

# EU AND TURKEY: ACCESSION PROSPECTS

*There are many economic, geopolitical and diplomatic issues at stake related to Turkey-EU relations and Turkey's potential accession to the EU. Both sides have significant mutual economic interests. Additionally, Turkey is crucial for Europe's security, and can also play a constructive role in the stabilization and democratization process of the Arab Spring countries. Several opponents of Turkey's accession claim that Turkey will undermine the very core of the EU identity, which is based on Christianity. This article argues, however, that the true foundations and identity of the EU are based on the principles of democracy, equality, and respect for human dignity and human rights. According to this interpretation, Turkey's accession is not only feasible but also desirable. Turkey can bridge Christianity and Islam, and contribute to Europe's goals. But a peaceful solution to the Cyprus issue is needed and Turkey must ensure that the non-Muslim minorities can practice their religion peacefully and securely and increase its efforts and cooperation with the EU in order to address the flux of illegal immigrants that pass from its territory to Europe.*

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**T**urkey's efforts to join the EU go back more than half a century. The European Economic Community (EEC) was established in Rome on 25 March 1957 and only two years later (September 1959) Turkey applied for associate membership. We need to keep in mind the fact that, from the very beginning, this process has had many ups and downs, leading to fluctuations between hope and disillusionment on both sides.

In September 1963, the ECC and Turkey signed an Association Agreement (Ankara Agreement) which envisioned, among others, the establishment of a Customs Union between the two parties and had as its ultimate goal Turkey's accession. A few years later (November 1970), a financial protocol was also signed in Brussels, and Turkey officially applied for membership on 14 April 1987. Ten years later (December 1997) the European Council of Luxemburg confirmed Turkey's eligibility for membership.



Since then, many developments took place that reached their peak with the decisions adopted by the European institutions in 2005. A European Commission's Communication envisioned the strengthening of the bonds between the EU and the candidate countries at the civil society level. After this Communication, accession negotiations with Turkey officially begun, and an analytical examination of Turkey's situation was conducted by the EU. In June 2006, following the EU Council's adoption of the decision related to the Accession Partnership with Turkey, the negotiations on the "Science and Research" chapter were opened and provisionally closed on the same day. However, in December 2006, the intricate Cyprus question complicated the situation and the EU Council decided to suspend negotiations on eight chapters while it also decided that no chapter would be provisionally closed. The blocked chapters are: Chapter 1 (Free Movement of Goods), Chapter 3 (Right of Establishment and Freedom to Provide Services), Chapter 9 (Financial Services), Chapter 11 (Agriculture and Rural Development), Chapter 13 (Fisheries), Chapter 14 (Transport Policy), Chapter 29 (Customs Union) and Chapter 30 (External relations).

This significant stalemate, however, did not mean the end of the negotiations. On the contrary, five more chapters were opened in 2007: Chapter 18 (Statistics), Chapter 20 (Enterprise and Industrial Policy), Chapter 21 (Trans-European Networks), Chapter 28 (Consumer and Health Protection) and Chapter 28 (Financial Control). In 2008, two more chapters were opened: Chapter 6 (Company Law) and Chapter 7 (Intellectual Property Rights). Finally, in 2010 Chapter 12 (Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Policy) was opened.

The European Parliament has been following and monitoring the whole process with strong interest. Since 2006, the European Parliament's Plenary Assembly has been passing annual resolutions on Turkey's Progress Reports, with the most recent resolution being approved by the European Parliament on 29 March 2012.

It is necessary to understand what is at stake concerning Turkey's accession in the EU. First of all, there are very strong mutual economic interests. Today more than half of Turkey's commercial exchanges are conducted with the EU. In terms of trade balance, Turkey's deficit is slightly less than 8.3 billion euros which amounts to 13 percent of the total Turkish trade deficit. In the past few years, Turkish exports to the EU have been around 46 percent, while Turkey's imports from the EU have been around 40 percent.<sup>1</sup> EU Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) amounts to nearly two thirds of the total FDI in Turkey. Machines, cars, chemical products, iron and steel are the most important products that Turkey has been importing from the EU.

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During the past few years, Turkey's major economic indicators have significantly improved –tripled in some cases– thus placing the country among the most important new emerging economies in the world. Only last year, Turkish economy had a growth rate of ten percent, the world's second highest only after China. The economic exchanges between the EU and Turkey reached a total of 103 billion euros in 2010, that made Turkey the EU's seventh most important trade partner and the EU Turkey's number one trade partner. European companies have established more than 13,000 enterprises in Turkey.

We also need to keep in mind that Turkey's location is of extreme importance for the EU's geopolitical interests. Turkey serves as a transit country for Europe's oil and gas supplies coming from the Caucasus and the Caspian while it is also very close to the Middle East's major oil markets.

Europe's interest in having close relationships with Turkey results also from the fact that, as shown by its faithful participation to NATO, this country is essential for the safety of the European continent. Additionally, a European Turkey is much needed in order to assure the democratic stability in the Middle East and more generally

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, "Trade – Statistics", *European Commission website*, 22 May 2012, [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_113456.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113456.pdf)

in the Arab world. This fact gained further importance after the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East. There are two possible scenarios about the final outcome of the Arab Spring. According to the first –and more positive– scenario, the Arab Spring countries will proceed down a more democratic path with respect and protection of human rights. According to the second, and negative, scenario, though, regression will prevail with violence, oppression and totalitarianism as its main characteristics. Turkey can play a significant role in order for the first scenario to prevail.

The question, however, is whether all these mutual and strong interests are enough to make Turkey the 29th EU member state. Many people have serious concerns and doubts about this prospect, putting forth two questions:

- Would Turkey's accession change the very core of the EU identity?
- Would the contrast/clash between cultures and religions lead to the EU's eventual collapse?

*“Do Europe and Turkey have compatible souls that could melt together?”*

The answer is not easy and we need to ask ourselves first what Europe truly represents. This question is much more than a philosophical or theoretical one, especially after the increase of “euroskepticism” and the current economic crisis in Europe.

First of all, Europe has a geographical context. If geography is the main characteristic of the EU integration process then Turkey has a point, though a weak one, asking for accession because a small part of its territory, including half of its most populated and biggest city, Istanbul, is located on the European continent. But the geographical argument has some inherent weaknesses since from a “quantity” point the overwhelming majority of Turkish territory is in Asia and not in Europe. Therefore, a qualitative analysis is needed in order to examine the identity characteristics of a nation. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Czechoslovakia's then President Vaclav Havel –who was imprisoned and suffered several humiliations because of his demands for the freedom of speech and expression during the communist regime– visited the European Parliament. In his speech, he expressed his admiration for the perfect organization of the European institutions and also added that “I've seen perfect gears, but I could not see their soul.” Well, the soul is the peoples' identity itself. It is made up of history, culture, ideals, and not just of interests.

Do Europe and Turkey have compatible souls that could melt together?

From an historical point of view, one could reasonably claim that the two sides' roots are common. Roman Empire covered most of the Mediterranean but when the Empire became too stretched its political organization was divided into the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire with Rome and Constantinople being their respective capitals. Despite the Empire's division the initial bond never faded. Many Byzantines found shelter in Italy for several decades, while the Eastern Roman Empire survived longer than the Western part and carried on the Christian Roman heritage for almost a thousand years. The bloody conflicts that followed in the region between Muslims and Christians were caused by religious extremism and intolerance.

It is not a coincidence that the opponents of Turkey's accession fear that the European soul will be eventually lost. This soul is deeply "rooted" in the Christian culture –despite the increasing secularization process the continent went through during the last few centuries– and could be endangered by a large presence of Muslims on its soil.

Instead of considering Europe a culture born on a continent, we should see it as a continuously expanding and transforming legal and political structure, originally composed of six nations and currently 27. Therefore, we can understand that a concrete European identity has been a very recent creation and is the outcome of the bloody wars among the nations that now belong to the same organization.

During the Cold War, Europe was divided into two. Western and Eastern Europe remained hostile for many decades and were prepared for a full-scale war, with nuclear weapons that could destroy the rest of humanity. It was necessary for Europe to reunify both in order to get over the feeling of remorse and to overcome the fears. Therefore, the EU needed to restructure itself in order to be able to include more nations and avoid external aggressions.

One of the EU's original goals was protection from the Soviet Union. Following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the idea of a wider Europe became more feasible. The balance between enlargement and integration to strengthen the EU and its institutions has been a constant issue of political debate since 1989. Integration does not only mean the improvement of EU institutions but most importantly the guarantee of the EU's democratic nature and respect for human rights.

At this point a critical question comes to the forefront: should a state apply for EU accession or remain part of it because its economic interests favor this or should there be a more noble goal for wanting to join the Union? In other words, is the EU

as a means in order to serve the member states' national interests or is it a club of nations where solidarity prevails and which has the potential to further expand, thus promoting peace and prosperity?

In line with this second vision –which could be embraced with enthusiasm by many people but especially the youth– accepting Turkey in the EU may seem very desirable. From a Turkish point of view, however, the European Parliament's several resolutions concerning Turkey are causing frustration because Turkey is being treated as a “backward nation”.

The EU considers itself as a teacher who aims to teach democracy and human rights to an Anatolian country, requiring from the latter to improve its health, economy, freedoms and justice system. But does the EU really have the right to judge Turkey?

Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty –which failed to become a proper European constitution– states that the EU is founded on the respect of human dignity, equality, democracy, human rights. But words do not always match with reality. Europe itself is also on the path towards these goals and a formal democratic system does not always guarantee the substance of democracy is actualized.

Therefore I believe that the EU should have been more willing to welcome a big nation like Turkey. In turn, such a new member should consolidate the respect of human dignity.

A necessary step for Turkey's eventual accession to the EU is finding a peaceful solution to the Cyprus issue. This article does not intend to provide an historical overview of the Cyprus problem or to analyze its complicated parameters. It should be stressed, however, that Cyprus is already a member of the EU and there must be sincere friendship based on sympathy between two member states. Similarly, Turkey should fully respect the rights of its ethnic and religious minorities. Finally, the only way in order to successfully address violent acts by terrorist organizations –which are outrageous and need to be fought firmly– is the further strengthening of the rule of law and human rights.

The fact that the EU is largely Christian while Turkey is a Muslim country is definitely causing some problems. However, these can be overcome if Turkey plays the role of a bridge between people who believe in a unique God, although they refer to Him with different names. Moreover, the three monotheist religions –Christianity, Judaism and Islam– were all born on the Mediterranean shores.

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Jerusalem is a sacred city of these three religions while olive trees –which are a symbol for peace– grow across the Mediterranean. Despite this fact, the unresolved Palestinian (Arab) question raises concerns for a potential war that will have tremendous repercussions for the entire region. This contradiction must be overcome. With

Turkey strongly tied to Europe and leaning out –together with Greece, Italy and Spain– towards the Mediterranean, a positive solution of the Middle East conflicts –which will significantly affect world peace– could be found.

A critical factor needs to be understood. Turkey defines itself as a secular state, which means that it does not want religion to influence politics. This fact definitely places Turkey closer to Europe. Secular states, however, must guarantee the right of religious freedom. This is already reflected in Turkey's laws. However, the recent violent acts against Christians are, in my opinion, strengthening the arsenal of those who oppose Turkey's EU accession. Their fears would certainly diminish if the right of practicing religion peacefully was substantially respected in Turkey.

One of the main features of the EU is the free movement of people. Turkey's accession process should gain a new momentum by a mutually beneficial deal. The EU should give Turkey visa-liberalization. On the other hand, Turkey should play a more constructive role and coordinate its efforts with the EU in order to address the flux of illegal immigrants trying to enter the EU through Turkish soil.

Patience and persistence should be the main characteristics of those who fight for Turkey's EU accession. Turkey's accession will have a tremendous impact not only in terms of economy but also in the realm of ideas.