



Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Political, Economic and Cultural Dynamics of Turkish-French Relations

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Abstract

This article examines the relations between Türkiye and France from political, economic, and cultural perspectives. On the political level, it argues that bilateral tensions stem not from structural antagonism but from strategic competition in certain regions, such as the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa. Türkiye's European Union membership process, human rights issues, and normative divergences regarding leadership styles deepen this competition. Recent geopolitical developments, such as the Russia-Ukraine war and the post-Assad era in Syria, open up new avenues for pragmatic cooperation. Economically, the article reveals a persistent asymmetry in relations within the framework of dependency theory. French companies hold a significant presence in Türkiye, while Turkish investments in France remain quite limited. Despite this imbalance, bilateral trade relations based on industry-based complementarity exhibit a resilient structure. Culturally, media discourses, diaspora policies, and identity-based narratives complicate interaction, while academic collaborations, transnational youth initiatives, and cultural diplomacy programs offer apolitical platforms for dialogue.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Economic Interdependence, European Union, Turkish-French Relations

Türk-Fransız İlişkilerinin Siyasi, Ekonomik ve Kültürel Dinamikleri

Öz

Bu makale, Türkiye ile Fransa arasındaki ilişkileri siyasi, ekonomik ve kültürel açılardan incelemektedir. Siyasi düzlemde ikili gerilimlerin yapısal bir karşıtlıktan değil Doğu Akdeniz ve Afrika gibi bazı bölgelerdeki stratejik rekabetten kaynaklandığı ileri sürülmektedir. Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği üyelik süreci, insan hakları meseleleri ve liderlik tarzlarına ilişkin normatif ayrışmalar bu rekabeti derinleştirmektedir. Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı ve Suriye'de Esad sonrası dönem gibi son dönem jeopolitik gelişmeler ise pragmatik iş birliği için yeni alanlar açmaktadır. Ekonomik açıdan makale, bağımlılık teorisi çerçevesinde ilişkilerdeki kalıcı bir asimetriyi ortaya koymaktadır. Fransız şirketleri Türkiye'de belirgin bir ağırlık taşıırken Fransa'daki Türk yatırımları ise oldukça sınırlı kalmaktadır. Bu dengesizliğe rağmen sanayi temelli tamamlayıcılığa dayanan ikili ticaret ilişkileri dirençli bir yapı sergilemektedir. Kültürel olarak medya söylemleri, diaspora politikaları ve kimlik temelli anlatılar etkileşimi zorlaştırırken akademik iş birlikleri, ulus-ötesi gençlik girişimleri ve kültürel diplomasi programları siyasetten arındırılmış diyalog zeminleri sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği, Ekonomik Bağımlılık, Kültürel Diplomasi, Türk-Fransız İlişkileri

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1. INTRODUCTION

The bilateral relationship between Türkiye and France constitutes a complex and evolving case of interaction marked by strategic competition, economic interdependence, and historically embedded cultural ties.⁴ While Turkish-French relations are not grounded in structural antagonism, they have increasingly been shaped by overlapping geopolitical ambitions. In parallel, normative divergences within the European institutional context and fluctuating leadership discourses have further complicated bilateral dynamics. In a period marked by global power realignments and regional instability, this article offers a multidimensional analysis of the political, economic, and cultural foundations of Turkish-French relations, drawing on both theoretical and empirical insights.

The aim of this article is to examine the drivers, patterns, and asymmetries that shape contemporary Turkish-French relations and to evaluate the scope for strategic cooperation despite enduring tensions. It addresses three main research questions. First, to what extent are Türkiye and France engaged in strategic rivalry across adjacent regions, and how does this competition influence their bilateral political discourse? Second, how do economic asymmetries manifest within the framework of mutual interdependence, particularly in trade, investment, and sectoral integration? Third, in what ways do cultural narratives, diaspora dynamics, and media representations reinforce or challenge bilateral engagement?

In accordance with the research questions, the article is structured in three main parts. The first part analyzes the political relationship through a realist and strategic lens, highlighting areas of geopolitical friction and emerging opportunities for recalibration. The second part investigates economic ties using the theory of complex interdependence, drawing on bilateral trade statistics, foreign direct investment (FDI) data, and corporate case studies to assess the asymmetric nature of the partnership. The third part focuses on cultural relations, with emphasis on historical memory, media narratives, diaspora politics, and the role of transnational actors in shaping public discourse.

This article makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it brings together the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of Turkish-French relations, a combination that is seldom addressed in a single study. Second, it approaches the relationship not as a simple choice between cooperation and conflict, but as a changing interaction shaped by interdependence, differing perceptions, and shifting strategic priorities. This perspective offers a clearer view of how two middle powers manage periods of rivalry within broader alliance frameworks such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Methodologically, the article follows a mixed structure to examine the multiple dimensions of Turkish-French relations. Political dynamics are analyzed through official statements and secondary academic sources, economic relations are assessed using statistical data from relevant institutions, and the cultural dimension relies on media discourse, diaspora activities, and cultural diplomacy initiatives.

2. POLITICAL RELATIONS

From a realist perspective, state behavior in international relations is primarily shaped by the pursuit of core national interests, with security occupying a central position. Geopolitical antagonism typically emerges when states perceive their security imperatives as mutually exclusive or zero-sum (Waltz, 1979). This logic, however, does not fully characterize the

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relationship between Türkiye and France, whose foundational security interests are largely non-antagonistic and structurally compatible. Current tensions do not arise from existential threats but from secondary concerns, notably strategic competition for influence in adjacent regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and parts of Africa.

These geopolitical tensions emerge from competing spheres of influence and diverging regional priorities rather than from an irreconcilable clash of vital interests. Importantly, such competition is not immutable and is amenable to recalibration. In an international system characterized by fluid alignments, situational rivalries are not immutable. They can evolve into cooperative engagement when shared security concerns or economic imperatives begin to dominate policy preferences. For Türkiye and France, the prospect of strategic convergence -grounded in pragmatic assessments of mutual benefit- offers a viable pathway to transcend regional rivalries and foster more constructive bilateral engagement.

The first significant point of contention between Türkiye and France emerged in the 1970s, around the Cyprus issue. While French Presidents Charles de Gaulle (1958-1969) and Georges Pompidou (1969-1974) adopted a relatively conciliatory stance towards the Turkish position, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974-1981) pursued a markedly pro-Greek orientation. Notably, he opposed the second Turkish military intervention in Cyprus in August 1974, which effectively partitioned the island (Denizeau, 2022: 71-72). Thereafter, France maintained a strategic partnership of considerable importance with Greece in the Mediterranean basin, supporting Athens in its disputes with Türkiye. This French stance was reiterated in the late 2010s, particularly in response to Türkiye's repudiation of the exclusive economic zone claimed by Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean, in accordance with Türkiye's Mavi Vatan (Blue Homeland) doctrine. Such opposition precipitated heightened bilateral tensions. France bolstered Greece by supplying military hardware, notably frigates and Rafale fighter jets, and issuing outspoken diplomatic statements critical of Turkish policies (Jabbour, 2021). From the French standpoint, these measures were primarily intended to strengthen EU cohesion, whereas Türkiye viewed this posture as overtly antagonistic.

The diplomatic frictions among France, Greece, and Türkiye have been further exacerbated regionally divergent alignments throughout the 2010s. In Libya, during the 2011 conflict, Türkiye publicly opposed the French-endorsed military intervention that led to the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi. Following Libya's descent into civil war (2014-2021), Türkiye provided substantial support to the General National Congress based in the western part of the country, whereas France discreetly aligned with the forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar in the east (Taylor, 2019). This antagonism culminated in a notable naval incident in the summer of 2020, wherein France accused a Turkish naval vessel of hostile maneuvers, a claim vehemently denied by Ankara (Merchet, 2020).

Regarding Egypt's political transformation, France adopted a distinctly pragmatic approach, maintaining and even deepening its relations with the country immediately after the 2013 military coup that brought Abdelfattah al-Sisi to power. In contrast, Türkiye pursued a normative foreign policy stance, firmly condemning the coup and refraining from official engagement with the Sisi administration for several years. However, shifting regional dynamics -particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, proved decisive. These shifts ultimately opened the way for a cautious normalization of relations between Ankara and Cairo.

In Syria, Türkiye and France initially converged in supporting anti-Assad insurgents; however, the rise of so-called jihadist factions soon complicated this alignment. France subsequently provided active support to Kurdish militias, notably the YPG, an affiliate of the PKK that Türkiye classifies as a primary terrorist threat. These rivalries in the Mediterranean region have

periodically spilled over into other regions. For example, in the Caucasus, France supported Armenia during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict against Türkiye's ally Azerbaijan, causing bilateral tensions (Leduc, 2023). In Africa, Türkiye has sought to curtail French influence by promoting alternative media to Francophone outlets and by accusing France of neocolonialism (Özgan, 2020). By the close of the 2010s, the geopolitical competition between Türkiye and France -manifested through their competing influence over regional actors- had crystallized a fully-fledged regional power rivalry.

Türkiye's EU accession process constitutes a diplomatic issue distinct from specific alliance conflicts. During the 2000s, it represented a principal source of tension between the parties. However, the issue is not inherently contentious: in the 1960s, President de Gaulle notably advocated Türkiye's integration into the European Community. However, Türkiye's formal candidacy status granted in 2005 provoked apprehension within France. This sentiment stemmed from two interrelated dynamics. Firstly, following the accession of several post-communist states, a significant segment of the French populace perceived EU enlargement as occurring too rapidly, advocating for a deceleration in the integration of new members (Cicioğlu and Kalkan, 2019: 21-23). Secondly, the rise of Islamophobic currents within right-wing and extreme right political factions fostered resistance to the prospect of a predominantly Muslim country, and geopolitically situated in Asia, Türkiye joining the EU.

Moreover, during the 2007 presidential campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy explicitly politicized the issue of Türkiye's EU accession by pledging to suspend negotiations (Denizeau, 2025: 20). Although this position was not fully translated into formal policy, France adopted a markedly obstructive stance in the accession process between 2007 and 2012, effectively contributing to a slowdown in negotiations. This period fostered a negative feedback dynamic in bilateral relations, as Ankara increasingly interpreted France's position as a signal of political exclusion, which in turn reinforced Türkiye's more assertive approach on sensitive dossiers, most notably the Cyprus issue. While Türkiye's EU membership prospect has since lost its centrality as the primary source of bilateral tension and appears unrealistic in the short term, the legacy of France's approach under Sarkozy continues to shape Turkish public and elite perceptions of the EU and of France's role within it.

The issue of human rights has constituted a persistent point of contention between Türkiye and France since the 1980s, often functioning as a lens through which each state accuses the other of violating rights against specific ethnic or political constituencies. During the 1980s, France provided asylum to leftist and Kurdish activists fleeing the repressive Turkish military regime, garnering particular sympathy from Danielle Mitterrand, spouse of President François Mitterrand (1981-1995). This period witnessed the crystallization of pro-Kurdish independence sentiments within France, predominantly among leftist factions. Notably, prominent figures such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon and leaders within the ecological movements publicly expressed solidarity with the terrorist organization PKK, calling for its delisting from France's official roster of designated terrorist organizations (L'Humanité, 2016).

Furthermore, since the 2010s, multiple French political parties have publicly endorsed domestic opposition groups challenging President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration, a move Ankara interpreted as undue interference in its sovereign affairs (DW, 2025). Conversely, from the 2000s onward, the ruling AK Party increasingly critiqued the French political model, denouncing its secularist framework and countermeasures against political Islam as inherently Islamophobic. This reciprocal politicization of human rights rhetoric has exacerbated bilateral tensions and has frequently been instrumentalized for domestic political leverage on both sides.

In recent years, political crises shaping bilateral relations have often stemmed from the vehement and provocative rhetoric of leading political figures. Both Türkiye's presidential system and France's semi-presidential system share the defining feature that the president, elected by universal suffrage, serves as the primary architect of foreign policy. As a result, when a dominant political figure occupies this position, the trajectory of diplomatic engagement becomes closely aligned with their personal political posture. As previously noted, from 2005 to 2012, President Sarkozy instrumentalized Turcophobia as an electoral strategy, thereby embedding a hostile disposition toward Türkiye within French foreign policy (Billion, 2016: 76). Similarly, since the late 2010s, a pronounced personal rivalry has unfolded between President Erdoğan (since 2014) and President Emmanuel Macron (since 2017), characterized by occasional inflammatory exchanges, which have directly and adversely affected bilateral relations (Garnier, 2025). This dynamic underscores the existence of genuine bilateral challenges, particularly salient from the 2010s onward (Garnier, 2025). However, these issues are intrinsically linked to mutable political and geopolitical circumstances. Recent developments -including the war in Ukraine, emergent conflicts in the Middle East, and the strategic ambivalence of the USA- have opened new avenues for pragmatic cooperation between Türkiye and France.

The primary geopolitical crises that shaped the Mediterranean landscape throughout the 2010s -specifically the Syrian and Libyan civil wars- compelled Türkiye and France to adopt diametrically opposed positions (Savaş and Yılmaz, 2023: 90). However, the salience of these conflicts has gradually diminished over time. The Syrian conflict entered a new phase following the consolidation of the Baath regime's territorial and institutional control, while Libya continues to navigate an unresolved political process marked by ongoing negotiations among competing local factions. In subsequent years, emerging international challenges have facilitated rapprochement between Ankara and Paris. This convergence is particularly pronounced in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. From the outset, both Türkiye and France articulated a shared normative stance, condemning Russian aggression and affirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The operational efficacy of Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles in countering the Russian offensive notably resonated within French public opinion. Nonetheless, both states have concurrently advocated for sustained dialogue with Russia. Unlike more hawkish NATO members -such as the UK and the Baltic states- who endorse a confrontational approach toward Moscow, Türkiye and France have expressed a preference to maintain diplomatic channels for potential post-conflict engagement.

In the context of the renewed Israeli-Palestinian crisis, which intensified following Israel's large-scale military operations in Gaza in October 2023, the official positions of Türkiye and France display a limited degree of divergence rather than a fundamental strategic rift. Both states have consistently reaffirmed Israel's right to exist and its sovereignty, while simultaneously endorsing the principle of a two-state solution and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state. In the initial phase of the conflict, France adopted a comparatively restrained approach in its public criticism of Israel's military actions in Gaza. Over time, however, this position evolved. By the spring of 2025, Macron articulated a more openly critical assessment of Israeli conduct and signaled France's readiness to consider the recognition of Palestine as a sovereign state, a shift that brought the French position into closer alignment with Türkiye's long-standing diplomatic stance.

The re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2024 represented a profound disruption to established geopolitical dynamics. The Republican President demonstrated a clear intention to distance the USA from Western security architectures to which both Türkiye and France belong, most notably NATO. Concurrently, he signaled a willingness to entertain concessions to Vladimir Putin regarding the conflict in Ukraine. Such a posture raised the prospect of a resurgent Russian dominance in the Black Sea region, a development fundamentally at odds

with Türkiye's geopolitical interests. Moreover, as the USA increasingly retreats from its traditional security commitments, European states face an imperative to cultivate alternative regional defense partnerships. This imperative is particularly acute for France, which since the 1960s has pursued the establishment of an autonomous European defense capability independent of Washington. Against this backdrop, political and strategic cooperation between Türkiye and European powers -especially France- has assumed heightened significance. This perspective was notably advocated during the first half of 2025 by prominent voices within French strategic discourse, including former ambassador Gérard Araud and former foreign minister Dominique de Villepin (Araud, 2025).

In this context, tangible opportunities for strategic bilateral cooperation have emerged. Türkiye could serve as a pivotal conduit for European, and particularly French, access to regions where it has established significant influence. This potential is particularly evident in three strategic arenas. First, following the formal fall of Baath regime in December 2024, France has expressed a strong interest in renewing its relations with Syria. In this endeavor, Türkiye's support - given its maintained excellent relations with the new Syrian authorities - will be indispensable. Second, should the conflict in Ukraine be resolved, France is likely to seek the resumption of diplomatic dialogue with Russia.

In this regard, Türkiye's considerable experience in negotiating with Moscow renders it a valuable mediator capable of supporting European initiatives to engage Russia. Lastly, France retains strategic stakes in the Caucasus region, owing in part to its historically close ties with Armenia. In the event that peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is consolidated, Türkiye could assume a critical role in preserving this stability. Therefore, it is in France's strategic interest to engage Ankara proactively to sustain and enhance its influence within the Caucasus.

In counterbalance, France constitutes a pivotal partner for Türkiye within the EU framework. While Türkiye's accession remains stalled, the Macron administration, during its October 2022 EU presidency, launched the European Political Community. This forum is distinctive in encompassing not only EU member states but also significant non-EU actors such as the UK, Ukraine, and Türkiye (Tobelem, 2025). Through this initiative, France has sought to create an alternative platform to foster closer relations between Türkiye and EU countries, independent of the formal accession trajectory. This endeavor is further facilitated by a geopolitical context in which other traditional European powers have experienced diminished influence. The UK's exit from the EU (Brexit) in 2020, combined with a series of politically unstable governments in Germany, has elevated France's prominence in European strategic affairs. Notably, France is a principal advocate for an autonomous European defense policy, thereby positioning it as an indispensable ally for Türkiye in any efforts to deepen strategic cooperation with the EU.

Despite the ongoing sensitivities stemming from recent bilateral tensions, prospects for military collaboration between Türkiye and France have begun to surface. Since 2022, speculation has circulated regarding Türkiye's potential acquisition of the SAMP/T surface-to-air missile system, though official confirmation remains elusive. Nonetheless, the strategic rationale is evident as Türkiye aims to modernize its military capabilities, particularly in the aerial and maritime domains, while diversifying its defense procurement sources. Concurrently, France remains the foremost supplier of advanced air defense weaponry among EU member states. Should bilateral strategic cooperation materialize successfully, it is plausible that such collaboration could progressively extend into the military sphere over the longer term (Boyraz and Yeşiltaş, 2022).

Most of these considerations remain largely theoretical and are still confined to the realm of reflection within diplomatic and strategic circles. Nevertheless, it is crucial to develop these hypotheses as they reveal that the political relationship between Türkiye and France encompasses

considerable potential. The evolving conjunctural context could facilitate the resolution of certain crises and foster unprecedented cooperation across novel domains. Indeed, political elites in both countries appear to have acknowledged this reality. Since 2021, the Turkish and French presidents have actively pursued a process of détente aimed at stabilizing and normalizing bilateral relations. Concurrently, diplomatic actors from both sides have engaged intensively in efforts to address and reconcile outstanding disagreements. This dynamic underscores that bilateral relations are fundamentally contingent upon deliberate political choices and retain a high capacity for rapid change.

3. ECONOMIC RELATIONS

This part of the article draws on the complex interdependence theory formulated by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye as its primary analytical framework. The theory emphasizes that states are linked through multiple and overlapping channels of interaction, a condition that reduces the effectiveness of military force as a policy instrument and renders patterns of interdependence more salient in international relations. Within this framework, the concepts of sensitivity and vulnerability are particularly useful for capturing the unequal character of Turkish–French economic interdependence. Sensitivity refers to the immediacy and magnitude with which policy shifts or economic disruptions in one country affect the other, whereas vulnerability denotes the longer-term adjustment costs and structural constraints associated with responding to such changes (Keohane and Nye, 2011).

The economic relationship between Türkiye and France is characterized by an asymmetric distribution of sensitivity and vulnerability. France exhibits a measurable degree of sensitivity to economic developments in Türkiye, largely due to the extensive presence of French firms operating across key sectors of the Turkish economy. Periods of economic or financial instability in Türkiye can, therefore, generate short-term disruptions for French commercial interests. Yet these effects remain largely contained, as France’s highly diversified global trade and investment portfolio provides ample capacity to absorb shocks and reallocate resources. In this sense, while France’s exposure to the Turkish market is non-negligible in specific sectors, it does not translate into a structural or strategic vulnerability.

Conversely, Türkiye exhibits a higher degree of vulnerability in its economic relationship with France. France ranks among Türkiye’s key trading partners, particularly in the domains of industrial goods, high-tech equipment, and defense technologies. Turkish reliance on French capital, technological input, and market access -embedded within the broader context of Türkiye’s European integration- creates structural dependence. A deterioration in bilateral relations or a decline in French economic engagement would impose substantial adjustment costs on Türkiye, which lacks easily accessible alternatives in the short to medium-term. Although the relationship remains mutually beneficial, the asymmetrical structure of interdependence places Türkiye in a comparatively more exposed and strategically dependent position.

In this regard, it should be noted that economic relations between Türkiye and France began in the 16th century with the alliance established between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of France. The capitulations signed between Suleiman the Magnificent and François I in 1536 gave France a privileged position in the Ottoman market and revived the silk, spice and textile trade (Arıkan, 2005: 11-28). Subsequently, French capital played an influential role in the Ottoman economy. The establishment of the Ottoman Bank, the influence of French representatives in the Düyûn-ı Umûmiye (Public Debt Administration) and French investments in railway projects are notable examples of this period. The settlement of Ottoman debts upon the establishment of the Republic shaped the relations between the two countries. Throughout the 20th century, Türkiye’s industrialization efforts and France’s technological superiority strengthened economic

cooperation. In particular, the Türkiye-EU Customs Union (CU), which came into force in 1996, has taken trade between the two countries to a new level and made France one of Türkiye's most important trading partners.

Despite high political tension between Türkiye and France, there has been a relative stability in economic relations. Both countries play significant roles in various aspects of the other's commercial landscape. In 2024, France was Türkiye's sixth-largest trading partner for both exports and imports (TUIK, 2025). Conversely, Türkiye was France's eleventh-largest export and import partner in the same year (World's Top Exports, 2025). Data in Table 1 shows that the economic partnership between Türkiye and France has demonstrated both resilience and volatility over the period from 2013 to 2024, as evidenced by the evolving dynamics of bilateral trade. Total trade volume rose from approximately \$15.3 billion in 2013 to over \$22.5 billion in 2024. Based on the ceteris paribus principle, trade volume is expected to reach 30 billion dollars by 2030.

Table 1. Türkiye-France Trade Relations by Years (bin dollars)

	TÜRKİYE'S EXPORTS FRANCE	TO	TÜRKİYE'S IMPORTS FRANCE	FROM	TRADE VOLUME	TRADE BALANCE FOR TÜRKİYE
2013	6.654.651		8.650.205		15.304.856	-1.995.554
2014	6.856.439		8.584.304		15.440.743	-1.727.865
2015	6.101.381		7.983.110		14.084.491	-1.881.729
2016	6.309.389		7.679.138		13.988.527	-1.369.749
2017	6.895.251		8.425.089		15.320.340	-1.529.838
2018	7.655.340		7.836.528		15.491.868	-181.188
2019	7.945.607		6.760.064		14.705.671	-1.185.543
2020	7.195.168		6.988.074		14.183.242	+207.094
2021	9.111.137		7.931.536		17.042.673	+1.179.601
2022	9.534.619		9.429.702		18.964.321	+104.917
2023	10.287.542		11.547.686		21.835.228	-1.260.144
2024	10.043.748		12.499.807		22.543.555	-2.456.059

Source: (TUIK, 2025)

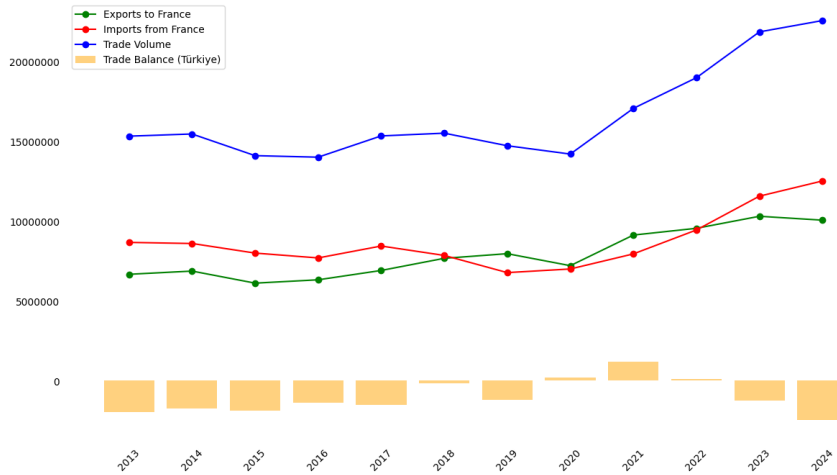
In the early years of the examined period, Türkiye consistently ran a trade deficit with France, peaking in 2013 at nearly \$2 billion. The trade balance remained negative until 2020, when Türkiye achieved a modest surplus of \$207 million. This shift reflected a temporary adjustment in trade dynamics, possibly linked to the economic disruptions and realignments triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. A more significant surplus of \$1.18 billion was recorded in 2021, marking the most favorable trade balance for Türkiye during the entire decade. However, this positive trend was short-lived, as the trade deficit resurfaced in subsequent years, reaching \$2.46 billion in 2024. Given that Türkiye and France are respectively the 7th and 17th largest economies in the world, Türkiye does not experience a disproportionately large trade deficit with France (Silver,

2025). This suggests a relatively resilient and balanced bilateral trade relationship in light of the size differential.

Türkiye's exports to France have grown from \$6.65 billion in 2013 to over \$10 billion in 2024, indicating a relatively stable upward trend with slight declines in 2015 and 2020. The export growth suggests a strengthening of Türkiye's industrial and manufacturing capacities, especially in sectors where it holds competitive advantages, such as automotive parts, textiles, and machinery. Conversely, imports from France also increased overall, with notable spikes occurring in 2023 and 2024. The sharp rise in imports during these years has significantly contributed to the widening of Türkiye's trade deficit.

Since bilateral trade between Türkiye and France has been conducted within the framework of the Türkiye-EU Customs Union (CU) in force since 1996, tariff barriers and a substantial share of non-tariff measures are already aligned with EU legislation. As a result, the structural imbalances evident in Türkiye-France trade cannot be attributed primarily to regulatory incompatibilities, but rather to differences in the composition, technological intensity, and competitiveness of the goods exchanged. While this regulatory harmonization effectively minimizes formal trade barriers, it does not neutralize deeper asymmetries embedded in production structures. France's more diversified and capital-intensive export profile underscores this imbalance in competitive capacity, whereas Türkiye's reliance on French industrial inputs and intermediate technologies reinforces its comparatively more vulnerable position within the interdependent trade framework.

Graphic 1. Türkiye-France Trade Relations by Years



Despite the expanding volume and growing strategic relevance of Türkiye-EU trade, efforts to modernize the CU have encountered sustained political resistance from several member states, France foremost among them. While the European Commission has repeatedly acknowledged the need to extend the CU to cover areas such as services, agriculture, and more effective dispute-settlement mechanisms, this institutional consensus has not translated into political momentum. Academic analyses by French scholars likewise indicate that a revised CU framework would generate mutual economic gains for both France and Türkiye (Denizeau and Schmid, 2020). Nevertheless, Paris has adopted a notably cautious approach to reform (European Commission, 2025). This hesitation is commonly explained by political considerations, including concerns over Türkiye's domestic governance trajectory, democratic regression, and ongoing tensions in the

Eastern Mediterranean, all of which continue to shape the broader context of Türkiye-EU relations. From the French standpoint, advancing CU modernization in the absence of parallel progress on political criteria risks diluting the EU's normative leverage. At the same time, French reservations cannot be reduced to political arguments alone. Given that France has consistently maintained a trade surplus with Türkiye, the existing CU framework is widely regarded in Paris as economically advantageous, thereby reducing incentives to pursue reforms that might unsettle this favorable balance.

Moreover, a modernized CU could potentially include provisions for the liberalization of unprocessed agricultural trade - a sensitive area for France, which maintains a strong and politically influential agricultural sector. The prospect of increased access for Turkish agricultural goods, particularly raw and unprocessed products, raises concerns among French farmers and policymakers alike. As such, agricultural protectionism and the desire to preserve existing trade advantages both contribute to France's hesitancy toward CU reform. Despite this, a more balanced and strategically oriented trade relationship -within the existing CU framework or a modernized version of it- could serve not only the economic interests of both nations but also contribute to broader political and diplomatic stability between Türkiye and the EU.

The trade relationship between Türkiye and France exhibited varying trends in export and import shares over the period from 2018 to 2024. The data in Table 2 reveal evolving dynamics of this bilateral economic partnership. From Türkiye's perspective, France consistently remained one of its significant trade partners throughout the analyzed period. France's share in Türkiye's total exports hovered around 4%, peaking at 4.4% in 2019 and reaching a comparable level again in 2023, before slightly declining to 3.8% in 2024. In terms of imports, the share of French goods in Türkiye's total imports declined from 3.4% in 2018 to a low of 2.6% in 2022, followed by a notable rebound to 3.6% in 2024. This suggests a recovery in French exports to Türkiye, potentially reflecting improved trade conditions or increased demand for specific goods. Conversely, Türkiye's presence in France's trade portfolio was comparatively modest but exhibited a gradual upward trend. Türkiye's share in France's total exports rose from 1.3% in 2018 to 2.1% in 2024. A similar progression occurred in imports, increasing from 1.3% in 2018 to 1.7% in 2024. Although these figures indicate a relatively small portion of France's overall trade, the steady growth underscores Türkiye's increasing integration into the French market.

Table 2. Shares of Türkiye and France in Their Total Exports and Imports (%)

	FRANCE'S SHARE IN TÜRKİYE'S TOTAL EXPORT	FRANCE'S SHARE IN TÜRKİYE'S TOTAL IMPORT	TÜRKİYE'S SHARE IN FRANCE'S TOTAL EXPORT	TÜRKİYE'S SHARE IN FRANCE'S TOTAL IMPORTS
2018	4.3	3.4	1.3	1.3
2019	4.4	3.2	1.2	1.3
2020	4.2	3.2	1.5	1.3
2021	4	2.9	1.5	1.1
2022	3.8	2.6	1.5	1.1
2023	4	3.2	1.9	1.3
2024	3.8	3.6	2.1	1.7

Source: (TUIK, 2025)

As shown in Table 3, the trade relations between Türkiye and France over the period from 2018 to 2023 reflect a stable and structured exchange pattern centered predominantly on the automotive, machinery, and heavy industry sectors. This continuity highlights a mature bilateral trade relationship underpinned by sectoral complementarities and long-standing economic integration. A recurring trend in the bilateral trade data is the predominance of transportation-related goods. From France to Türkiye, key exports have consistently included planes, helicopters, and spacecraft, alongside motor vehicles, parts and accessories. Notably, planes and helicopters appear among the top five export products in four out of six years, underscoring France's industrial strength in aerospace and Türkiye's sustained demand in this sector. Gas turbines and tractors further reflect France's export specialization in high-technology and industrial machinery.

Conversely, Türkiye's exports to France have demonstrated remarkable consistency, particularly in cars, delivery trucks, and motor vehicle components, which have consistently ranked among the top five each year. This suggests that Türkiye plays an important role as a manufacturing hub for the automotive industry within Europe. In recent years, refined petroleum (2022) and tractors (2023) have emerged, indicating Türkiye's expanding industrial base and evolving export capacity. The prominence of scrap iron as both a French export to Türkiye (2018-2022) and a Turkish export to France (2018-2019) highlights a circular exchange in the recycling and raw materials value chains. This exchange may indicate integrated industrial processes between the two countries, where raw materials and semi-finished products move reciprocally.

From a trade policy perspective, these figures reveal an interdependent economic relationship rooted in comparative advantage and sectoral specialization. The dominance of durable goods and machinery in bilateral exchanges also suggests resilience against short-term fluctuations and external shocks, such as those caused by global pandemics or supply chain disruptions. Furthermore, the bilateral trade profile appears to be aligned with broader CU arrangements, which facilitate the free movement of industrial goods.

Table 3. Products in the Top Five in Türkiye-France Trade by Years

YEARS	FRANCE'S MOST EXPORTED PRODUCTS TO TÜRKİYE	TÜRKİYE'S MOST EXPORTED PRODUCTS TO FRANCE
2018	Planes, helicopters, spacecraft Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Cars Scrap iron Gas turbines	Cars Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Delivery trucks Buses Knit T-shirts
2019	Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Cars Hot-rolled iron Scrap iron Vaccines, blood, antisera, toxins and cultures	Cars Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Delivery trucks Buses Knit T-shirts
2020	Cars Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Planes, helicopters, spacecraft Hot-rolled iron Scrap iron	Cars Delivery trucks Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Buses Refrigerators
2021	Planes, helicopters, spacecraft Cars Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Scrap iron Tractors	Cars Delivery trucks Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Buses Refrigerators
2022	Planes, helicopters, spacecraft Cars Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Tractors Scrap iron	Cars Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Delivery trucks Buses Refined petroleum
2023	Cars Planes, helicopters, spacecraft Tractors Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Gas turbines	Cars Delivery trucks Motor vehicles, parts and accessories Buses Tractors

Source: (OEC, 2025)

The economic relations between Türkiye and France demonstrate a notable asymmetry, particularly in terms of FDI flows and corporate presence. As of 2024, approximately 1.700 French companies are operating in Türkiye, compared to around 280 Turkish companies in France (Ministry of Industry and Technology of Türkiye, 2025; Ministry of Trade of Türkiye, 2025a).

This asymmetry exemplifies the concept of asymmetrical interdependence, in which one actor (France) has more capacity to shape the economic agenda due to its dominant corporate and capital presence. Meanwhile, Türkiye remains more exposed to fluctuations in external investment flows and technology transfers, reinforcing its subordinate interdependent status. This disparity underscores the strategic importance of French investments for Türkiye's economy, whereas Turkish investments hold relatively limited significance for the French market.

French companies are deeply integrated into the Turkish market. Companies such as Renault, CarrefourSA, Total, AXA and Decathlon hold strong positions in their respective sectors. They have established joint ventures, production facilities, and nationwide distribution networks, creating significant employment and contributing to Türkiye's industrial and service infrastructures. Of these, the Oyak-Renault partnership is a symbol of longstanding Turkish-French commercial cooperation. This cooperation, which started in 1969, has spanned half a century and has provided employment for thousands of Turkish citizens and contributed to the development of the Turkish automotive sector. Similarly, Carrefour has developed a strong retail footprint across the country through its partnership with Sabancı Holding.

These and other companies span essential sectors, including energy, insurance, food, automotive, and even defense and transportation, playing an indispensable role in the Turkish economy. Some of the French companies also directly contribute to Türkiye's exports because they manufacture in Türkiye and sell their products abroad. Moreover, they make a significant contribution to the Turkish economy by providing employment opportunities for almost half a million people in Türkiye, 130.000 directly and 300.000 indirectly (EGİAD, 2025). Considering that unemployment rates in Türkiye have been between 9% and 14% since 2012 (Clark, 2025), the contribution of these companies to the Turkish economy can be better understood.

In contrast, Turkish companies in France are fewer in number and more narrowly concentrated in sectors such as electronics and home appliances (including Beko and Vestel), food products (such as those sold under the Ülker brand), logistics and maritime operations (as with Arkas), and textiles and energy (as in the case of Zorlu). While they are important actors within their niches, they have not achieved the same level of market integration or economic footprint as their French counterparts in Türkiye. In addition, unlike the high employment opportunities created by French companies in Türkiye, Turkish companies with investments in France provide direct employment opportunities for only approximately 1.400 people in the country (Ministry of Trade of Türkiye, 2025a).

An analysis of bilateral FDI flows between Türkiye and France from 2013 to 2023, as shown in Table 4, highlights the persistent asymmetry in capital flows. Over this period, French investments in Türkiye consistently outpaced Turkish investments in France, both in frequency and in size. While there were occasional fluctuations, the structural gap between the two remained evident throughout the decade. French FDI into Türkiye reached a peak in 2023 with a substantial volume of \$403 million, marking the highest point over the ten-year span. This figure is nearly 4.4 times greater than Turkish investments in France during the same year (\$92 million). Notably, even in years where French FDI temporarily declined -such as 2016 and 2019- investment volumes remained substantially significant compared to Turkish outbound capital.

Table 4. Worth of FDI between Türkiye and France by Years (million dollars)

	TURKISH INVESTMENTS IN FRANCE	FRENCH INVESTMENTS IN TÜRKİYE
2013	113	217
2014	106	287
2015	43	165
2016	48	90
2017	55	107
2018	66	313
2019	160	158
2020	64	168
2021	83	127
2022	136	177
2023	92	403

Source: (Ministry of Trade of Türkiye, 2025b; Ministry of Industry and Technology of Türkiye, 2025)

Conversely, Turkish investments in France show a more volatile pattern and remain modest in scale. For example, in 2015, Turkish FDI fell to just \$43 million, while French FDI was nearly four times higher at \$165 million. The only year of near parity was 2019, when Turkish investment reached \$160 million, closely matching France's \$158 million. However, this convergence was short-lived and did not reflect a structural shift in investment dynamics. This persistent imbalance underscores the strategic and economic weight of French companies in Türkiye. It also reflects Türkiye's role as a receptive and advantageous investment environment for French capital, offering both market access and cost competitiveness. In contrast, the limited penetration of Turkish companies into the French market may be attributed to entry barriers, competitive saturation, and the smaller international footprint of Turkish multinationals.

The asymmetrical investment landscape not only shapes the economic structure but also influences the political dynamics between the two countries. The imbalance partially explains the pragmatic restraint observed in their diplomatic relations between the two countries. Despite recurring political tensions, both sides are aware of their economic interdependencies. As a result, economic rationality often serves as a moderating force in bilateral interactions.

Türkiye's attractiveness for French investors as an investment destination can be attributed to several factors. First, its geographical position makes it a strategic gateway to the Middle Eastern and Central Asian markets, granting foreign investors access to a larger regional economy. Second, Türkiye is considered one of the most stable and reliable investment environments in its region. Third, regulatory reforms have facilitated a more business-friendly atmosphere. According to the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings, Türkiye is ranked 33rd globally, reflecting improvements in infrastructure, legal protections, and administrative procedures (World Bank, 2025). Additional factors reinforcing Türkiye's attractiveness include the availability of a large and relatively young labor force, comparatively competitive labor costs,

and the expansion of a dynamic domestic consumer market. Beyond these structural advantages, the CU further strengthens Türkiye's appeal for French firms by facilitating its role as a production and distribution hub integrated into European value chains, particularly for companies seeking operational alternatives beyond Western Europe.

Although the number of Turkish firms operating in France has gradually increased, their overall level of market penetration remains limited, largely due to a combination of regulatory constraints and structural market conditions. Compliance with the EU single market regime constitutes a central challenge, as Turkish companies are required to satisfy demanding environmental, labor, and product standards that substantially raise entry costs. These regulatory hurdles are compounded by a high degree of market saturation, especially in retail and consumer electronics, where firms such as Vestel and Beko face intense competition from well-established European brands.

Beyond regulatory and competitive pressures, low levels of brand recognition further constrain Turkish firms' expansion by weakening consumer confidence and necessitating considerable investment in marketing and distribution networks. Access to public procurement represents an additional barrier, as administrative procedures and implicit local preferences tend to advantage French or EU-based companies, particularly in strategic areas such as infrastructure and defense. Taken together, these factors help explain why Turkish investment in France, despite its upward trajectory, remains limited in scale and economic impact when compared with the more substantial presence of French investment in Türkiye.

More fundamentally, the asymmetric configuration of economic relations raises substantive questions regarding Türkiye's economic sovereignty. Despite notable advances in industrial capacity and export diversification, Türkiye continues to rely heavily on external capital flows and advanced technologies, especially in high value-added sectors. The deep integration of French multinational firms such as Renault, AXA, and CarrefourSA into Türkiye's automotive, insurance, and retail markets illustrates the extent of this dependence. Such levels of foreign corporate entrenchment can, under certain conditions, narrow national policy autonomy, particularly during periods of political tension or in response to shifts in EU regulatory frameworks. Accordingly, economic ties that appear broadly reciprocal at first glance may, upon closer examination, reproduce hierarchical relationships that expose Türkiye to external shocks or unilateral policy adjustments by its partners. In this respect, while economic interdependence has contributed to a degree of stability in bilateral relations, it simultaneously underscores the importance for Türkiye of strengthening domestic productive capacity and reducing reliance on foreign capital in strategically sensitive sectors.

Table 5. Some Major French Companies Operating in Türkiye

COMPANIES	SECTORS	ACTIVITIES IN TÜRKİYE	IMPACTS IN TÜRKİYE
AXA	Insurance	Non-life insurance, nationwide agency network	Strong in the insurance sector
CarrefourSA	Retail	Joint venture with Sabancı Holding, nationwide store network	Wide retail chain, local employment
Citroen	Automotive	Vehicle sales through distributor network	Active player in automotive retail
Decathlon	Sports retail	Retail chain in major cities	Local jobs and retail growth
Groupama	Insurance	Multi-line insurance, including agricultural	Active in health and rural markets
Ibis	Hotels	Hotels in major cities	Part of growing hotel industry
Michelin	Tires	Tire distribution and branding	Strong presence in the auto parts sector
Nestle	Food	Wide product range; marketing and local partnerships	R&D and sales operations
Peugeot	Automotive	Distribution and marketing network	Strong presence in car market
Pierre Cardin	Fashion and apparel	Extensive retail network in clothing	Major market presence, and contribution to fashion industry and consumer trends
Renault	Automotive	Joint venture with Oyak; production plant in Bursa	Export hub, major employer, car production base
TEB	Banking	Subsidiary of BNP Paribas, operates as TEB	Strong in small and medium-sized enterprises, and retail banking
Tefal	Home appliances	Marketing and after-sales	Popular home appliance brand
Thales	Defense and aerospace	Security systems, defense technologies	Partner in defense and aerospace sectors
Total	Energy	Fuel distribution and renewable energy projects	Contribution to energy transition

Table 6. Some Major Turkish Companies Operating in France

COMPANIES	SECTORS	ACTIVITIES IN FRANCE	IMPACTS IN FRANCE
Arkas	Logistics and maritime	Shipping, logistics, and port operations in France	A strong player in the logistics and maritime sector
Beko	Electronics and home appliances	Sales and distribution network in France	Significant presence in the home appliance market
Ekol	Logistics	Warehousing, road transport, intermodal logistics	Enhances supply chain efficiency, promotes sustainable logistics
Vestel	Electronics and home appliances	Sales of TVs and electronics in France. Presence in major retail chains	Important player in the electronics market
Yıldız	Food	Sales of food products under the Ülker brand	Established a strong presence in the food sector

Finally, tourism constitutes an important dimension of the relations, functioning not merely as a medium of cultural interaction but also as a meaningful pillar of bilateral economic exchange. In 2023, France maintained its position as the most visited country in the world, welcoming over 90 million international tourists. Türkiye ranked sixth globally with approximately 51 million visitors, highlighting its growing prominence as a global tourism hub (WP Travel, 2025). From a bilateral perspective, tourism is particularly important for Türkiye, given the steadily increasing number of French citizens visiting the country. According to the data in Table 7, the number of French tourists visiting Türkiye rose from 731.379 in 2018 to 1.088.380 in 2024, despite temporary disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, the number of Turkish citizens visiting France remains comparatively low, fluctuating between 18.878 and 85.995 in the available data range and remaining far below the outbound figures from France.

The asymmetric structure regarding tourist numbers is not unexpected and is primarily shaped by structural and institutional factors. First, Turkish citizens are required to obtain a Schengen visa to enter France, and in recent years, visa rejection rates have increased markedly, owing to both political tensions and administrative restrictions. Second, the disparity in purchasing power, exacerbated by the strength of the Euro against the Turkish Lira, makes international travel to the Eurozone prohibitively expensive for many middle-income Turkish citizens. Nevertheless, the economic value of French tourism to Türkiye is substantial. French visitors contribute significantly to the Turkish economy, especially in the hospitality, cultural heritage, and services sectors. Beyond economic figures, the sustained interest of French citizens in Türkiye underscores the country's cultural appeal, geopolitical significance, and potential for strengthening soft power channels.

Table 7. Number of French Citizens Visiting Türkiye and Turkish Citizens Visiting France by Year

	NUMBER OF FRENCH CITIZENS VISITING TÜRKİYE	NUMBER OF TURKISH CITIZENS VISITING FRANCE
2018	731.379	75.623
2019	875.957	85.995
2020	311.708	not available
2021	621.493	18.878
2022	986.090	43.495
2023	1.031.824	77.467
2024	1.088.380	not available

Source: (TURSAB, 2025; DrDataStats, 2025)

4. CULTURAL RELATIONS

Bilateral cultural relations between Türkiye and France have historically functioned both as a mirror reflecting and a buffer moderating broader political dynamics. Rooted in centuries of interaction -from Ottoman diplomatic engagements in France to the enduring influence of Francophone culture in Türkiye- these relations have evolved in tandem with shifting political, economic, and security contexts. Cultural cooperation has mirrored the oscillations in bilateral relations, shaped not only by contemporary events but also by deeply embedded historical memories. In this regard, cultural diplomacy has served as a platform for both dialogue and contestation. Although Türkiye and France have historically collaborated extensively in the fields of arts, education, and language, a growing tension has been seen, particularly arising from media portrayals that challenge the social values of one or both countries. Nevertheless, as former French President François Hollande observed, cultural relations have always been very vibrant (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, 2025). This dimension thus offers a crucial lens through which to understand the broader trajectory of bilateral relations.

Cultural engagement between Türkiye and France was institutionally rooted in the 1952 Cultural Agreement, which aimed to foster mutual advancement in intellectual, artistic, and scientific fields (Udum and Gezen 2022: 187). Building on this foundation, cultural cooperation gained renewed momentum in the post-Cold War era. A notable milestone was achieved in 1992 with the establishment of Galatasaray University, formalized through an international accord signed by Turkish President Turgut Özal and French President François Mitterrand, underscoring the centrality of culture and education in strengthening bilateral ties (Université Galatasaray, 2025).

Despite these accomplishments, the 2000s saw rising tensions. The historical disputes, particularly those surrounding the events of 1915, exacerbated tensions between Türkiye and France. The French National Assembly's 2006 bill criminalizing the denial of the so-called Armenian genocide, which President Sarkozy signed into law in 2012, was staunchly rejected by Türkiye as an unwarranted political interference (Le Monde, 2012). Subsequently, the annulment of this draft law by France's Constitutional Council in February, 2012, was interpreted in Türkiye as a reaffirmation of freedom of expression, academic inquiry, and the rule of law, while also resisting the politicization of history within France (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, 2012).

Certain contentious issues have exerted considerable pressure on the cultural ties between Türkiye and France, thereby complicating avenues for cooperation. In recent years, the increasingly confrontational rhetoric between Turkish President Erdoğan and French President Macron - particularly on matters related to xenophobia, anti-Muslim sentiment, and the rise of nationalism within European societies- has significantly shaped cultural perceptions, media narratives, and public discourse in both countries. Türkiye has emphasized the protection of Muslim communities' rights and religious respect, especially within European contexts, whereas France has prioritized the preservation of its secular republican identity (Örmeci, 2022: 153-157). These divergent approaches have influenced how cultural identities are expressed and negotiated transnationally.

French policies regulating religious symbols and practices in public space have drawn sustained criticism from a range of international actors, including Türkiye, on the grounds that they risk marginalizing Muslim communities. These debates increasingly spill over into cultural spheres such as education, diaspora engagement, cinema, and literature, where broader political disagreements find symbolic and narrative expression. Public institutions, artists, and intellectuals operating across the Turkish–French space are thus required to navigate a densely politicized environment in which cultural exchange is closely intertwined with diplomatic and ideological tensions. The resulting politicization of religious and cultural questions complicates initiatives aimed at promoting mutual understanding and, in many cases, contributes to the reproduction of polarized discourses rather than their resolution.

Another salient dimension of bilateral tension concerns the role of French media in shaping public perceptions of Türkiye. Major media outlets in France have frequently framed developments in Türkiye through recurring themes of authoritarian governance, Islamic conservatism, and democratic backsliding, a pattern that has contributed to the consolidation of negative stereotypes within the French public discourse. For instance, a content analysis of Le Monde's coverage in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 15 identified a dominant narrative centered on political instability, the suppression of dissent, and the perceived weakening of secular institutions in Türkiye (Devran and Benrazek, 2017). Comparable framing has been observed in other leading newspapers, including Le Figaro and Libération, suggesting the persistence of a largely unidimensional portrayal of Türkiye in the French media landscape (Önder et al., 2021: 172–173).

Such persistent patterns of media framing exert a tangible influence on cultural relations. By normalizing simplified representations of Turkish society, they complicate efforts to cultivate cultural empathy, sustained dialogue, and meaningful artistic exchange. Turkish cultural institutions and diaspora communities in France frequently confront these stereotypes, which in turn shape the reception of their identities and cultural expressions (Ceyhan and Yılmaz, 2022: 261-262). Consequently, the space for meaningful cultural interaction contracts and mutual understanding becomes increasingly elusive. In this context, the media's role in constructing “the other” transcends journalistic responsibility and assumes significant diplomatic and cultural implications. The misrepresentation of Türkiye in French media does not occur in isolation but reverberates through educational environments, cultural platforms, and public opinion, thereby shaping the contemporary relationship between these historically interconnected societies.

Moreover, France hosts significant Turkish and Armenian diaspora communities whose competing historical narratives and political mobilizations have substantially influenced French cultural policy. Here, “diaspora” is understood broadly to encompass individuals of Turkish or Armenian descent residing in France, irrespective of citizenship status. The Armenian diaspora in France, estimated at around 600.000 individuals, has been particularly effective in lobbying for the official recognition of the 1915 events as “genocide” (Oddon, 2020). In response, the French government has designated April 24 as a day of commemoration, supported by state-funded

memorials and educational programs. From the Turkish perspective, these developments pose challenges to historical memory, as Turkish institutions reject the label “genocide”, viewing it as a politicized characterization that neglects the complex realities of the events (Directorate of Communications of Türkiye, 2025). Consequently, when French cultural institutions align with narratives advanced by the Armenian diaspora, it complicates the engagement of Turkish artists, academics, and organizations. Such cooperation is often domestically perceived in Türkiye as an implicit endorsement of a contentious historical and diplomatic claim, thereby presenting a significant challenge for Turkish cultural diplomacy.

The Kurdish community in France introduces an additional layer of complexity to bilateral cultural and diplomatic relations. Kurdish networks occasionally align with Armenian advocacy efforts on political and historical matters, thereby further complicating Türkiye’s engagement with France. From Ankara’s perspective, a significant source of tension stems from the public display of symbols and images affiliated with the PKK during demonstrations held across France (Anadolu Agency, 2025). Despite the PKK’s official designation as a terrorist organization by both the EU and the USA, French authorities have frequently permitted protests in which participants openly brandish flags, banners, and images associated with the group (Tetik ve Düz, 2019). This practice has elicited criticism from Turkish officials, who contend that France’s tolerance of such displays amounts to an endorsement of terrorist propaganda.

This cyclical interaction fosters a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby the continuous anticipation of antagonism generates behaviors and discourses that actualize that very outcome. Put simply, continually portraying the “other” as untrustworthy, culturally different, or politically troublesome damages how each side views the other, which then seems to confirm and justify the initial negative assumptions. Over time, this escalating narrative solidifies into a structural barrier to dialogue and cultural exchange, ultimately becoming a fixed impediment to mutual understanding (The Program on Negotiation, 2025). To counteract this dynamic, proactive initiatives are required to create and sustain spaces for direct, regular, and constructive media dialogue. A promising initial step would be the institutionalization of a Turkish-French Media Forum, wherein journalists, editors, and media scholars from both countries convene periodically to discuss editorial practices, framing strategies, and common challenges.

Crucially, the effectiveness of such engagements depends less on isolated initiatives than on their continuity, as trust and mutual understanding cannot be sustained through sporadic interaction alone. In this regard, the creation of institutionalized platforms linking media organizations from both countries may offer a constructive point of departure. Structured and sustained dialogue among media actors has the potential to challenge entrenched interpretative frames and to move beyond zero-sum representations. Ultimately, the revitalization of cultural and diplomatic relations between Türkiye and France will rest not only on political will, but also on the capacity of the media to engage in critical self-reflection concerning its role in the production of international images—and, by extension, in the shaping of international relations.

Furthermore, France is home to one of the largest Turkish diaspora communities in Europe, estimated at approximately 600,000 individuals (Denizeau, 2024: 29). A significant share of this population consists of second- and third-generation Turkish–French citizens who are increasingly visible in cultural, civic, and artistic spheres. Equipped with bilingual competencies and hybrid cultural repertoires, these younger generations often function as informal intermediaries between Türkiye and France, shaping everyday interactions as well as broader public debates. In major urban centers, Turkish–French youth play an active role in multicultural festivals, public art initiatives, and digital platforms that contest dominant stereotypes and encourage intercultural exchange. Through such forms of engagement, they contribute to more nuanced articulations of

Turkish identity within the French sociocultural landscape and, in doing so, influence the terms through which this identity is publicly perceived and negotiated.

Within this framework, diasporic identity needs not be understood solely through the lenses of political tension or integration-related challenges. The everyday practices and creative expressions of Turkish-French youth, when embedded in shared social and cultural spaces, have the capacity to generate more constructive forms of cultural interaction and to exert a positive influence on bilateral relations. Realizing this potential, however, requires sustained and carefully designed initiatives that promote long-term cultural dialogue among young people in both societies. In this regard, municipalities and cultural institutions can play a facilitating role by supporting collaborative endeavors-such as community-based exhibitions, bilingual publications, and thematic workshops- that give visibility to hybrid identities. Beyond offering channels for artistic expression, such platforms can contribute to the gradual reshaping of public perceptions by enabling experiential forms of engagement and the circulation of shared narratives.

As noted earlier, academic cooperation between Turkish and French institutions has long constituted a durable pillar of cultural exchange. At the secondary education level, French high schools -including Lycée Saint-Michel, Lycée Saint-Benoît, and Lycée Notre-Dame de Sion in Istanbul, Lycée Charles de Gaulle in Ankara, and Lycée Saint-Joseph in Izmir- have functioned as important hubs of linguistic and cultural interaction, sustaining long-term patterns of educational collaboration (Denizeau, 2025: 22). Although administrative disputes at times introduced a degree of politicization into the operation of French secondary schools in Türkiye, these tensions were ultimately managed and defused. This episode underscored the importance of sustained track-two engagement in the educational sphere as a means of preventing misperceptions and containing political frictions at an early stage. Beyond secondary education, bilateral cooperation at the university level has expanded considerably. Erasmus+ exchange schemes, jointly supervised graduate theses, and collaborative research initiatives have facilitated academic mobility between institutions such as Galatasaray University in Istanbul and its French partners, including Sciences Po and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

The French Institute in Türkiye maintains an active presence through its branches in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir, where it regularly organizes exhibitions, film festivals, and public debates aimed at enhancing cross-cultural literacy. In a parallel effort, Türkiye has strengthened its cultural diplomacy via the Yunus Emre Institute, which has been offering Turkish language instruction, cultural programming, and academic initiatives in Paris since 2009. More recently, in 2024, the Institute introduced a program specifically targeting French diplomatic candidates, with the objective of fostering deeper mutual understanding and more informed bilateral engagement (Yunus Emre Institute, 2025). Alongside these initiatives, French cultural festivals in Türkiye and Turkish cultural festivals in France have provided platforms for joint exhibitions and film screenings. Such artistic collaborations contribute to more nuanced and multidimensional representations of both societies and, in many cases, create spaces of interaction that remain relatively insulated from prevailing political rhetoric, allowing engagement to unfold through shared cultural experience rather than political positioning.

5. CONCLUSION

Politically, Türkiye and France do not confront a fundamental or structural incompatibility in their core security interests. Rather than stemming from entrenched antagonism, bilateral frictions have largely emerged from shifting geopolitical configurations and overlapping regional rivalries, most notably in the Eastern Mediterranean, Africa, and the South Caucasus. Disagreements surrounding Türkiye's EU accession process, coupled with the instrumental use of bilateral issues within domestic political debates, have further complicated the relationship. At the same time, the

evolving international environment-characterized by the resurgence of great power competition-creates new space for strategic recalibration. Therefore, it can be argued that the future trajectory of Turkish-French relations will depend on the extent to which both sides demonstrate the political will to privilege converging interests and to pursue pragmatic, issue-based cooperation in addressing regional challenges.

The bilateral trade relationship has expanded steadily in volume, yet it continues to display pronounced structural asymmetries. Although trade flows reflect a degree of mutual interdependence- particularly in the aftermath of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic- France retains a quantitatively larger and qualitatively more diversified position within bilateral exchanges. This imbalance, however, has not translated into systemic instability, as sectoral complementarities have contributed to the durability of trade relations over time. A similar pattern is evident in investment relations, where French capital occupies a significantly more prominent place in Türkiye's economy than Turkish investment does in France, thereby reinforcing an asymmetry with broader strategic implications. At the same time, these dynamics underscore economic cooperation as a key stabilizing pillar of bilateral ties. Finally, while tourism flows remain uneven due to institutional and mobility-related constraints affecting Turkish citizens, the sustained growth in the number of French visitors to Türkiye continues to deepen economic interaction and cultural interconnectedness.

With respect to cultural relations, Türkiye and France are embedded in a historically layered and multidimensional cultural space shaped by shared memories, reciprocal perceptions, and dense transnational social ties. Beyond the sphere of formal diplomacy, cultural institutions, academic collaboration, and a wide range of civic initiatives play a significant role in sustaining and continuously reshaping bilateral interaction. Although political tensions periodically place constraints on these exchanges, such platforms often function as comparatively less politicized arenas in which dialogue and normative alignment can still emerge. This dynamic is particularly visible among second- and third-generation diaspora communities, where hybrid cultural identities and patterns of civic engagement contribute to more nuanced forms of mutual understanding. In this regard, the trajectory of Turkish-French cultural relations is likely to depend less on state-driven cultural diplomacy than on the durability and inclusiveness of transnational cultural networks linking diverse civil society actors.

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