

Interview - Evren Balta

Written by E-International Relations

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Evren Balta is Professor of Political Science at Özyeğin University, Istanbul. Her research focuses on citizenship, democratic backsliding, Turkish foreign policy, and the intersections of domestic and international politics. She is the author of *The American Passport in Turkey: National Citizenship in the Age of Transnationalism* (with O. Altan-Olcay, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020) and *The Age of Uneasiness* (İletişim, 2019), and has published in journals such as *Party Politics*, *Democratization*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Turkish Studies*. She has been a visiting scholar at Harvard, Columbia, NYU, and the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM, Vienna), and is currently an affiliate scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

One of the most exciting developments is the growing convergence between International Relations and Comparative Politics. While IR has never been entirely detached from domestic political dynamics, the boundaries are now more porous than ever. What's particularly striking today is how domestic politics has become a systemic variable — not just background noise, but a driver of international outcomes. We're seeing internal transformations — polarization, democratic backsliding, identity politics, or economic inequality — reshape global alignments, foreign policy behavior, and even the structure of the international order itself. At the same time, international pressures — wars, climate crises, shifting hegemonies — are deeply reshaping domestic regimes. This recursive relationship is producing some of the most dynamic and necessary research in the field right now.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I was educated in a period shaped by critical debates around inequality, cultural difference, and the legacy of Western dominance. While I never subscribed to postmodern relativism, I was deeply influenced by the need to deconstruct narrow definitions of universalism and expose their exclusions. I believed in universal values — but I became wary of how they were defined and instrumentalized. Over time, however, a different kind of realization emerged. Intellectually, I always knew that progress isn't linear or irreversible. But witnessing how easily shared achievements — democratic norms, human rights, pluralism — can be eroded before our eyes, often by authoritarian leaders with popular mandates, forced me to ask new questions: Why do these values collapse so easily? How do internal vulnerabilities and external pressures combine to make that possible? And how can we think about global responsibility in a world where the inside and the outside are deeply entangled? These questions brought me back to universal values—but from a different starting point. I now believe more strongly than ever that values such as democracy, justice, and resistance to unjust authority are not Western inventions, but part of humanity's shared historical experience and common heritage. They have been imagined, practiced, and defended — sometimes at great cost — across a wide range of societies. What I have come to embrace is a more horizontal form of universalism, one that emerges from multiple geographies, histories, and voices. This shift in perspective has profoundly shaped how I think about global politics — and about the possibilities of solidarity across difference.

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In light of recent geopolitical shifts, including the 2024 U.S. presidential election and evolving political

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dynamics within the European Union, how would you characterize the current state of Turkey's relations with its Western partners? Do you see signs of stabilization, further divergence, or a new hybrid phase emerging?

Turkey's relations with its Western partners in 2025 reflect a cautious, transactional phase with signs of selective convergence, but not a full stabilization. The relationship remains shaped by both structural tensions (e.g., democratic concerns, divergent regional interests) and converging interests (e.g., defense, trade, migration). This points to an emerging hybrid phase: neither a clean break nor a full reset, but a compartmentalized cooperation dependent on shifting geopolitics. The outcome of the 2024 U.S. election has reinforced personalistic, leader-to-leader diplomacy, which Ankara prefers. Unlike during the earlier Biden administration, democracy and human rights concerns have become less central to U.S.-Turkey relations, especially under a more transactional American approach. Meanwhile, Europe's focus on defense autonomy has created opportunities for Turkey to position itself as an indispensable partner, particularly as the U.S. shifts resources toward Asia. Economic and regional dynamics also push the relationship toward cautious cooperation: the EU's search for secure supply chains and alternative energy routes plays to Turkey's geographic strengths, while Ankara's efforts to mediate volatile Middle Eastern crises — such as in Syria and the Israeli Palestinian conflict — reinforce its strategic relevance. However, trust deficits and Turkey's unpredictability continue to limit deeper integration or full stabilization of ties. Relations are increasingly transactional rather than driven by shared long-term visions. Dialogues happen bilaterally (e.g., Germany-Turkey, France-Turkey) rather than through coherent EU-wide strategies. Overall, relations with Western partners are best described as a hybrid phase of selective convergence and enduring transactionalism. There is no decisive stabilization, but also no rupture. Instead, Turkey and the West compartmentalize disagreements and cooperate where interests align (defense, migration, energy, trade).

Turkey's foreign policy has exhibited increasing multi-alignment in recent years, deepening relations with Russia, China, and Gulf states while maintaining a central role in NATO. How sustainable is this balancing strategy in the context of today's evolving international order?

Turkey's recent strategy of multi-alignment, deepening ties with Russia, China, and Gulf states while maintaining its central role in NATO, has expanded its diplomatic reach but is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain in today's volatile international order. While Turkey sought strategic autonomy over the past decade, exemplified by moves like purchasing the S-400 air defense system from Russia, the renewed polarization of the global system, rising NATO cohesion after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and intensifying U.S.-China rivalry leave less space for autonomous maneuvering than in the early 2010s. At the same time, NATO's greater focus on defense spending and security cooperation, particularly in light of threats on its eastern flank, draws Turkey closer to the alliance, limiting its ability to freely hedge between competing blocs. In the Middle East, rising regional tensions, such as the escalation between Israel and Iran and the fragile situation in Syria, further reduce opportunities for an independent course, as missteps could quickly entangle Ankara in conflicts beyond its control. Still, Turkey retains room for influence, especially through mediation and leveraging its economic and military ties with multiple actors, but this influence increasingly depends on careful balancing rather than genuine autonomy. The current environment demands caution: while Ankara can still capitalize on being an indispensable regional player, the era of relatively unconstrained strategic autonomy that Turkey enjoyed a decade ago has clearly narrowed, and sustaining a purely multi-aligned posture has become riskier and more complex.

The ongoing war in Ukraine and the resulting reconfiguration of European security dynamics continue to shape NATO's agenda. How has this affected Turkey's positioning within the alliance, both in terms of strategic priorities and internal alliance politics?

The war in Ukraine initially reinforced strong cohesion within NATO, with Turkey's strategic priorities aligning closely with the alliance's stance. From the outset, Ankara backed Ukraine's territorial integrity, provided military support (e.g., Bayraktar drones), and opposed Russian dominance in the Black Sea. Yet, Turkey carefully avoided a complete rupture with Russia, leveraging its unique ties to act as a mediator in grain corridor negotiations and prisoner exchanges. This balancing act allowed Ankara to increase its diplomatic relevance within NATO while maintaining its independent channels with Moscow. As the conflict continues, shifting U.S. priorities and growing

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European debates over defense autonomy are creating new dynamics. European states are increasingly expected to shoulder a larger share of security responsibilities, and Turkey sees this as an opportunity to deepen its integration into European security structures, positioning itself as an indispensable player in the continent's evolving architecture. Furthermore, Turkey's geographic and logistical importance makes it a key factor in post-war reconstruction efforts in Ukraine, where access to EU funds and contracts could further entrench its strategic role. However, while Ankara wants to be a key partner, growing mistrust among allies — driven not only by Turkey's ties to Russia but also by broader concerns about democratic backsliding and foreign policy misalignment — complicates deeper integration within the alliance.

Sweden's recent accession to NATO marked a significant moment in alliance politics, with Turkey playing a key role in negotiations. What lessons can be drawn from this episode regarding Ankara's leverage within NATO, and more broadly, about intra-alliance bargaining dynamics?

Sweden's accession process highlighted Turkey's ability to use its veto power strategically within NATO, demonstrating that even a single member state can significantly influence alliance decisions. Ankara leveraged its approval of Sweden's membership to secure concessions on issues tied to its domestic security agenda. This episode underscored how NATO's consensus-based decision-making grants individual allies disproportionate leverage when enlargement or major policy shifts are at stake, allowing domestic political priorities to shape alliance outcomes. For Turkey, it reaffirmed the utility of linking bilateral disputes and internal security concerns to broader alliance negotiations. More broadly, the process revealed the complexity of intra-alliance bargaining dynamics, where national interests, domestic politics, and alliance cohesion are deeply intertwined.

Domestically, how do you assess the impact of the 2024 Turkish local elections on the country's foreign policy trajectory? Are there signs of adjustment in Ankara's external posture, or is continuity more likely?

The 2024 local elections in Turkey had limited direct impact on the country's foreign policy trajectory, as core elements of Ankara's external posture remained largely unchanged. Foreign policy continues to be tightly controlled by the executive, with little influence from local political dynamics. Instead, a relatively favorable international environment, where Western partners prioritize security cooperation over democratic concerns, has given Ankara more space to pursue repressive measures at home without risking serious external backlash. This dynamic reinforces continuity rather than adjustment in foreign policy, as the government sees its assertive external posture as both a tool for consolidating domestic power and a means of sustaining Turkey's regional influence. Absent a major shift in global or regional conditions, the pattern of using foreign policy successes to bolster internal control is likely to persist.

Critical issues such as energy security, migration governance, and Eastern Mediterranean disputes continue to shape Turkey's relations with both the EU and the U.S. Do you see potential avenues for cooperative engagement on these fronts, or are they more likely to reinforce existing tensions?

Issues like energy security, migration governance, and Eastern Mediterranean disputes remain central to Turkey's ties with the EU, but they offer a mixed picture for cooperation. In the Eastern Mediterranean, entrenched tensions over maritime boundaries, the unresolved Cyprus issue, and competing energy exploration activities continue to reinforce distrust. While global shifts like the EU's green transition could gradually lower the stakes of fossil fuel disputes, meaningful cooperation will remain elusive without political progress on core issues. By contrast, the Black Sea region offers clearer avenues for cooperation, as shared concerns over Russia's actions align Turkish, EU, and U.S. security interests — particularly on maritime security and energy transit. On migration, flows have largely stabilized under existing agreements, turning the issue from a flashpoint into a platform for pragmatic, if uneasy, cooperation. However, deep mistrust still constrains the potential for lasting partnerships. Ultimately, while opportunities for engagement exist, especially in the Black Sea, sustained cooperation will depend on managing tensions elsewhere and rebuilding trust.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

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Stay intellectually curious — and politically awake. International Relations is not just about theories or institutions; it's about power, inequality, war, solidarity, and the future of humanity. So, don't study IR as if it's something "out there," detached from the world you live in. The international and the domestic are deeply intertwined, and understanding their entanglement is one of the most urgent tasks of our time. Also: be honest. Don't fall into the trap of writing a lot while saying very little. Academia rewards performance, but scholarship should be about clarity, substance, and care. Study what truly matters to you — what you find troubling, moving, or unjust. Don't be afraid to ask big, difficult questions — even if they don't fit neatly into existing paradigms. Theory should serve as a lens, not a cage. And finally: read widely, beyond your discipline, and listen closely to voices from different parts of the world. Some of the most important insights today come not from the traditional centers of academic power, but from the margins — both geographic and epistemic.