CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM
essays

From drift to strategy: why the EU should start accession talks with Turkey

The prospect of membership has been the EU's single most effective foreign policy tool. In their desire to join the EU, countries across the European continent have consolidated democracy, opened up their economies, strengthened their public administrations, and improved relations with their neighbours. The accession process has worked wonders in Central and Eastern Europe, helping these countries to move from chaotic post-Communism to orderly EU membership in a decade and a half. The EU could do the same for Turkey, provided it stops dragging its feet. Turkey has been trying to move closer to the EU for 40 years. If EU leaders postpone the start of accession talks once more this year, they risk undermining the usefulness of accession as a foreign policy tool. If the EU cannot offer a credible timetable for accession to a key partner like Turkey, it will lose its leverage, not just in Turkey but also in the many other countries aspiring to join the EU.

At the moment, the EU's influence in Turkey is considerable. In 1999 the EU formally declared Turkey a candidate for membership and defined the political conditions it has to meet to start accession talks: the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the protection of minorities. Since then, successive governments in Ankara have made great efforts to fulfil these criteria and the Turkish parliament has passed highly controversial measures bolstering democracy and human rights. It is clear that the EU's steady pressure has empowered modernisers in Turkish politics. But the modernisers will only be able to keep the upper hand if the EU offers Turkey visible and measurable progress towards accession. Turkey's people and politicians know that it will take many years before their country meets all the criteria for EU membership. But they need an assurance that it will happen, eventually. In the absence of clear progress towards membership, the fragile consensus favouring reform in Turkey could quickly crumble.

In December 2004, EU leaders will decide whether and when to begin accession negotiations with the Ankara government. They will probably say 'yes' to a start in 2005 or 2006, in part because the EU has run out of plausible reasons to say 'no'. The EU will then ask Turkey to fulfil all the other 'Copenhagen criteria'. These include a functioning market economy, the capacity to cope with competition in the single market, and the effective implementation of EU rules and regulations, known as the '*acquis communautaire*'. If applied strictly and consistently, these criteria for membership could spur the kinds of reforms in Turkey that are needed for a smooth accession process. This policy of 'conditionality' is the EU's traditional way of exerting influence internationally. But there is a risk that the EU will not use its power effectively and thus pass up the opportunity to help Turkey to modernise its political and economic systems. To avoid this outcome, the EU needs to deepen its economic and political integration with Turkey well in advance of eventual membership, for the benefit of both sides.

This essay explains what is at stake in the EU's decision on negotiations. It explores three potential scenarios for December, and argues that a postponement of accession negotiations would not help to resolve the problems that many people cite as obstacles to Turkey's accession. The essay concludes with five recommendations for the EU and five for Turkey in preparing for the December decision.

Centre for European Reform
29 Tufton Street
London SW1P 3QL UK

T: 00 44 20 7233 1199
F: 00 44 20 7233 1117
info@cer.org.uk / www.cer.org.uk

The debate in the EU

The proponents and opponents of Turkish membership often use the same arguments. For every con, there is a pro, and vice-versa.

★ Turkey's population, already 72 million strong, is the fastest growing in Europe. By the time of accession, Turkey would be larger than any other EU member-state. Since voting in the EU Council of Ministers depends mainly on a country's population, Turkey would have much weight in EU decision-making – a prospect that frightens many current member-states, especially the smaller ones already worried about being marginalised in EU decision-making. On the other hand, Turkey's young and expanding population would be a welcome counterweight to the EU's ageing and shrinking workforces.

★ Turkey's territory straddles Europe and Asia. Critics point to a clause in the EU's treaties which states that only European countries are allowed to apply for membership. They want the EU to remain a geographically European club. Supporters of Turkish membership point out that the country would be a bridge to the Islamic world and thus a very useful partner to help the EU achieve its foreign policy objectives.

★ If Turkey joins, the EU will border Iraq, Iran and Syria, as well as Georgia and Armenia. With such frontiers, the EU would no longer bear any resemblance to the cosy club that started on the Rhine, say the opponents. They warn that instability in the Middle East and the Caucasus could spill over into the EU. But, counter Turkey's defenders, the EU will have to address the risk of instability to its east anyway. Having Turkey as a fully fledged member would be the best way to do this.

★ Turkey is a major route for trafficking in drugs and people into the EU. The critics therefore call on the EU to keep its borders with Turkey closed. But borders are never watertight, say the proponents of membership. The EU needs to build very good working relations with Turkey's law enforcement agencies to combat trafficking. Again, this task would be easier if Turkey were firmly on its way towards EU membership.

★ Turkey's population is poorer than that of any current member-state, and a larger share of its people work in the farm sector even than in Poland, the EU's most agricultural country. Since most of the EU budget goes on aid to poor regions and farm subsidies, Turkey's accession would bust the EU's budget and destroy the Common Agricultural Policy, say opponents. But financial constraints, international trade rules and the impact of the last enlargement round are forcing the EU to reform its finances and farm policies anyway. By the time Turkey joins, the EU is highly unlikely to have the same regional and agricultural policies as today.

★ Turkey would oblige the EU to become more flexible. For example, the EU needs to find ways of allowing richer, better-equipped or more integrationist countries to move ahead with projects for which Turkey is not ready. Critics say that taking in a country as large and poor as Turkey would change the nature of the EU. But multi-speed Europe is already a reality, say the proponents, pointing to the fact that certain countries, such as the UK, have stayed outside the euro and the Schengen area of passport-free travel. They add that with 25 (soon 28) member-states at vastly different levels of development, the EU needs to become more flexible anyway. The EU's constitutional treaty – now awaiting ratification – contains various schemes to allow smaller groups of countries to move ahead with certain policies, for example in defence or migration.

In the wider public debate about Turkey's membership bid, these practical, financial and geo-political arguments play a subordinate role. Many of Europe's voters think that cultural differences are the main argument why Turkey should not join the EU. Turkey's population is overwhelmingly Muslim – although the state is secular – whereas the EU's existing members are predominantly Christian in origin. European societies are increasingly multi-cultural and some 10 to 12 million Muslims already live in the EU, most of them as citizens. Nevertheless, the prospect of Turkey joining raises tricky questions about European identity. Few politicians want to address these since they have no ready answers. In part, Turkish accession is unpopular in the EU because it forces Europeans to confront fundamental uncertainties about who they are, which values they share, and how open their societies can and should be.

The EU's decision about Turkey's accession negotiations is further complicated by its timing. The decision will come at the end of a busy and turbulent year for the EU. In 2004, the EU enlarged eastward, hammered out an agreement on the new constitutional treaty, held European Parliament elections, found a new president for the European Commission and started thinking about its next long-term budget framework. Many see Turkey's membership aspirations as a nuisance at a time when the EU's agenda is already so challenging. Many also suffer from 'enlargement fatigue'. They are still struggling to come to terms with the increase in membership from 15 to 25 countries.

While most citizens in the current EU supported eastward enlargement, many feel that Turkey is a step too far – politically, geographically and psychologically. Turkey's membership is unpopular. Only one-third of people in the EU-15 countries are in favour of Turkey joining, with nearly half against

it, according to Eurobarometer. Such polls show that political leaders in the EU have not done a good job in making the case for starting negotiations with Turkey. They have to explain to their electorates that the difficulties surrounding Turkish membership – the threat of instability beyond EU borders, the EU's uncertain identity, the need to reform the EU's institutions and policies – will not disappear if negotiations are postponed again or even if Turkey withdraws its application altogether.

The stakes for Turkey

For Turkey, the stakes are very high for December. The centre-right AKP party, whose leaders have their roots in Islamic political parties, won a landslide election victory in November 2002. Since then, the AKP government has been treading a fine line in its EU policy, convincing sceptical middle-class secularists and the armed forces to accept controversial reforms in the name of the EU. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan looks likely to succeed as long as Turkey is making progress towards EU accession. The AKP government has formed an uneasy and fragile coalition with the military in favour of the EU and reform. EU aspirations are the glue that binds together Turkey's key groups – the Muslim democrats, arch-secularists, the armed forces and business. But the Turkish establishment could quickly turn against Erdogan if the EU decided against starting negotiations. There are reactionary forces in the army, the state administration and in politics that oppose EU accession because of the radical reforms it requires. These forces would seize on a further postponement of negotiations as proof of the Union's bad faith. The uneasy alliance favouring reform would quickly dissolve.

Turkey's EU aspirations are not new. But before the AKP came to power in 2002, the country was ruled by weak coalition governments which struggled to implement the reforms that the EU demanded. The AKP's overwhelming victory in the November 2002 election gave it a much stronger mandate and a clear majority in parliament. The AKP has pushed through four major reform packages, some of which required significant changes to the Turkish constitution. The packages included greater cultural, language and educational autonomy for minority groups, especially the Kurds; more civilian control over the military and the diminution of its political role; the release of political prisoners; the abolition of the death penalty; a clamp-down on torture by the police; reform of the judiciary; and greater protection for the media and for freedom of expression. These measures are starting to change the Turkish state fundamentally, but they could still provoke a backlash from the many interest groups who benefited from the previous status quo.

Turkey has also made dramatic changes in its foreign policy in recent years, to conform with the EU. In 2003 Erdogan rejected the UN peace plan for Cyprus because of domestic pressure. But in April 2004 his government played an active role in persuading the Turkish Cypriots to vote 'yes' to the plan in a referendum on the island's future. This about-turn on Cyprus policy would have been inconceivable just a few years ago, when the Turkish military might have threatened to intervene to prevent any change on the island. Greek-Turkish relations have also improved greatly in the past few years. Partly this is because of changed views in Athens about the value of reconciliation, but partly because of a strong willingness on the Turkish side. And Turkey has swung away from the United States – partly because of its opposition to the war in Iraq – and towards the EU in its general foreign policy orientation.

These drastic constitutional and policy changes are all the more remarkable since they were initiated at a time when Turkey was just emerging from its worst recession since 1945. The economy bounced back in 2002 and output growth has since remained surprisingly strong. Inflation also came down quickly from its post-devaluation peak in 2001 to around 15 per cent today. Turkey's economy, however, remains fragile, highly indebted and dangerously dependent on the inflow of short-term money. A negative decision in December could wreak havoc in Turkey's volatile financial markets, threaten hard-won budget stability and undermine the emerging consensus for economic reform. A positive decision, on the other hand, would provide a boost of confidence, push down interest rates (and thus ease the burden of debt service) and raise inflows of foreign direct investment from currently low levels.

Significant though recent reforms have been, they are just the beginning of the many difficult changes Turkey will have to make before it can join the EU. Once negotiations begin, the EU will spell out the economic conditions for accession in more detail. It will demand that Turkey take over EU rules and regulations. It will encourage Turkey to overhaul its state administration to ensure that EU rules are properly implemented and enforced. The EU will also set further conditions for democracy and human rights, to address such deeply entrenched problems as honour killings and violence against women. In short, the EU will keep leaning on Turkey to make further changes – just as it did with the Central and East European applicants – throughout the entire accession process.

The Turks will probably find it much harder to accept EU conditionality than did the ten countries which have just joined. For Turkey is best described as what British diplomat Robert Cooper calls a 'modern' state, in the sense that its political culture is unused to 'post-modern' ideas about pooling sovereignty or political integration in a wider entity like the EU.[1] Nevertheless, the current Turkish consensus on EU

[1] *Robert Cooper, 'The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-first Century', London, Atlantic Books, 2003.*

accession and the strength of the Erdogan government mean that there is a window of opportunity for the EU to help transform Turkey into a more democratic, stable and economically competitive country. However, the EU needs to remember that Turks will accept its long list of demands only if the EU supplements them with a clear road map for accession.

Three scenarios for the December decision

The way the EU presents its decision in December matters greatly. The Turkish population and political elite want to see a reward for their recent efforts. And they want a clear sign that the EU is serious about negotiations this time.

The European Commission will present its annual report on Turkey's accession preparations in early October 2004, just before its own term expires. Enlargement Commissioner Günter Verheugen has signalled his intention to present a firm recommendation about whether or not Turkey has met the conditions for starting negotiations. The Commission's report will laud the legal constitutional changes pushed through by the Erdogan government, but it will also focus on how far Turkey has implemented these changes. Verheugen has promised that Turkey will be judged according to the same standards as the East European candidates, which means that the EU will not expect 100 per cent compliance before negotiations can begin. The Commission will probably argue that Turkey can still make up some ground later on the political conditions, provided it has implemented key reforms by the end of 2004. However, it may also propose a change in the basis for negotiations by demanding greater evidence of progress in future (see below).

Together with the annual progress report, the Commission will publish a study on the political, economic and financial impact of Turkish accession. This study will provoke much discussion about whether the EU can cope with such a large and poor addition to the club. Yet any assessment of Turkey's impact can only be speculative now, when membership could be 15 years away and the Union is likely to change significantly over the intervening period. The Commission's progress report will feed into the final decision on whether and when to start accession talks, which will be taken by EU heads of state and government at their regular summit in mid-December 2004. In theory, the EU's leaders need not follow the Commission's recommendations (they overruled them, for example, when they allowed Greece to start negotiations in 1976). In practice, however, the Council would find it hard to impose additional conditions on Turkey that go far beyond those in the Commission's report.

An outright 'no' in December looks highly unlikely at the time of writing, although there is an outside chance that one of the member-states will veto the start of accession talks for domestic political reasons. The Greek Cypriot government could do so because of on-going problems in its relationship with the Turkish part of the island. Some of the 'old' EU countries could be tempted to veto Turkey's accession because of mounting popular opposition. In France, for example, two-thirds of the electorate opposes Turkish accession, according to a 2003 Eurobarometer poll. Voters in Austria and Denmark are similarly sceptical. Even in the Netherlands, which holds the EU's presidency for the second half of 2004, there are mixed feelings about Turkey – not only in the population as a whole, but also within the government itself.

Moreover, while the EU insists that Turkish accession depends mainly on progress within that country, it could – explicitly or implicitly – make the start of accession talks dependent on the EU's internal development. For example, France could insist that the EU only open accession talks with Turkey after the ratification of the new constitutional treaty. France is among the EU countries which will have a referendum on the new treaty not long after the EU's decision on Turkish accession talks. The French government could try to calm public anxiety over the future of the EU by making the Turkey question contingent on the successful adoption of the constitution. Such a link between treaty ratification and Turkey's accession process would delay the start of accession talks for years. Even if all 25 national parliaments adopt the new treaty swiftly and none of the planned referendums returns a 'no' – and such a smooth passage looks highly unlikely – the ratification process will take at least until the end of 2006.

Most people in the EU and in Turkey expect the EU's December decision to be some form of 'yes, but'. Depending on the way the EU phrases its decision, the 'yes, but' could mean three different things:

1. Not yet

The EU could laud Turkey's progress in political reforms but add that it wants to see more evidence of implementation before accession talks can start. It could, for example, call for another review in 2005, when it would take the final decision about the start of membership talks.

Any further postponement of accession talks would be a huge disappointment for the Turks. It would strengthen reactionary forces in Turkish politics. "See," they would say, "Even if we do everything the EU asks for, they will never let us in." Nationalists would argue that Turkey's support for the Cyprus peace plan was in vain, while the army would become more resistant to attempts to reduce its role in national politics.

2. A date with onerous conditions

The European Council could give Turkey a date for the start of accession talks in, say, mid-2005 or early

2006, but add a list of heavy demands for further reforms. This would imply the EU might rethink its decision unless Turkey complied with all the extra conditions. Such a grudging 'yes' would not go down well in Turkey. The AKP government might try to put a positive spin on the EU's decision, but its ability to push through difficult reforms for the sake of EU accession would be considerably weakened.

3. A date with a road map

The EU could set a firm date for the start of accession talks and add a road map for the next steps towards accession. In this best-case scenario, Ankara's recent reform efforts would clearly be rewarded, strengthening the reformers in Turkey and encouraging further progress. The EU would give an indication of how long and how detailed the negotiations are likely to be, and set out achievable conditions for each step along the way. Such a road map would give a firm commitment that Turkey will finally reach its EU destination – something that the Turks have long demanded. But it would also serve as a reality-check, by showing the Turkish people and the political and business elites just how arduous the accession process will be, and how it will upset many interest groups in Turkey. That will help to give Turks more realistic expectations and prepare them for the long journey ahead.

With such a road map, the EU may well change its negotiating technique somewhat from the one employed in the previous round of enlargement. In the case of the Central and East European candidates, the EU was often prepared to close negotiations on certain policy areas (referred to as the 31 'chapters' of the *acquis*) once the country in question had made the required legal changes or promised a change in policy within a specified timeframe. But Commission and member-state officials are concerned that Turkey will find implementing EU rules much more difficult. As a result, they would like to link progress in the negotiations with proof of concrete reform – not just the promises of the Turkish government. The road map may therefore set out stages for each set of reforms, but leave open the timeframe. And Turkey is likely to have to give evidence that it has enforced EU legislation or implemented other measures before the Union's negotiators declare each chapter closed.

This last scenario is the best one, but both the EU and Turkey need to work hard before December to achieve it and to ensure that negotiations start on the right track. Each side needs to do five things over the next few months.

Five recommendations for the EU

1. Recognise Turkey's membership aspirations as a strategic opportunity, not a threat to European identity. The identity questions – what values lie at the heart of what it means to be European, and where does Europe end? – are there already. A further delay in starting accession negotiations will not make them go away.

2. Acknowledge how far Turkey has come already. This is a country that experienced four military coups in the last half-century, but is now pursuing previously unthinkable reforms. The current government has shown not only a firm commitment to change Turkey to make it fit for membership, but also the capacity to do so.

3. Work on reforms that will help the EU accommodate Turkey as a member. Many of these changes are needed in any case, such as reform of farm policy and regional aid – and others will be forced on the Union by existing members, such as more flexible modes of integration.

4. Make the membership conditions very clear. The EU's accession criteria are rather general and vague. In the case of the Central and East European candidates, this was not a major problem because the countries were smaller and they competed against one another to fulfil the conditions. But Turkey will need more detailed guidance, because it is a large country and will be in negotiations for much longer – perhaps 15 years or more.

5. Start preparing public opinion for eventual Turkish membership of the EU. The worst outcome would be two decades of difficult negotiations resulting in an accession treaty that was eventually rejected by one or more of the member-states, owing to popular opposition.

Five recommendations for Turkey

1. Prove that Turkey is willing and able to do whatever is necessary to become an EU member. The best way to convince sceptical member-states is to ensure consistent implementation of the measures agreed with the EU. That will be a long and arduous process because it requires extensive changes on the ground – for example in police stations, schools and local government all over Turkey.

2. Persuade the European public, not just the Commission and heads of government. Although the Commission will manage the negotiations, Turkey's eventual accession depends on the member-states and their domestic politics. The Ankara government needs to persuade the whole panoply of EU opinion-formers – journalists, commentators, parliamentarians and business-people – that it can one day be an asset as a member-state. The eastward enlargement of the EU was a largely elite-led exercise, and no member-state held a referendum on it. But Turkey's accession has to be accepted by the European public, because it will inevitably transform the EU's nature.

3. Quietly ask the United States to refrain from calling publicly for Turkey's admission to the EU. Such calls

are very counter-productive, raising hostility in the most sceptical member-states. As President Chirac remarked in June 2004, for the American president to ask the EU to let Turkey in is like France telling the US how to handle its relations with Mexico.

4. Educate the Turkish political and business elites about the scale of the changes needed to meet the EU's accession requirements. Many of the enthusiasts for entry are unaware of how profoundly the EU's demands will change Turkey's political institutions and economy. They will become much less keen when they start to realise that EU accession will require Turkey to do unpopular things like cutting state subsidies to ailing industries, imposing tougher hygiene standards on its food producers, and taking on costly EU environmental rules. Economic interest groups will start to complain loudly when the full price of joining the EU becomes clearer, so the Turkish government needs to start a more informed debate about the overall sum of costs and benefits.

5. Make the Turkish public aware of the likely timetable. A series of governments – as many as four or five administrations – will have to follow a consistent strategy for meeting the EU's many requirements if Turkey is to achieve accession. This strategy can be politically viable only if the public knows it will take a long time but can see tangible progress from one election to the next.

Conclusions

Back in the 1960s the EU accepted the idea of Turkish membership in a fit of absent-mindedness, not as part of a coherent strategy. EU leaders and their voters are mostly unenthusiastic about the idea of Turkey joining the EU, and many prominent politicians openly oppose it. Yet the EU has made a series of half-hearted promises over four decades that will eventually force it to accept Turkey – grudgingly and with great misgivings.

Now the EU needs to think strategically about this relationship rather than continue to drift. Turkey's membership aspirations are widely seen as a threat to European integration, but they are really an astonishing opportunity for the EU. Turkey is the largest and strategically most important country ever to apply for membership. It is a valuable partner for the EU in the Black Sea region and the Middle East. Every time the EU has set new conditions for starting negotiations, Turkey has met them. The current government in Ankara has pushed through deeply controversial reforms of the Turkish state, to comply with EU accession requirements. The EU is able to exercise 'soft power' in Turkey on an unprecedented scale – and in a strongly nationalistic, proud country. The United States cannot boast that any country has ever adopted its norms and followed its policy preferences so closely as Turkey has followed the EU's. For anyone who wants the EU to have a credible foreign policy, the Union's relationship with Turkey is a great success story. But for that success to continue, negotiations have to start.

There are good and bad reasons for the EU to accept Turkey as a member. The worst reason to pursue accession is that the member-states can find no alternative, even if their populations remain largely opposed to Turkish membership of the EU. In that case, negotiations will be slow, member-states will be reluctant to close chapters, and the Turks will become extremely frustrated.

The best reason for Turkey's accession is if the Turkish authorities use the accession process as an anchor for much-needed political and economic reforms, and if the EU uses it to confirm the changing nature of European identity. European societies are becoming more diverse, more secular, and more multi-cultural. They are more heterogeneous than they used to be, and they have already moved far from the idea of a 'Christian Europe'. This presents an opportunity for politicians in Turkey and the EU to make a strong case in favour of Turkish membership. They should start now.

Heather Grabbe is deputy director of the Centre for European Reform. *The CER is grateful to the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation Turkey, APCO Europe and the German Marshall Fund of the United States for their support of its work on Turkey and the EU.*

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