



Turkey's Quest for EU Membership

Turkey is the largest and most controversial candidate for membership in the European Union (EU). While Turkey's application draws support from a number of its allies – both in Europe and in the United States – it also generates fear and opposition at the grass roots level. This brief explains why Turkey's application is so controversial, it sets out who favors and who opposes Turkish accession, and it maps scenarios for how the situation is likely to develop in the near future.

Turkey and the EC

Ever since the foundation of modern Turkey in 1923, Turkish policy-makers have followed a policy of political, social, and economic Westernization, which they hoped would reorganize their society and redefine Turkey's place in the world. Turkey's application for EC membership in 1959 reflected these goals, but was also based on the desire to check Greek influence in the Communityⁱ. In 1963, Turkey's efforts were rewarded with the Ankara Agreement, regulating its association with the EC. The Ankara Agreement was limited to trade and financial matters, but offered the prospect of full membership at a future unspecified date. As a next step, both parties signed the 1970 Additional Protocol, establishing a 22-year transitional period leading to a customs union. However, in the course of the 1970s, Turkey's economic development strategy, based on industrialization and import substitution, conflicted with its commitment to liberalize trade with the EC. As pressure for a re-negotiation of the customs union was mounting, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit cancelled a third round of tariff reductions in 1978 and asked for a revision of the terms of the Association Agreement.

In the meantime, Turkey's intervention in Cyprus in 1974, following a Greek-sponsored coup, and the Turkish military's overthrow of the civilian government in 1980 led to a real rupture in Turkey's relations with the EC. Tensions began to ease only with democratic elections in 1983, opening the way for Turkey's application for full EC membership in 1987. At the time, Prime Minister Turgut Özal pushed for full membership for pragmatic geo-political and economic reasons. Özal realized that Greek membership of the EC, with accompanying veto powers, had put Turkey in a disadvantaged positionⁱⁱ. Moreover, the Mediterranean enlargement had eroded Turkey's trading position with the EC, giving countries with similar trading patterns an advantage over Turkish products. Özal hoped to reestablish Turkey's position as a stable actor on the world stage after a tumultuous era of military government and conflict.

The 1990s: The Lost Decade

Turkey's application for full membership caught the EC by surprise. Two factors specifically worked against an immediate opening of accession negotiations. First, the EC, following the Single European Act of 1986, was preoccupied with the establishment of a Single Market by

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1992, and remained reluctant to welcome any new members in the meantime. Second, starting from the mid-1980s, Turkey fought an increasingly bloody Kurdish insurrection in South-East Anatolia and faced accusations over the abuse of human rights and the rights of minoritiesⁱⁱⁱ. Following lengthy deliberations, in 1989 the EC recommended that no new accession negotiations should be initiated before 1993. In addition, the EC raised reservations about Turkey's ability to implement the necessary social, political and economic adjustments required for EC membership in the medium term. Turkey's failure to expand political pluralism and improve human rights and the rights of minorities, its skyrocketing inflation and unemployment, and the persisting disputes with Greece over Cyprus and the Aegean, according to the European Commission, would create significant "adjustment constraints". Instead, the EC proposed a package of measures to intensify EC-Turkish relations, the so-called Matutes Package. This package included four specific measures designed to re-launch relations with the EC: the intensification of financial cooperation, the completion of the customs union, industrial and technological cooperation, and the strengthening of political and cultural links.

However, with the collapse of communism, Turkey's membership application again went to the end of the queue. While many of the Central and Eastern European countries were economically in a bad shape, they were considered to be politically and culturally part of Europe. When decisions were made on the next round of EU enlargement in 1993, Turkey again went empty-handed. The Copenhagen summit of 1993 marked an important watershed for EU-Turkey relations. Two specific developments at Copenhagen proved of primary importance for the prospects for Turkish membership. First, the EU acknowledged that the membership of Central and Eastern European countries (not Turkey) was a priority for the European Union. Second, the EU introduced economic and political criteria for membership, the so-called Copenhagen criteria^{iv}. As progress on the political criteria seemed unachievable for Turkey, the EU instead gave priority to completing negotiations for the EU-Turkey customs union, which came into force in 1996. The 1997 Luxembourg European Council summit brought another defeat for Turkish ambitions. The Luxembourg summit set up a two-tier accession process in which Turkey was not accepted as a candidate. In fact, additional conditions were placed on Turkey's candidature, including the resolution of differences with Greece over Cyprus and the Aegean.

The Luxembourg summit provoked a wave of outrage in Turkey and prompted it to freeze its political dialogue with the EU. Most Turks believed that the Luxembourg decision was taken due to religious and cultural factors. This impression was fuelled by a statement of the European Christian Democratic Union that "the EU is in the process of building a civilization in which Turkey has no place"^v. Other concerns were of a more political nature, such as German anxiety over Turkish immigrant workers, and French and Italian reservations over Turkish exports of textiles and agricultural products. However, these concerns usually remained obscured by the official rhetoric that focused on the "Greek veto", human rights and a lack of democratization. Finally, at the 1999 Helsinki summit, the EU confirmed that Turkey was a candidate country, destined to join the European Union, once it fulfilled the Copenhagen criteria and resolved its long-standing disputes with Greece.

Helsinki and Beyond

Different explanations for the sudden adjustment in the European Union's position have been presented, but it seems that three specific developments have been of special significance: a

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change of government in Germany in 1998, a reversal of the Greek position on Turkey in 1999, and the firm support given to Turkey's application by the US. The 1998 German elections brought to power an SPD-Green coalition that broke with the former CDU consensus, which could not accept Turkey's membership on cultural grounds. Germany signaled this change in policy early on, extending its support for Turkey's membership at the 1999 Cologne European Council summit, but failed due to the resistance of Greece and the Scandinavian countries. However, soon after, devastating earthquakes in Greece and Turkey opened the way for a dramatic reversal of the Greek position, spearheaded by Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou. Following an improvement in Greek-Turkish relations, the Greek government signaled that it was willing to drop its long-standing objections to Turkey's EU membership, based on the hope that bilateral problems could be easier solved within the framework of the Union^{vi}. Finally, America's determined support for Turkey's membership application has been an important factor – although it did not always have the desired effects^{vii}.

More or less simultaneously, developments inside Turkey opened the way for political reforms. Following the 1997 coup that forced the Islamist Welfare Party from power, some pragmatic Islamist leaders made their peace with Kemalist secularism and began to espouse a more moderate philosophy. Soon, the Islamist movement regrouped under the umbrella of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). At the same time, the Turkish military won some decisive victories against the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), culminating in the arrest of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. The following cease-fire with the PKK restored a sense of stability to the country not known since the 1970s. As a result, the Turkish military was willing to tolerate a greater measure of individual freedom and political reforms. Another landmark development was the election of the Islamist AKP party in 2002, made possible by a decade of political corruption and a severe economic crisis in 2001. Following the elections, the AKP pursued the reform process initiated by the previous government with growing zeal, eager to show its pro-European credentials and to avoid the fate of its Islamist predecessor. In fact, democratic reforms became a way for the AKP to shake off the constraints imposed upon it by Turkey's secular military.

Suddenly, Turkey was well on its way to meet most of the requirements the EU had set for the beginning of accession negotiations. Moreover, to the surprise of many, the new Turkish government declared itself willing to accept a new UN plan for a settlement of the Cyprus question. Following these developments, an agreement was made at the 2002 Copenhagen European Council that accession negotiations could start in mid-2005, if Turkey complied with the Copenhagen criteria. After a positive assessment by the European Commission, the December 2004 European Council set out the final requirements for opening negotiations on October 3, 2005. However, the opening of accession negotiations did not pass without further drama and high-politicking amongst EU member states. A last minute objection by the Austrian government almost derailed the accession process and could only be overcome by simultaneously initiating accession talks with Croatia, a long-standing Austrian priority.

The Negotiating Framework

Following the decision to open accession talks with Turkey, a framework for negotiations was revised by the European Commission. The pace of negotiations will be determined by three factors. The first is Turkey's progress with adopting the European *acquis communautaire* – the existing body of European Union market regulations and other jurisprudence. The second

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is Turkey's fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria as set out in June 1993. The third factor is new. In addition to the existing requirements, the framework set out by the European Commission includes several other conditions that are specific to Turkey as a candidate country:

- ◆ According to the negotiating framework, “the shared objective of the negotiations is accession. These negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand. While having full regard to all Copenhagen criteria, including the absorption capacity of the Union, if Turkey is not in a position to assume in full all the obligations of membership it must be ensured that Turkey is fully anchored in the European structures through the strongest possible bond”.
- ◆ Accession negotiations will be conducted in the framework of an Intergovernmental Conference. Within this conference, policy issues will be broken down into 35 policy areas (chapters) and decisions on all chapters will require unanimity.
- ◆ The EU may consider the inclusion of long transition periods, derogations, specific arrangements or permanent safeguard clauses in its proposal for each framework.
- ◆ Negotiations with candidates “whose accession could have substantial financial consequences” (i.e. Turkey) can only be concluded after 2014, the date for the establishment of the EU's new financial framework.
- ◆ Accession negotiations can be suspended in case of a “serious and persistent breach . . . of the principles of democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law on which the Union is founded”. Suspension would require a Commission initiative or a request to that effect by one third of the member states. The final decision would be made by the Council by qualified majority.
- ◆ Under a compromise, Turkey had to sign a protocol that adapted the 1963 Ankara Treaty to the ten new member states of the EU, including the Greek Cypriot government.
- ◆ Turkey commits itself to good neighborly relations and to resolving any outstanding border disputes.

The process of negotiations will be reviewed regularly by the European Council, based on the European Commission's progress reports. The Council will establish benchmarks for the opening and provisional closure of each chapter, and will communicate these benchmarks to Ankara. Turkey will have to report regularly on its progress in meeting these benchmarks. Turkey is currently undergoing a screening process aimed at taking stock of its progress in harmonizing its laws with those of the Union. The conclusion of the screening process will initiate negotiations on the individual chapters. Negotiations will begin on the (legally) least controversial chapters, including culture and education.

Positions of the Relevant Actors

1. Germany

Under the SPD government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Germany has been one of the main advocates for Turkey's membership and proved decisive in bringing about a change in EU-Turkey relations. However, following the election of the CDU-SPD grand coalition, Germany's position has changed considerably. The CDU has traditionally been an opponent of Turkish EU membership on both cultural and political grounds and Angela Merkel, the new Chancellor, has been a fervent supporter of the idea of a “privileged partnership” with Turkey. On this issue, Merkel can count on the support of the majority of her party. The SPD,

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while openly still in favor of Turkish membership, has faced considerable internal opposition, stemming from prominent figures such as former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. The ambivalence of both parties has been reflected in their coalition contract, which states that there will be no automatism leading to Turkish membership and that all options remain on the table. Finally, public support for Turkey's membership remains low. An April 2004 poll showed 12 percent of Germans in support of Turkey joining, with 66 percent against.

2. France

The French position on Turkey remains obscure. President Jacques Chirac has been openly supportive of Turkish membership in the run up to the accession negotiations, but has come under considerable pressure concerning his position. Most of the French right remains opposed to Turkish membership, including the frontrunner for the next presidential elections, Nicolas Sarkozy. His position is shared by a significant part of the left, led by Laurent Fabius. Both Sarkozy and Fabius have called for a referendum on Turkish EU membership, a position subsequently adopted by Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. French protectionism and fear of a large influx of Turkish workers is likely to solidify the opposition to Turkish accession.

3. United Kingdom

The British government under Prime Minister Tony Blair has been one of the main proponents of Turkish accession to the EU. British policy on the issue has long been consistent, and is in line with Britain's general political and strategic alignment with the US. It reflects a preference for widening the scope of EU membership rather than deepening the level of political integration within the EU. Blair has further underlined the importance he gives to Turkish membership by making the first visit of a British Prime Minister to Turkey in fourteen years. So far, it seems that the Conservative Party remains aligned with the government's position on Turkey; because of its similarly strong traditional preference for the transatlantic alliance.

4. Greece

The Greek position on Turkish membership has changed substantially in recent years. An ardent opponent of Turkey's bid for many years, Greece shifted its position following sustained pressure from the EU and the US and following a severe earthquake hitting both countries in 1999. Ever since, Greek support for Turkish membership has endured several potential irritations over the question of Cyprus and is based on the conception that bilateral problems will be easier to solve once Turkey has become a member of the EU. However, Greek public opinion remains deeply averse to Turkish EU membership, with a recent poll showing only 25 percent in favor and more than 45 percent opposed. Under these conditions, a reversal of the Greek position at a later stage is not inconceivable.

5. Austria

The Austrian government under Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel has been the main opponent of Turkish membership at the December 2004 Council meeting. Schüssel's position is backed up by a coalition of all major parties, as well as some 70-80 percent of the Austrian population. In 2004, however, Schüssel was forced to concede defeat when confronted with a

common European front. Somewhat oddly, one of the few proponents for Turkey's membership in Austria is the right-wing politician Jörg Heider. Following the decision to start accession negotiations with Turkey, Austria has announced that it reserves the right to hold a referendum on Turkish membership.

6. *Turkey*

Turkey's political elite has traditionally perceived membership in the EU as an identity question – the ultimate goal of a century long process of Westernization. Accordingly, there has been little opposition to EU membership within Turkey. The Islamist AKP government has adhered to this consensus and ever since its elections in 2002 has made EU membership one of its main projects. However, it ought to be noted that EU membership has only recently become a shared goal of Turkey's Islamists, and some questions remain about the true depth of their commitment. Thus, prior to 1997, several RP representatives, including current Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, have stated that it was the aim of the RP to protect Turkey's values from the EU. Recently, public opinion has become less enamored with EU membership and a 2005 poll showed a drop in support for membership to 57 percent, down from a high of 70-80 percent during the 1990s.

Conclusion: Future Scenarios

Based on the above, there seem to be four possible future scenarios regarding the course of Turkish membership negotiations:

1. Under the first scenario, economic reforms in EU member states continue to deepen and economic growth strengthens, leading to a long-term economic revival of continental European countries. At the same time, EU member states successfully agree to implement a package of institutional and procedural reforms, enabling the further enlargement of the EU. Under these conditions, it seems possible that popular disenchantment with enlargement would cede and that demographic pressure could convince EU member states to admit Turkey, once it has fulfilled all ascribed criteria.
2. In a second scenario, economic reforms in Europe run into the sand, or exaggerate the existing economic malaise. Conflict over the appropriate way ahead prevents any ambitious reshape of EU institutions, making the EU increasingly unable to make common decisions, not least about future enlargements. Under these conditions, public opinion would most likely grow even more opposed, and Turkish ambitions are doomed to fail in the Austrian and French referenda. However, given this situation, it seems probable that negotiations would be broken off at an earlier stage and that Turkey could be offered a "privileged partnership" with the EU, granting it access to some of the EU common policies. However, it is unlikely that Turkey would ever accept such a status.
3. Under a third scenario, Turkey implements in full the necessary reforms qualifying it for EU membership. Economic reforms and FDI lead to a boom in the Turkish economy and Turkey develops into a regional growth center and considerable regional power. Over the same period, growth in Europe remains low and continuing intra-European disputes mean that Europe fails to establish itself as a global actor of any weight. Given these circumstances, it seem possible that Turkey, a country with a strong sense of sovereignty

and its own imperial history, would reject membership of the EU and instead opt for a “privileged partnership”, under which it is granted certain rights and prerogatives.

4. In the final scenario, a violent rejection of the European project occurs from within part of Turkish society, leading to a rejection of EU membership. It seems perceivable that such a rejection could either emerge from the ranks of the Turkish military or Turkey’s political Islamists. In case of the military, a renewed Kurdish insurrection, triggered by events in Iraq, could lead to the roll-back of certain reforms and a new era of military control. On the other hand, it is possible that the Islamist establishment grows increasingly discontent with what it perceives as European anti-Muslim discrimination and chooses to no longer pursue EU membership. In the latter case, it is possible that a secular party will take over from the AKP and continue to pursue the EU project.

ⁱ Greece filed its application for EC membership two months prior to Turkey’s application.

ⁱⁱ Greece acceded to the EC in 1981.

ⁱⁱⁱ The human and monetary costs of the conflict have been an immense burden on Turkey and included a death toll of some 30,000, as well as military expenditures of \$100 billion.

^{iv} The political criteria include: a stable democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and protection of the rights of minorities.

^v quoted in “European Christian Democrats against Turkey”, Financial Times, 22 March 1997

^{vi} According to some, Greece’s change in attitude may also have been linked to the fact that Greece wanted to join the Euro and was willing to exhibit a more positive attitude towards Turkey in return.

^{vii} France especially objected to any US interference in internal EU decisions.