providing the EU with a more cooperative trans-Atlantic partner than his climate-sceptic predecessor. The momentum for change continued with the EU's announcement of its "Fit for 55" program in July 2021. The program aims at a more ambitious framework to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. Given the EU's prioritisation of its climate agenda, the framework of the Customs Union (CU) between Türkiye and the EU could prove to be the best conduit for incentivising Türkiye to achieve a green transition to an extent and on a timetable that will benefit the entire Eastern Mediterranean.

### Disparities among Türkiye, the Eastern Mediterranean Region, and the European Union

The complex dynamics of climate change mitigation in the Eastern Mediterranean are illustrated by a comparison of national policies concerning the phasing out of coal as an energy source (Figure 1). Greece, as an EU member state, has pledged to phase out coal by 2030. Israel, in which domestic natural gas resources are playing an important role in the country's energy supply mix, has made a similar pledge. Egypt, Lebanon and the Cyprus have already abandoned coal from their energy sector.

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Syria is the only other country that has no discernible plans for a coal exit in the Eastern Mediterranean. Amidst phasing out pledges in the region, Türkiye has not yet committed to announcing a date for a coal exit.



Figure 1: Individual country's commitment to phasing out of coal as an energy source

Source: Our World in Data, TEPAV visualisations

A parallel disparity exists among Eastern Mediterranean countries in terms of their performance rating on the ND-GAIN (Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative) Index, which compares countries' vulnerability to climate change as well as their policies to address its impacts. By 2020, the entire Mediterranean Basin averages 54 on the ND-GAIN index, with Türkiye performing slightly better at 56.7 (Global Adaptation Initiative, 2022). However, the northern average of the ND-GAIN index for the countries Spain, France, Italy, Malta, Croatia, Montenegro, Greece, Türkiye and Cyprus, amounts to 58.9 (Figure 2). While Türkiye rates significantly better than Egypt, with its score of 45.1. However, Türkiye's ND-GAIN index falls below the northern average.

The disparity between Türkiye and the European Union becomes particularly salient in light of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a carbon tariff on goods produced outside the EU that are imported into the Union. CBAM was formally proposed by the European Commission on July 14, 2021, with the announcement of the Commission's "Fit for 55" package, to realise the EU's target of achieving a 55% reduction in carbon emissions compared to 1990 levels by 2030 on the way to becoming a climate-neutral continent by 2050 (European Commission, 2021a).



Figure 2: Values of the ND-GAIN index for countries in the Mediterranean Basin

Source: Our World in Data, TEPAV visualisations

## Türkiye's Response to Fit for 55

In July 2021, Türkiye's Ministry of Trade published its "Green Deal Action Plan" and put ambitious targets for its own green and digital transformation in place. The action plan includes 32 objectives and 81 actions under 9 main headings. It was published with the aim of defining a roadmap for the preparation of more comprehensive action plans for achieving a carbon-neutral future (Ministry of Trade, 2021). In 2021, around 45 % of all Turkish exports are sold to EU member states (TURKSTAT, 2021). Therefore, the prospect of losing a significant portion of export revenue due to non-compliance with CBAM prompted Türkiye to take the necessary political decisions to move forward with its own green transition plans.

Although Türkiye was among the first countries to sign the Paris Climate Agreement, the agreement was not ratified by the Turkish parliament until October 7, 2021. On September 21, 2021, President Erdoğan also announced 2053 as Türkiye's own net-zero year during his address to the United Nations General Assembly. This is comparable to the EU's 2050, China's 2060, and India's 2070 targets (Net Zero Tracker, 2022). The goal of becoming net-zero by 2053 is ambitious for Türkiye. Carbon emissions have currently risen back to 524 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e<sup>1</sup>, after two years of decline, and the carbon absorption capacity, which refers to the ability of natural or artificial systems to remove and store carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, amounts to around 80 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e (TURKSTAT, 2022).

Türkiye updated its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which is a country's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change, as part of the global effort to address climate change under the Paris Agreement<sup>2</sup>, taking this ambitious net-zero target into account on the road to COP27, which was held in Sharm el Sheikh in November 2022. Yet the update failed to meet the expectations as being less ambitious than expected after the announcement of 2053 as the net zero year for the country.

The focus of continued efforts will lie on the new Climate Law, which will specify Türkiye's Emissions Trading System (ETS) and carbon pricing mechanisms. In parallel to the ETS, a carbon tax framework will also be specified in 2024 by the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change in the envisioned Climate Law (Ministry of Environment, 2022). Türkiye has also been planning to start selling its first domestically manufactured electric vehicle (EV), TOGG (Türkiye'nin Otomobili Girişim Grubu, Türkiye's Automobile Joint Venture Group Inc.), by 2023 in the context of a new public-private partnership project. Plans have already been made to invest in a network of charging stations along Türkiye's main arteries for 2023, together with plans to renew the public car fleet with EVs. The CEO of TOGG, Gürcan Karakaş, during his speech at the Forum Istanbul: 2050 Horizon Towards 2023, stated that the company ordered 1000 charging stations, and are working on defining the locations for their instalment (Habertürk, 2022).

In addition to these measures, Türkiye needs to determine a timetable for phasing out coal. The issue was already discussed in the Climate Council meeting organised by the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change on February 21-25, 2022. However, a deadline for Türkiye's coal exit remains to be fixed (Beyond Fossil Fuels, 2022). The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War on February 24, 2022 represents a significant change in European and global politics and economics. The unprovoked Russian aggression against the Ukraine and the boycott measures taken by former importers of Russian oil and gas have further increased Türkiye's significance for the EU's energy security and the implementation of the EGD.

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<sup>1</sup> CO<sub>2</sub>e stands for "carbon dioxide equivalent" and is a unit of measurement used to express the global warming potential of different greenhouse gases. It is a way to standardise the comparison of various greenhouse gases based on their potential to contribute to global warming over a specified time frame.

<sup>2</sup> The agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) signed at the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) in Paris, France in 2015.

## The Russia-Ukraine war as a game changer

Prior to the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, the COVID-19 pandemic dominated political and economic processes on a global scale. The observed slight decline in atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations that resulted from the global economic downturn illustrated the impact of human activity on the drivers of climate change. Moreover, the economic conditions evolving during the pandemic assisted in the implementation of significant measures to combat greenhouse gas emissions. Firstly, low interest rates of the pandemic period enabled a capital-intensive economic transformation as part of a climate change mitigation agenda. Secondly, the post-pandemic recovery requires productivity gains, which are stimulated by a targeted public expenditure program as needed by the green and digital transformations.

The Russia-Ukraine war now constitutes a second and perhaps even more important shift in global political and economic developments. The prospect of a protracted war increases the likelihood that Europe will increasingly reduce economic activities with Russia. The need to trade with Russia in energy, raw materials, and food supplies provides an opportunity to diversify European economies through a green transition (Sak, 2022). However, such a transition is likely to take place on a medium-term time scale. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was understood that the transition process has to be managed properly to prevent a twisting in energy and food prices. Hence, three weeks prior to the Russian invasion, the EU revised its taxonomy of energy sources and reclassified natural gas and nuclear energy as bridge fuels for the short term (Spinaci, 2022). The reclassification has paved the way for Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea natural gas to be considered as alternative supplies to the EU's Russian gas imports, rendering further development of these resources as commercially feasible.

The turn of events has created new possibilities for Türkiye to realize its ambition to become an energy hub by bringing diverse natural gas sources as well as green hydrogen to the EU market. The Trans-Anatolian Pipeline Project (TANAP), which was signed in 2011, which will be connected directly to the SGC (Southern Gas Corridor), with the purpose of delivering Azerbaijani gas to Türkiye and further to Europe, has become even more prominent (Southern Gas Corridor, n.d.). The proximity to the market and the availability of LNG terminals, pipelines connecting Türkiye to the EU countries and the capacity to increase renewable energy use in Türkiye provide mutual advantages. Türkiye is boosting its importance not only in terms of migration but also for the energy security of the Mediterranean EU countries, allowing the EU and Türkiye to envisage a common future. In this light, the Customs Union (CU) between the European Union and Türkiye takes on a new importance.

## The updating and modernising of the Customs Union as the basis of a green transformation in Türkiye

Türkiye's decarbonisation agenda takes shape through its integration into the EU economy. Türkiye's industrial transformation has been boosted more by the 1996 CU arrangement with the EU than by the currently stalled accession process that started in 2004. The former has firmly turned Türkiye into an industrial country in the Eastern Mediterranean. Viewed from this position, decarbonisation may be viewed as a continuation of Turkish modernisation in cooperation with Europe. The EGD has added an entirely new dimension to the debate between the EU and Türkiye on updating the CU. The CU has now become outdated as the digital transformation unfolds. The EGD framework has instead the potential to completely renew the existing CU arrangement.

Today, Türkiye is one of Europe's main polluters with regard to electricity production, together with Germany, Poland, and the Ukraine. As of 2015, Turkish carbon emissions amounted to around 12 % of the EU-wide emissions<sup>3</sup> (Climate Watch, 2020). Assuming that the EU meets its 55 % carbon emissions reduction target in 2030 and Türkiye keeps its 2015 commitment to lowering emissions by 21 % by 2030,

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<sup>3</sup> Calculated as the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (in Mt) of Türkiye as a percentage of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (in Mt) of the European Union.

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Türkiye's carbon emissions will amount to 40 % of EU-wide emissions in 2030 (European Commission, 2021b; The Republic of Turkey, 2015). This means that Türkiye's share of the emissions in EU-wide emissions is on track to become 3.3 times the 2015 level in 2030. Thus, the decarbonisation of Türkiye is essential to both the decarbonisation of Europe and the Mediterranean.

The modernisation of the CU assumes a new dimension in the context of the decarbonisation agenda. The old CU arrangement as well as the 2014 proposals to jumpstart CU updating are now all outdated. The EGD has radically changed the equation. The need for technical preparations involving Turkish measures to deal with environmental degradation and lower carbon emissions is now of the utmost importance. CU modernisation could constitute the vehicle to achieve this transformation. Further, the CU is a much more effective framework than a free trade agreement for making European value chains operating in Türkiye stronger and greener. Therefore, CU modernisation is essential for the digital and green transformation agendas, as Türkiye's existing value chains can be made climate-friendly and new climate-smart value chains can be established in the services and agricultural sectors.

However, coordinating with the EGD requires a stronger political will in Türkiye to pass ambitious decarbonisation laws. The decision to ratify the Paris Agreement and to define 2053 as the net-zero year were both political decisions that advanced the process. Technical preparations are relatively straightforward. It will require the appropriate political will in Ankara in order to foster change in Türkiye. However, this will have to be carried out at an accelerated pace to avoid CBAM tariffs in the near future.

Türkiye's ambitious green agenda can only be realised through new European investments in sectors within the scope of green transformation, starting from green energy transition, that strengthen value chains in the country. With Europe becoming a more intrinsic part of the Turkish economy, where European foreign direct investments (FDI) account for 73% of total FDI in Türkiye by 2022 (CBRT, 2023), Türkiye can be incentivised to change and find the necessary funding. Türkiye's 12% share of carbon emissions in total emissions from the EU could be maintained or even lowered, benefitting both the environment and the Turkish economy.

On a wider geopolitical view, the failure of oil-producing countries in the wider region of the Middle East and North Africa to comply with EGD requirements could drive many companies, which fail to achieve EGD requirements to relocate their operations. A greener and stronger Turkish economy will be needed, both to guarantee more orderly migration and job creation, as well as to manage the economic and social transformations to come.

## Conclusion

Türkiye's CU modernising can be the basis of Ankara's participation in a greener Eastern Mediterranean. Transformation of a large industrial country with a population of more than 84 million requires more efforts and larger investments. Only closer cooperation with the EU and the related capital-intensive economic transformation can turn Türkiye into an intrinsic part of a green Mediterranean initiative. It all depends on the nature of the working relationship between the EU and Türkiye. The CU negotiations need to be organised within the context of the EGD. Türkiye and Europe should have compatible decarbonisation plans and comparable ETs. They should also cooperate more to deal with the economic and social transformations to be brought on by international migration, driven in part by climate change factors.

In contrast to the "positive agenda" items created around cooperation on Syrian migration, which were too shallow to form the basis of a comprehensive negotiating process, the modernisation of the CU in the age of the European Green Deal potentially provides a sufficiently deep framework to envision a common future for the EU and Türkiye.

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A common regional perspective between the EU and Türkiye is a necessity when it comes to the Mediterranean, in general and the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular. We need a more thorough, well-designed, and positive agenda, particularly when it comes to the depth of digitalisation, biologisation (i.e., the assimilation into a biological framework), decarbonisation, and common security issues at hand. Add energy security cooperation once again to the agenda, together with joint green hydrogen production for the EU market. Yet a joint action requires a mechanism for climate policy dialogue in the region.

The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF; <https://emgf.org>), established in 2019, includes member states such as Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, providing a platform for coordinating activities related to gas exploration, production, transportation, and export to maximise the region's gas potential and foster energy security and economic development. In the current context, the Forum could be taken into account as a single purpose vehicle to start a policy dialogue on the issues at hand. Firstly, unlike the Gas Forum, an Eastern Mediterranean Climate Policy Forum could be established by the participation of all countries in the region. Secondly, the forum could initially be hosted by business support organisations, like chambers of commerce and industry, of the region providing a conducive economic policy dialogue process. Thirdly, the focus could be more comprehensive including issues like climate change, water management, biodiversity, green finance, energy security, digital transformation and international trade.

An Eastern Mediterranean Climate Forum could be helpful in jumpstarting a broader policy dialogue on EGD in the region to mitigate climate change risks in the region. Climate policy coordination in the Eastern Mediterranean could also lay the foundations of a blue growth strategy for the region as a whole.

However, the abandonment of the CU with Türkiye for the signing of a free trade agreement in the case of Türkiye-EU trade relations would be a mistake that would have highly negative consequences for the European Green Deal. A free trade agreement would not provide a framework to negotiate the complexities the EGD requires. The urgency of combatting climate change and its consequences demands a return of an ambitious agenda for EU-Türkiye relations. Türkiye's journey to a green transition should form part of the motivation and the plan for a Türkiye-EU Customs Union 2.0. A greener and a cleaner Eastern Mediterranean depends on it.

## About the Author

Güven Sak holds a Ph.D. degree in Economics from the Middle East Technical University and M.A. degree from University of East Anglia. He worked as a senior researcher at the Capital Markets Board of Turkey, as a faculty member of the Department of Public Finance at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Ankara University and as an external founding member of the Monetary Policy Council of the Central Bank of Turkey. He became Professor of Public Economics in 2003. In 2006, he was transferred to the newly established TOBB University of Economics and Technology (TOBB ETÜ). He was the founding managing director of Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) in 2004 which is the first and only economic policy think tank in Turkey. Area Studies Program of TEPAV has been active in private sector development projects, entrepreneurship and SME support programs in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. Güven Sak co-chaired the Migration Task Force of Think 20 (T20) during the German, Japanese, Argentinian and Saudi Arabian Presidencies of the G20. Güven Sak writes on economic issues for *Nasıl Bir Ekonomi*. He is currently Director of Area Studies Program at TEPAV and President/CEO of TEPAV Global, Washington, DC, USA.



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