

TACTICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TÜRKIYE AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER AND NORMATIVE CHALLENGE IN THE FIELDS OF MIGRATION AND ENERGY¹

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and Türkiye has historically been marked by dynamic complexity, reflecting a combination of political, economic, cultural and geostrategic factors. As a candidate for accession since 1989, Türkiye has played a central role in the EU's strategic considerations, especially in the areas of migration management and energy security. This complexity highlights the importance of theoretical approaches that recognise the diversity of motivations and strategies of international actors. In that line, the present article has adopted tactical constructivism, as proposed by Steele, Gould, and Kessler,² as an innovative lens deemed appropriate for explaining the selective instrumentalisation of norms in contexts of strategic interdependence.

Unlike conventional constructivism, which tends to assume a stable internalisation of norms and identities, tactical constructivism presumes that actors are able to strategically mobilise norms, shaping them according to contextual interests. This approach aims to analyse the dynamics between normative rhetoric and pragmatic practices, especially in cases in which the narrative on values serves to legitimise decisions that contradict those same values.³

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the relationship between the European Union and Türkiye in the context of Enlargement Policy, using migration and energy as case studies. The research sought to explore how normative dynamics between the European Union and Türkiye develop in contexts of asymmetric cooperation, using the theoretical framework of tactical constructivism to understand how norms are strategically mobilised. Methodologically, a comparative study was applied based on a most-different systems design logic. The analysis showed that, in both migration and energy, the Union adopts a selective and pragmatic stance towards its normative commitments, while Türkiye instrumentalises its geopolitical position to obtain strategic benefits. The study highlighted the tensions between normativity and pragmatism, contributing to the debate on the external coherence of the European Union, particularly in the context of its Policy on Enlargement.

Keywords: enlargement, tactical constructivism, Türkiye, European Union.





RESUMO

CONSTRUTIVISMO TÁTICO E O ALARGAMENTO DA UNIÃO EUROPEIA: A TURQUIA COMO PARCEIRA ESTRATÉGICA E DESAFIO NORMATIVO NOS DOMÍNIOS DAS MIGRAÇÕES E DA ENERGIA

Este artigo analisa as relações entre a União Europeia e a Turquia no contexto da Política de Alargamento, usando como estudos de caso os domínios das migrações e da energia. A investigação procurou explorar como as dinâmicas normativas entre a União Europeia e a Turquia se desenvolvem em contextos de cooperação assimétrica, recorrendo ao enquadramento teórico do construtivismo tático para compreender de que forma as normas são mobilizadas estrategicamente. Metodologicamente, aplicou-se um estudo comparativo baseado numa lógica de *most-different systems design*. A análise mostrou que, tanto nas migrações como na energia, a União adota uma postura seletiva e pragmática face aos seus compromissos normativos, enquanto a Turquia instrumentaliza a sua posição geopolítica para obter benefícios estratégicos. O estudo evidenciou as tensões entre normatividade e pragmatismo, contribuindo para o debate sobre a coerência externa da União Europeia, em particular no quadro da sua Política de Alargamento.

Palavras-chave: alargamento, construtivismo tático, Turquia, União Europeia.

Its usefulness in studying EU-Türkiye relations lies precisely in its ability to capture how both actors use norms – such as human rights, the rule of law, or migration management – as instruments of political negotiation.

In this article, two concepts emerge as central to the analysis: functional interdependence and tactical norms. The first refers to phenomena in which two agents, despite power asymmetries, depend on each other to achieve specific operational objectives – a concept based on the seminal work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye,⁴ as well as its application to the Turkish case by Aydın-Düzgüt and Rumeli.⁵ The second refers to the instrumental appropriation of norms for strategic purposes, without this implying an ethical commitment to their substantive content.⁶ Both concepts will be operationalised throughout the article and articulated with the empirical framework of EU-Türkiye relations in the fields of migration and energy.

Türkiye's geopolitical importance has been amplified by a series of significant events, including the attempted coup in 2016, the war in Ukraine, and recurring migration crises. These developments have not only impacted Türkiye's internal stability but also redefined its role as a key player in the Union's external relations strategy. Faced with these multiple challenges, including energy dependence and migratory pressures, the EU has sought to achieve a delicate balance between maintaining its normative commitments and adopting pragmatic strategies to ensure cooperation with Türkiye, doing so in the broader framework of Enlargement Policy.

Against this backdrop, the article at hand endeavours to explore the following question: how are European standards used as strategic tools in the EU's Enlargement Policy towards Türkiye, shaping the dynamics of this process and cooperation in critical sectors?

The methodology adopted is based on a comparative 'most-different systems design' type case study, which allows for the analysis of two distinct sectors – migration and energy – in which, despite their functional differences, similar patterns of normative behaviour can be observed. The analysis will be developed relying on primary sources (institutional documents, official speeches, treaties) and secondary sources (scientific literature, public policy reports). The choice of this methodological strategy is inspired

by works such as those by George and Bennett⁷ and Landman,⁸ which focus on identifying causal mechanisms through functional contrasts.

The article is structured into four main sections. The first presents the theoretical framework, focusing on the evolution of constructivism up to its tactical aspect. The second and third sections delve into, respectively, the domains of migration and energy, applying the theoretical model to EU-Türkiye dynamics. The fourth section offers a comparison between the two cases, highlighting how norms and interdependence are mobilised selectively. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main findings, and proposes paths for future research on EU's normative flexibility and Türkiye's role as a tactical actor in its external relations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TACTICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

As announced, this article adopts constructivism as a theoretical framework for analysing relations between the EU and Türkiye, with a particular focus on the role highlighted by the third generation of constructivists of norms as strategic tools in the context of enlargement and cooperation in critical sectors such as migration and energy.

The use of constructivist meta-theory⁹ is neither new in international relations in general nor in European Studies in particular.¹⁰ Since the 1990s, various issues in international and EU policy have been analysed in the light of assumptions such as the social construction of reality,¹¹ the importance of language and norms, and the mutability of identities and interests through interactions. Constructivism assumes that material resources only acquire meaning for human action through a structure of shared knowledge.¹² In other words, ideas are not just individual psychological states, but collective social phenomena.¹³

Although material phenomena exist independently of human thought, they cannot be observed without the mediation of language. Furthermore, ideas are fundamental in shaping the identities and interests of agents. Consequently, identities are not static but formed and transformed over time through interaction with 'others'.¹⁴ This process therefore implies that the national interest

is also dynamic and conditioned by changing identities.¹⁵ Constructivism emerged as a critical alternative to the dominant rationalism in International Relations, particularly structural realism and institutional liberalism.

Constructivism's relational ontology awards pride of place to the idea that international reality is co-constituted by agents and structures, which are simultaneously shaped by and themselves shape the environment in which they operate.¹⁶ In this context, norms play a central role in traditional constructivism, functioning as standards of behaviour and, rather than merely providing for punishment for their violation, they guide correct behaviour and are able to transform the motivations and beliefs of agents.¹⁷

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.

The first generation of constructivists – often referred to as conventional or traditional constructivism – sought to demonstrate that ideas, norms, and identities had real causal effects on state behaviour, often using methodologies compatible with positivist assumptions. Authors such as Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore and Jeffrey Chechcel stood out at this stage for arguing that norms not only regulate but also constitute the interests of states.¹⁸ This approach became particularly influential in European Studies, which sought to understand the role of the EU in promoting values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

The second generation – identified as critical or reflexive constructivism – advanced beyond the limits of positivism, emphasising the co-constitution between agency and structure, the performative role of language, and the reflexivity of agents.¹⁹ This strand began to consider not only the social effects of norms, but also the discursive and narrative processes that constitute them. Its proximity to post-positivist perspectives led to a deepening of analyses of identity, otherness, and normative contestation, although it has been criticised for, in some cases, losing explanatory power by moving away from the empirical level.

The first two generations, although essential for the theoretical advancement of the discipline, faced difficulties in capturing contexts in which normative rhetoric is contradicted by strategic practices. The growing dissociation between discourse and practice – visible in multiple domains of foreign policy – exposed the limits of these approaches. In response, a third generation emerged, known as tactical constructivism, which proposes a more pragmatic understanding of the relationship between norms, identity, and agency. This perspective acknowledges that actors may instrumentalise norms selectively, strategically, and even cynically, with no deep ethical commitment, to legitimise interest-driven behaviours.

Nevertheless, in 2020, Brent Steele, Harry Gould, and Oliver Kessler²⁰ edited a collective work that challenged the assumptions of the first and second generations of constructivists, and introduced a number of more critical reflections on this meta-theory. The tactical approach highlights that norms do not lose their relevance when instrumentalised; on the contrary, they become essential tools in the construction of legitimacy and in the negotiation of power. This instrumentalisation is visible both in discourses that mask practices contrary to declared values and in the selective choices of normative conformity that actors use for bargaining, negotiation or containment purposes.²¹ Tactical constructivism, therefore, does not reject the ontological and epistemological foundations of constructivism, but rethinks the role of norms as objects of strategic appropriation.

Traditional constructivism surmises that international interactions are not limited to rational calculations based exclusively on material interests, but are also shaped by shared norms, values, and social identities. Alexander Wendt, one of the leading theorists of this paradigm, argued in the 1990s that the structure of international relations

was socially constructed and that the meanings attributed to actions shape the behaviour of states.²² In this context, norms emerge as structuring elements that shape both expectations regarding the conduct of states and their perceptions of themselves and others. The ethical dimension of states' behaviours stems from their confrontation with existing normative standards, wherefore these norms shape behaviours at the same time as the agency of states and, with it, their worldviews and ethics contribute to the design of these same norms in a co-constitutive manner.²³ For decades, this assumption has been widely applied in international relations, with results which are more interesting, complex and profound than those achieved by positivistic theories until then. However, in this perspective, there is a close relationship between some constructivists and the ethical and normative dimension of agency: 'the moral power of norms lies in their effects but acts through their social power as something normative and even normal, ensuring acceptance through "socialisation, shame, boycotts, sanctions and the like"'.²⁴ At the same time, other researchers tried to focus on the co-constitution of agency and structure, denying ontological precedence to either of them and concerning themselves with the process rather than with the result, which distanced them from other post-positivist theories such as feminist, post-colonialist and post-structuralist theories.²⁵

Regardless of the option, Jelena Subotic acknowledges that there are limits to research on norms, and that change is urgently needed: 'Studies on norms have stagnated and are probably approaching a conceivable end point. For critical constructivists, the end of norms would already be overdue'.²⁶ Along these lines, tactical constructivism, while not rejecting the focus on norms and identities, posits that actors, far from acting solely on the basis of genuinely internalised beliefs and ethical considerations, can selectively instrumentalise norms to justify decisions and shape the international system in accordance with their identity and interests. This approach is particularly relevant in contexts in which pragmatic pressures and normative constraints coexist, such as in EU-Türkiye relations.

The concept of 'tactical norms', which will be used in this paper and which originates from the seminal approach presented by Brent Steele, Harry Gould, and Oliver Kessler,²⁷ is an attempt to conceptualise the explanation of how actors use normative discourses strategically to achieve immediate goals, without necessarily committing themselves deeply to the values that these norms represent. This instrumentalisation of norms can be seen in actions aimed at political, economic or security gains, while maintaining an appearance of compliance with established normative standards. 'Tactical norms' are defined as norms that are strategically mobilised without any deep commitment to their substantive meanings, for the purposes of legitimisation, containment or negotiation. This conception is detailed by Jack Amoureux, who describes the ethical and strategic use of norms by international actors, particularly in the context of the US-led 'war on terror' – liberal values as an attempt to legitimise contested interventionist practices.²⁸

This focus is particularly interesting when analysing relations between the EU and Türkiye, which are marked by constant tension between proclaimed values and practices of convenience. When studying enlargement policy and cooperation in areas such as migration and energy, tactical constructivism allows us to observe how the EU selectively mobilises its normative discourse to justify pragmatic decisions, while Türkiye

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uses EU norms as tools to strengthen its geopolitical position and negotiate political and financial concessions.²⁹

Despite its usefulness, one limitation of tactical constructivism is the difficulty in discerning when normative discourses are being tactically instrumentalised and when

they reflect genuine commitments. In the context of EU-Türkiye relations, this distinction can be particularly challenging, given the continuous intertwining of strategic interests and declared values.

Another challenge lies in the variation in normative expectations in different sectors. As this article will argue, the EU shows greater pragmatic flexibility in areas such as migration and energy than in more sensitive political issues, such as the democratic backsliding in Türkiye. This variation suggests that norms are shaped contextually and that their instrumentalisation depends on the specific dynamics of each area of cooperation.

MIGRATIONS AS TACTICAL NORMATIVE CHALLENGE IN EU-TÜRKIYE RELATIONS

The Agreement between the EU and Türkiye, signed in March 2016,³⁰ represents a significant milestone in the management of the migratory pressure that had been affecting the European continent in the preceding months. In response to the significant increase in migrants and refugees arriving in Europe, the EU and Türkiye established an agreement with the aim of controlling the flow of migration. Under the terms of the agreement, all irregular migrants arriving on the Greek islands from Türkiye after 10 March 2016 would be sent back to Türkiye.³¹ In return, for every Syrian returned, another Syrian would be allowed to enter the EU, within an initial limit of 72-thousand people. In addition, the EU committed to financing this operation with three billion euros previously destined to support refugees in Türkiye, and to providing a further three billion euros by the end of 2018.³² Other concessions included the revitalisation of Türkiye's EU accession negotiations and visa exemptions for Turkish citizens, conditional on compliance with specific criteria. In 2024, the European Commission put forward the possibility of resuming high-level meetings and discussions on the functioning and modernisation of the Customs Union³³ – a *quid pro quo* for this institutional arrangement. The allocation and use of these funds have been subject to scrutiny, notably by the European Court of Auditors, which has questioned the transparency and effectiveness of the

application of resources,³⁴ and even the impact of this dynamic on Turkish domestic policy and compliance with international obligations arising from the State's binding commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights, as noted by Muftuler-Baç.³⁵ In fact, this agreement allowed for the implementation, supported by regulations, of the outsourcing of the management of the Union's borders in a highly contested process,³⁶ for failing to guarantee decent conditions for migrants, which, in addition to being illegal under international law, would be immoral and inconsistent with all the political and regulatory principles of the EU itself.³⁷ However, the justification presented by the Union to deflect the accusations of illegality and immorality regarding these acts relies on its securitization narrative, which identifies the initial migration crisis as an ontological threat warranting any type of response, even if it violates rules,³⁸ as is evident in various communications from official representatives and in the statement that made public the terms of the agreement with Türkiye.³⁹ In addition to the above, the agreement implemented readmission practices, whereby migrants who did not apply for asylum, or whose applications were rejected, would return to Türkiye, which, in turn, undertook to prevent new irregular migration routes to the EU.⁴⁰ Internally, the agreement had a significant impact on European migration policy.⁴¹ Countries such as Greece and Germany felt the effects directly: Greece, due to its geographical proximity to Türkiye, became a focal point for migrant arrivals and faced significant logistical and humanitarian challenges; Germany, which adopted an open-door policy under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, welcomed a large number of refugees, sparking debates about integration and reception capacity.⁴² In fact, this policy of outsourcing immigration and asylum management is not necessarily an innovation of the 2015 crisis, nor is it exclusive to relations with Türkiye, as Inês Sousa has shown.⁴³ The practice, with the Turkish candidate, dates back to the Helsinki Summit and the year – 1999 – in which its status as a candidate country was recognised. The EU's demands were mapped out by Gökalp Aras, with a role of growing importance, particularly since the instability of migration flows fuelled by the Arab Spring and the war in Syria, with the Turkish state acting as the gatekeeper of Fortress Europe. Türkiye is urged to cooperate with the EU regarding the control of its external borders, in particular through integrated border management, harmonisation of visa policies and effective implementation of readmission agreements, including the elimination of geographical restrictions imposed on the Geneva Convention of 1951. In return, the EU has committed to offering financial and institutional capacity-building support, visa exemptions and, if the remaining accession criteria are met, the possibility of full membership of the Union.⁴⁴ On several occasions, however, Türkiye has not failed to use this vantage point over the EU, and has often threatened to open its borders, allowing migrants to move freely to Europe, revealing the tactical – or utilitarian – way in which Türkiye deals with the (normative) agreement, wielding migration as a bargaining chip to achieve political

and financial goals. The threats arise at different times and always in response to some EU decision that is out of line with Türkiye's interests: in 2016,⁴⁵ in response to the freezing of negotiations; in 2019,⁴⁶ when calling for the creation of a buffer zone in northern Syria; and, in 2020,⁴⁷ for being called out for promise-breaking by the Europeans, which was compounded by a period of increased tension with the partners of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

However, despite various concessions, the EU continued to insist that Türkiye was not complying with the *acquis communautaire*, particularly in sensitive areas for the candidate country, such as the rule of law and human rights.⁴⁸ In this regard, the EU remained consistent, as far as its narrative is concerned, with what it had established in its Enlargement Policy – which was intended to be normative and aligned with fundamental values – considering it an important tool for promoting democracy and ensuring the credibility of the Union.⁴⁹

At the same time, aware of the strategic importance of this candidate, the 2024 report on refugees recognised how difficult it was to accommodate such a large community, and praised Türkiye's performance,⁵⁰ in a document in which the term 'human rights' is mentioned only once.

However, it would be inaccurate to assume that Türkiye is a passive target of European pressure, as the academic community has extensively and almost unanimously demonstrated regarding the process of Europeanisation in the country.⁵¹ Saime Özçürümez and Nazlı Şenses⁵² used Türkiye as a case study to test the resilience of states receiving EU externalisation policies, acknowledging that this particular candidate accommodates some of the organisation's demands, but with reservations.

This analysis made it possible to identify the sequence of events that led to the signing of the 2016 agreement: the sharp increase in migrant arrivals in 2015, the tragedies in the Mediterranean, and the pressure on European asylum systems created a perception of urgency reinforced by European discourses, which culminated in the agreement. European narratives on border security evolved from a humanitarian approach to one focused on protection and control, as indeed several authors working on securitisation theory had already anticipated.⁵³ This shift in narratives was not merely an ad-hoc reaction to events such as the tragedies in the Mediterranean or the increase in migrant arrivals; it reflected a social construction around threats and insecurity that shaped political practices. 'Tactical norms' were used strategically to frame the migration crisis as a threat to Europe's internal security, a move that enabled the transformation of migration policies. By adopting this new security norm, Member States were able to justify tightening borders and strictly controlling arrivals, creating a strategic alignment between security norms and political responses, as had already been seen in other geographies,⁵⁴ highlighting the inconsistency between their values and praxis, while using norms not as limitations on action, but as tools for pursuing immediate strategic objectives.

Table 1 > Summary: causes and impact of phenomena in the field of migration

Phenomenon	Causal mechanism	Observed impact
Migration crisis (2015)	Discursive construction of migration as a threat	Justification for containment policies
EU-Türkiye Statement (2016)	Externalisation of borders via bilateral agreement	Reduction of irregular flows, dependence on Türkiye
Turkish threats to 'open borders'	Geopolitical bargaining based on functional interdependence	Reinforcement of regulatory asymmetry and European concessions

Source: Author's own elaboration.

In short, the field of migration proves to be a favoured terrain for the operationalisation of tactical constructivism. The analysis of the 2016 EU-Türkiye agreement demonstrates how European norms were strategically mobilised to respond to internal pressures, while Türkiye instrumentalised its geographical position as a bargaining chip. This interaction highlighted an asymmetrical functional interdependence and selective normative adaptation, marked by security narratives that conceal a pragmatic logic of containment and externalisation. Here, the relationship between norms, interests and agency reveals its tactical dimension par excellence.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE 2016 EU-TÜRKIYE AGREEMENT DEMONSTRATES HOW EUROPEAN NORMS WERE STRATEGICALLY MOBILISED TO RESPOND TO INTERNAL PRESSURES, WHILE TÜRKIYE INSTRUMENTALISED ITS GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION AS A BARGAINING CHIP.

ENERGY IN EU-TÜRKIYE RELATIONS. BETWEEN COOPERATION AND TENSION

In terms of energy, the relationship between the EU and Türkiye is characterised by a complex web of cooperation and tension, shaped by strategic projects such as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Southern Gas Corridor, as well as by geopolitical events with an impact on energy issues, such as the war in Ukraine. TANAP, launched in 2018, is a rather unique project because, despite being dedicated to international gas transport, it possesses the features of a national pipeline, which generates competition in Türkiye's domestic market. Although exempt from national legislation and governed by international agreements, TANAP's purpose at the time of its planning was to improve market liquidity and security of supply, as well as to correct structural distortions in the Turkish gas market.⁵⁵ With a length of 1,850 kilometres, TANAP connects the South Caucasus Pipeline to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP),

establishing a direct route to the European market. One of its chief goals was to diversify the EU's natural gas sources, reducing dependence on Russian gas and strengthening European energy security.

Internally, Türkiye faces growing demand for energy, especially electricity and natural gas. As approximately 74% of this demand is met by imports, the state has invested in its conversion into an energy corridor between the West and the East, aligning its energy policies with those of the EU.⁵⁶ Surrounded by major gas exporters, Türkiye has the potential to transport significant quantities of oil and gas to Europe, making it a strategic location for the construction of gas pipelines, driven by geopolitical security considerations that once again place it at an advantage over its European partners.⁵⁷

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had profound implications for EU energy policy.⁵⁸ European dependence on Russian gas became a strategic vulnerability, urging the EU to prioritise the search for alternatives that would guarantee energy supplies and diminish the advantage that Russia would eventually use as leverage in the context of the conflict. According to Hartvig *et al.*, the EU opted for a strategy of diminishing dependence through diversification of sources, reduction of demand and technological changes.⁵⁹ In addition, the war accelerated investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency in Europe, although the complete transition still faces significant challenges. On the Turkish side, establishing itself as a regional energy hub involves a careful foreign policy,⁶⁰ as it requires maintaining pragmatic relations with energy-producing countries such as Azerbaijan and Iran, despite international sanctions and political complexities.⁶¹ This pragmatic approach allows Türkiye to diversify its energy sources and increase its negotiating leverage with European partners, who are once again faced with this tension between the ethical application of norms (as in the case of sanctions against Iran) and the pragmatism of the need to diversify energy sources, creating other dependencies that will condition it in the future, in terms of negotiating *quid pro quos* with Türkiye. Nevertheless, Erçen and Çelikpala are more sceptical about this possibility, arguing that Türkiye is more likely to remain an energy corridor than a hub, due, among other things, to TANAP's pricing policy and growing energy dependence on Russia.⁶²

The discovery of natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has intensified the tensions between Türkiye, Greece and Cyprus.⁶³ The dispute centred on the delimitation of exclusive economic zones and energy resource exploitation rights, with Türkiye conducting exploration activities in disputed areas, claiming to be defending its interests and those of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.⁶⁴ These actions drew condemnation from the EU and increased regional tensions, complicating Türkiye's relations with its neighbours and with the Union itself.

As the same authors conclude, the last two decades have marked a transformation in Turkish foreign policy towards the search for a 'strategic autonomy' that balances global powers and strengthens regional alliances.⁶⁵ This approach has led to clashes with the EU and the United States, but without causing a total withdrawal from the Western

international system – Türkiye’s continued membership of NATO and the EU accession process, as well as its ongoing political and diplomatic relations with European states, are examples of this. But while it is true that Türkiye’s foreign policy has been characterised by recurring crises, it is also true that it has adopted a growing pragmatism,⁶⁶ especially in the face of economic challenges, making strategic and pragmatic use of the norms that surround it – whether in the framework of the Enlargement Policy or through other conventions and agreements it has established over the decades with its Western partners.

In the energy sector, too, it was possible to register a logic of normative instrumentalisation, albeit with less discursive weight and greater emphasis on strategic interdependence. European rhetoric on diversification and sustainability was reconciled with growing dependence on natural gas from Türkiye, especially after 2022. On the Turkish side, the strengthening of its position as an energy hub allowed it to reinforce its regional agency, albeit with structural limitations. Energy thus illustrates how norms and interests are intertwined in a tactical dynamic of conditional convergence.

Table 2 > Summary: causes and impacts of phenomena in the field of energy

Moment	Causal mechanism	Observed impact
Construction of TANAP (2015–18)	Strategic cooperation for EU energy diversification	Increased geopolitical relevance of Türkiye as a transit country
Energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine (2022)	Strengthening of functional interdependence and urgency of alternatives to Russian gas	Consolidation of Türkiye as an indispensable energy partner
Discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean	Competition for energy sovereignty and tensions with Greece and Cyprus	Weakening of the EU’s normative narrative and tactical use of Turkish discourse on exclusion

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

THE FRAMEWORK OF ENLARGEMENT AND THE FUTURE OF EU-TÜRKIYE RELATIONS: COMPARISON OF THE TWO DOMAINS IN LIGHT OF TACTICAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Academia agrees on the characterisation of EU and Türkiye relations: simultaneously marked by strategic interdependence and normative divergence, particularly in the areas of migration and energy, their interactions have been influenced by geopolitical, eco-

conomic and social factors, within the more institutionalised framework of the accession process.⁶⁷ An analysis of these interactions through the lens of constructivism, both general and tactical, offers a deeper understanding of the underlying strategies and motivations. By emphasising the role of ideas, norms and identities in shaping international politics and in the context of EU enlargement, constructivism highlights how European identity and shared norms influence the integration of new members. The EU uses the enlargement process not only as territorial expansion, but also as a means of disseminating European values and norms, promoting political stability, freedom of movement and increased trade through access to the single market.⁶⁸ However, this more traditional approach overlooks the inconsistencies that have marked relations between these two agents, which remain interconnected for reasons that are more complex than those which are apparent at first glance.

The relationship between the EU and Türkiye in the areas of migration and energy reflects a functional interdependence in both areas, but with different normative and pragmatic approaches. Constructivism helps explaining how these interactions are structured around the instrumentalisation of norms and the balance between discourse and practice. Although migration and energy are seemingly distinct areas, they both share the feature of being spheres in which the interdependence between the EU and Türkiye occurs in an apparently unavoidable way.

In the case of migration, Türkiye acts as an external barrier to migration flows to the EU, particularly following the 2016 agreement, while in the energy sector the candidate country is an essential transit point for natural gas supplies. In both sectors, European standards are strategically mobilised, serving both as constraints on the actions of the actors involved and as political opportunities that ultimately represent an attempt to legitimise more controversial actions.

Despite similarities in how interdependence manifests itself, the EU adopts different positions depending on the area in question, which can even be linked to the idea of 'flexible Europeanisation'.⁶⁹ In the field of migration, the normative dimension plays a predominant role, with the EU emphasising the need to protect human rights and ensure humane treatment of migrants.⁷⁰ However, in practice, the Union has chosen to outsource the control of its borders to Türkiye, resorting to pragmatic solutions such as the 2016 agreement, which nevertheless conflict with normative provisions. In the field of energy, the European perspective is markedly pragmatic, focusing on security of supply and diversification of sources, downplaying normative considerations whenever they conflict with its strategic interests. The EU's pragmatic use of norms has significant implications for its identity as a normative actor.⁷¹ In the field of migration, the dissonance between discourse and practice generates criticism and exposes inconsistencies that undermine European credibility.⁷²

Türkiye, for its part, exploits these dynamics to its advantage, using migration flows as a tool to exert political pressure on Brussels, while in the energy sector it exploits

its privileged geographical position to reinforce its geopolitical relevance – a process of Europeanisation reversed by Turkish agency.⁷³ The evolution of discourse over recent years shows a gradual shift away from idealistic rhetoric towards an increasingly tactical and instrumentalised approach. Migration is an example of this, and the idea of instrumentalising migration is discussed extensively in studies on border outsourcing:⁷⁴ a tool for tactical pressure by threatening to open borders, which laid bare the EU's vulnerability and dependence on Turkish cooperation to manage migration flows. The situation has had a significant impact on Member States such as Greece and Germany, which have faced increased challenges in managing migrants.⁷⁵

In contrast, the energy approach, although based on an essentially pragmatic logic, does not raise the same level of controversy, since energy security is widely perceived as an inescapable strategic necessity.

Energy is another crucial area in EU-Türkiye relations, characterised by cooperation and tension. The TANAP and the Southern Corridor are strategic projects aimed at reducing European dependence on Russian gas, a situation aggravated by the war in Ukraine, making cooperation with Türkiye even more relevant. Ulrich Kühn⁷⁶ concluded, in his 2022 study, that by positioning itself as a crucial energy corridor for Europe, Türkiye simultaneously challenges and cooperates with the EU. Furthermore, its relations with Azerbaijan and Iran, as well as the conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean with Greece and Cyprus, introduce tensions in energy cooperation. Disputes over resource exploitation rights in the Eastern Mediterranean encumber Türkiye's relations with the EU and affect regional stability.⁷⁷ This hierarchy of priorities reveals how the EU selectively balances its normative and pragmatic discourses depending on the area in question.

In order to systematise some of these reflections and empirical evidence, the following table presents a comparative matrix organising the main criteria for analysis for both actors, highlighting how norms are traditionally perceived by constructivist theory, but also in their 'tactical' or strategic formulation, the challenges faced and the central goals of each one. This structure allows us to discern how the EU and Türkiye articulate interests, opportunities and constraints in two critical areas of their bilateral relationship.

THE POSSIBILITY OF TÜRKIYE'S FULL ACCESSION TO THE EU REMAINS FAR-OFF, NOT ONLY DUE TO DEMOCRATIC AND NORMATIVE OBSTACLES, BUT ALSO BECAUSE THE RELATIONSHIP HAS EVOLVED INTO ONE OF SELECTIVE AND TRANSACTIONAL COOPERATION.

The future of EU-Türkiye relations will continue to be shaped by this duality between pragmatism and normativity. The possibility of Türkiye's full accession to the EU remains far-off, not only due to democratic and normative obstacles, but also because the relationship has evolved into one of selective and transactional cooperation. Maintaining a strategic partnership might represent a viable alternative scenario, allowing Türkiye to continue to play a central role in areas such as energy security and migration management without having to fully comply with European accession criteria.

In the current geopolitical context, Türkiye’s position as a regional interlocutor becomes even more relevant, especially in light of the war in Ukraine and the European need to diversify its energy sources. The EU’s ability to manage this relationship effectively will depend on its capacity to balance pragmatic considerations and its normative identity.

Table 3 > Comparative matrix: Türkiye and the European Union in the areas of migration and energy

	MIGRATION		ENERGY	
	EU	Türkiye	EU	Türkiye
'Conventional' standards/action limitations	Human rights limit migration agreements	International obligations limit unilateral actions	Environmental criteria and sanctions hinder cooperation	Dependence on external suppliers restricts strategic autonomy
	Pressure from international organisations regarding refugee conditions	Dependence on European funding for migration policies	European regulation on clean energy sources	EU pressure to adopt stricter environmental policies
	Difficulty in applying sanctions due to strategic dependence on Türkiye	External monitoring of human rights compliance	Dependence on energy partners with authoritarian regimes	The need to adapt to European market regulations
'Tactical' rules/strategic opportunities	Humanitarian discourse justifies partnerships with Türkiye	Use of refugee reception to obtain financial and political support	Energy diversification to reduce dependence on Russia	Role as energy hub strengthens negotiations with the EU
	Implementation of refugee financing programmes	Mobilisation of humanitarian discourse to reinforce its diplomatic position	Strengthening partnerships with alternative suppliers	Ability to diversify suppliers and consumers
	Strengthening cooperation on border security	Active participation in European discussions on migration	Promotion of environmental standards and energy transition	Expansion of infrastructure for gas and electricity exports

[Cont.]

Main objectives	Controlling flows without compromising its normative image	Maintaining influence over the EU and securing financial compensation	Ensuring energy security without excessive dependence	Strengthening geopolitical position and reducing energy vulnerability
	Maintaining political stability in Member States most affected by	Avoiding internal overload due to the increase in the number of refugees	Protecting critical supply infrastructure	Becoming a central supplier for Europe and Asia
	Reducing the impact of humanitarian crises	Projecting the image of a responsible actor in the international system	Strengthening the transition to renewable energies	Expanding its autonomy in the energy sector through domestic sources
Use as a negotiation tool	Conditioning Türkiye's political and financial concessions	Threats to 'open borders' to obtain concessions from the EU	Strengthening strategic partnerships to reduce supply risks	Strategic negotiations to consolidate energy agreements
	Binding funding to political and social reforms	Conditioning European policies related to refugee integration	Using the environmental agenda to promote greater energy independence	Exploring new supply routes to maintain relevance
	Adapting migration policies to respond to internal pressures	Negotiating improvements in access to the European market and the liberalisation of visas	Pressuring supplier countries for better trade conditions	Adjustment of gas prices to maximise political and economic gains
Strategic positioning	Central role in managing European asylum policy	Essential partner in managing the migration crisis	Dependence on Türkiye as an essential energy corridor	Key element in EU energy diversification
	Coordination with Frontex to strengthen external security	Maintaining a robust network for reception and management of migration flows	Expansion of the use of alternative infrastructure to reduce vulnerability	Expanding transport capacity and gas storage capacity
	Creation of mechanisms for rapid response to migration crises	Ability to influence European migration policies through unilateral actions	Promotion of long-term energy agreements	Building new bilateral partnerships to ensure trade flexibility

Source: Author's own elaboration.

It should be noted that, despite the dynamics of interdependence, some authors argue that Türkiye has adopted a more assertive and unilateral foreign policy, moving away from its previous cooperative approach. This change is perceived by Europeans as a democratic setback and has contributed to the current impasse in EU-Türkiye relations in the context of the enlargement.⁷⁸ In fact, this change may have occurred due to internal issues within the Turkish state – in which growing autocratisation is undeniable⁷⁹ – but it cannot be dissociated from the perception of advantage over the Union in the areas analysed.


CONCLUSION

A comparative analysis of the migration and energy sectors in the context of EU-Türkiye relations reveals the complexity inherent in EU enlargement, highlighting the need to understand the role of norms as tactical instruments in shaping these relations. Tactical constructivism proves to be an effective analytical tool for interpreting how norms are strategically mobilised, oscillating between value-oriented discourse and practices shaped by pragmatic goals. By emphasising the instrumental function of norms, this approach allows us to understand the normative flexibility of actors, particularly the EU, in the context of its relations with Türkiye. Although the Union presents itself as a normative actor, it undertakes a flexible approach when faced with practical challenges that threaten its internal stability. In the field of migration, this flexibility translates into the outsourcing of border control, while in the field of energy it is reflected in the acceptance of pragmatic partnerships to ensure security of supply.

Additionally, one of the central concepts mobilised throughout the article was that of functional interdependence, understood as a situation in which two actors, even with power asymmetries, depend on each other to achieve specific operational objectives. This form of interdependence, inspired by the classic conceptualisation of Keohane and Nye, becomes particularly evident in the areas under analysis: migration and energy. In both cases, the EU and Türkiye develop forms of cooperation that do not emerge from normative affinities, but from pragmatic needs, often justified through normative positions. Rather than diluting the conflict, this interdependence tends to reinforce the tactical logic of normative appropriation, insofar as each actor seeks to maximise its gains within a relationship of mutual dependence. Thus, functional interdependence not only frames the limits of the EU's normative action, but also accentuates Türkiye's strategic role as an indispensable, but not necessarily convergent, partner.

The research question of this study focused on how European standards are used as strategic tools in the context of the EU's enlargement policy towards Türkiye. The analysis shows that, in light of tactical constructivism, not only standards operate as structural constraints, but they are also selectively appropriated by actors, working as mechanisms of legitimisation, negotiation and strategic adjustment in their international interactions. The future of this relationship will depend on the balance that the EU

manages to strike between its normative identity and its strategic needs. This positioning will be decisive for the Union's success as a global actor and, ultimately, for its survival. Growing geopolitical uncertainty, exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine and by the European energy challenge, reinforces Türkiye's importance as a partner with which the EU will need to continue negotiating.

Future studies may delve into this issue in greater depth through a differentiated institutional analysis, i.e. by exploring and comparing how the strategies adopted by different European Union institutions instrumentalise norms in different ways, which would make it possible to test, refine or even expand the explanatory scope of tactical constructivism. 

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