



Turkey's Quest for EU Membership

Turkey is the largest and most controversial candidate for membership of the European Union (EU). While Turkey's application draws support from a number of its allies – notably the UK and USA – it also generates fear and opposition at the grass roots level. The EU officially launched accession talks with Turkey on October 3, 2005 and adopted the core principle that the pace of these talks depend on the pace of political and legal reforms in Turkey. Since 2005 several issues, in Turkey and the EU itself, have slowed progress in negotiations. Similarly international and domestic developments have further diminished the EU population's appetite for Turkish membership; the Turkish population also seems to have lost some of its enthusiasm for the EU project.

This brief explains why Turkey's application is so controversial, it then sets out the main member states' positions on Turkish accession and it also 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 on 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 on pragmatic geo-political and economic grounds. Özal realized that Greek membership of the EC, with its accompanying veto powers, had put Turkey in a disadvantaged positionⁱⁱ. Moreover, the Mediterranean enlargement with Greece

ⁱThe European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

(1981), Portugal and Spain (1986) had eroded Turkey's trading position with the EC, giving countries with similar trading patterns an advantage over Turkish products. Özal hoped to re-establish 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 1987 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 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 in the East, 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, it was acknowledged that the accession of Central and Eastern European countries (but not Turkey) was a priority for the EU. Secondly, the EU introduced economic and political criteria for membership, which became known as the 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

The European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

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 change of government in Germany in 1998, a reversal of the Greek position on Turkey in 1999, and continued 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.

The European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

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, which had been a long-standing Austrian priority.

The pace of accession talks was made a variable of the pace of reforms in Turkey. In the period following the initiation of the negotiation process, several issues have slowed down progress, for example recently because of the motion adopted by the Turkish Parliament that authorizes the government to intervene militarily against PKK fighters in northern Iraq. At the end of 2007 the view of the EU was that Turkey would need to make significant further efforts in the field of freedom of expression and the rights for non-Muslim religious communities. Other issues that still need considerable attention are the fight against corruption, judicial reform, trade union rights and women's and children's rights. Also, Turkey needs to create conditions in the south-east part of the country for the Kurdish population to enjoy full rights and freedom.

The Negotiating Framework

Following the decision to officially launch accession talks with Turkey in October 2005, a framework for negotiations was revised by the European Commission. The pace of negotiations would 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 is Turkey's fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria as set out in June 1993. However, 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 are broken down into 35 policy areas (chapters) and decisions on all chapters 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.
- ◆ Finally, Turkey commits itself to good neighborly relations and to resolving any outstanding border disputes.

The process of negotiations is 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 and the Turkish government has to report regularly on its progress in meeting these benchmarks. Currently, a screening process, aimed at taking stock of Turkish progress in harmonizing laws with those of the Union, is reaching its final phase and the Commission will submit most progress reports by the end of 2007. In its last progress report on Turkey in November 2007 the Commission states that Turkey’s renewed momentum in the political reform process will have a direct impact on the pace of the accession negotiations. Provided that opening benchmarks are met, progress is possible in accession negotiations in 2008, which will then 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 was one of the main advocates for Turkey’s membership and proved decisive in bringing about a change in EU-Turkey relations. However, following the 2005 election of the CDU-SPD grand coalition, Germany changed its position 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 an, undefined, “privileged partnership” with Turkey. On this issue, Merkel can count on the support of the majority of her party. The SPD, 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, German public support for Turkey’s membership remains low. An April 2004 poll showed only 12 percent of Germans supported Turkish accession, with 66 percent against.

The European Union Center of Excellence of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is funded by the European Union to advance knowledge and understanding of the EU and its member countries.

2. *France*

Under former President Jacques Chirac the French position on Turkey was somewhat obscure. Chirac openly supported Turkish membership in the run up to the accession negotiations, but came under considerable pressure as most of the French right remained opposed to Turkish membership. President Nicholas Sarkozy has made the French position much clearer, by spelling out explicitly his strong opposition to Turkey's membership during his electoral campaign. Also, the French Parliament decided for a national referendum to decide the membership question, expected to turn out in a "no". French protectionism and fear of a large influx of Turkish workers is likely to solidify this opposition. As an alternative, Sarkozy proposed a Mediterranean Union that would include Turkey, but of which the substance is left undefined. Additionally, in August 2007 Sarkozy proposed the appointment of a "Wise men's committee" that should research the boundaries of the EU; the EU as a whole has approved the idea of a committee, but has made the compromise that its mandate will – at least publicly - not cover geographical borders, reforms to the bloc's institutions or budgetary questions.

3. *United Kingdom*

The former British government under Prime Minister Tony Blair was one of the main proponents of Turkish accession to the EU. Similarly, Blair's successor Gordon Brown is consistently said to be one of the key advocates for membership. British policy on the issue 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. So far, it seems that the Conservative Party has remained aligned with the government's position on Turkey, mostly because of its strong traditional preference for the transatlantic alliance. Blair underlined the importance he gave to Turkish membership by making the first visit of a British Prime Minister to Turkey in fourteen years. Gordon Brown also met with Prime Minister Erdogan in October 2007, signing a UK-Turkish strategic partnership and expressing confidence in progress in EU-Turkish accession talks.

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 as previously mentioned following the 1999 earthquakes that hit both countries. 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. Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis summed up Athens' stance on Turkish membership with the phrase "full compliance, full accession". Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind, that Greek public opinion remains deeply averse to Turkish EU membership; a recent opinion poll showed that only 25 percent were in favor and more than 45 percent opposed to it.

5. *Austria*

The former Austrian government under Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel was the main opponent of Turkish membership at the December 2004 Council meeting. Schüssel's position was backed by a coalition of all major parties, as well as some 70-80 percent of the Austrian population. In 2005, however, Schüssel was forced to concede defeat when confronted with a common European front. The current Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer is also of the opinion that "Turkey in the EU would mean the end of the EU". Somewhat oddly, one of the few proponents for Turkey's membership in Austria is the far-right politician Jörg Haider. 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 long been little opposition to EU membership within Turkey. The Islamist AKP government has adhered to this consensus only recently, but ever since its election in 2002 it has made EU membership one of its main projects. In his first speech after the AKP re-election in 2007, Prime Minister Erdogan vowed to relaunch EU reforms.

However, the growing hostility from the side of the EU and a feeling of deception on possible membership, made Turkish enthusiasm for membership plunge and only a quarter of the population thinks that their country will ever become a member. The Turkish population in general has become less enamored with EU membership, with the latest 2007 Eurobarometer poll showing a drop in support for membership to 52 percent, down from a high of 70-80 percent during the 1990s. Accordingly, only 38 percent of the Turkish population says to have trust in the EU, which is a fall of 10 per cent compared with a previous survey. Furthermore, the domestic problems of political polarization and the Kurdish question have diverted attention away from EU membership and the newly elected President Abdullah Gül stated – although more than ten years ago – that the aim of his Reform Party to protect Turkey's values from the EU, making him a potentially problematic negotiating partner.

Conclusion: Future Scenarios

Based on the analysis above, there seems to be four possible future scenarios regarding the course of Turkish accession 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. In the current political mood, this scenario seems highly unlikely.

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 in the 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, possibly 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 seems 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 Turkish-Kurdish military conflict, 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 could of course be possible that, a secular party will take over from the AKP, and the pursuit of the EU project will continue.

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.