



## **Executive summary**

The prospects for Turkey's ambitions for full EU membership do not appear to be very bright in the current conjuncture. The "grand coalition for special partnership" appears to be firmly entrenched. With key chapters for negotiation already suspended, the government in power is likely to resume its pursuit of a loose Europeanization agenda of gradual reforms falling considerably short of deep commitment for full-membership. The counterpart of this in the foreign policy realm is an approach based on "soft Euro-asianism" where the emphasis on the use of soft power continues and an attempt is made to develop friendly relationship with all neighboring countries, but without the EU providing the main axis or the reference point for foreign policy. The policy brief investigates the underlying reasons for the decline of enthusiasm for EU membership following the golden age of Europeanization and reforms during the early years of the AKP government focusing both on domestic and EU factors. The article also points to internal and external political developments which may help to reverse the current drift away from Europeanization constituting possible grounds for optimism concerning the future of Turkey-EU relations.

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# **RECENT FOREIGN POLICY ATTITUDES IN TURKEY**

**HOW TO REVERSE THE GRADUAL SHIFT  
AWAY FROM EUROPEANIZATION?**

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## Introduction

The objective of the present paper is to explain the paradox of how Turkey-EU relations have drifted towards the current stalemate following the golden age of Europeanization and reform in Turkey, notably during the early years of the AKP government. Having identified the multiplicity of factors which have contributed to the progressive weakening of relations which had, indeed, reached a climax with the decision on the part of the EU to open negotiations with Turkey in December 2004, the paper looks to the future and tries to single out a possible mix of external and domestic influences which might help to revitalize Turkey's EU membership process in the medium term.

The Helsinki Decision of the European Council in December 1999 whereby Turkey was recognized as a candidate country for full-membership provided a powerful incentive for reform. Coupled with the impact of the deep economic crisis that Turkey experienced in February 2001, the EU process became particularly important in creating the mix of conditions and incentives necessary for large-scale economic reforms. Turkey experienced a kind of virtuous cycle of mutually reinforcing democratization process and economic reforms with the golden age period corresponding to the early years of the AKP government. In spite of the initial fears concerning the party's Islamist origins, the AKP proved to be a party of moderate standing and reformist orientation. The AKP government during the period displayed a vigorous commitment to the implementation of the Copenhagen criteria both in the economic and political realms with the result that the European Council in its December 2004 Summit in Brussels

decided to open the negotiation process without delay. The Brussels decision of 2004 clearly underlined the pace of transformation and reform that Turkey had experienced during this period.

## The Impact of the EU Membership Process

The EU membership process during this period had a profound impact in three interrelated areas. The first key area was the economy. The Turkish economy experienced one of its most successful phases of growth. Fiscal and monetary discipline was established and inflation was reduced for the first time for several decades to single digit levels. Important institutional reforms have helped to create a relatively autonomous central bank and a more robust banking and financial system which created stability conducive to long-term growth. Turkey started to attract considerable amounts of foreign direct investment. The EU process played a central role in terms of providing a focus for a program of reforms and the motivation needed for different groups in society to rally around the reform program which the IMF program alone could not accomplish. The fact that Turkey's foreign direct investment boom effectively started in 2005, following the decision to initiate the formal negotiation process, constitutes further testimony to the importance of the kind of powerful signals which rapid progress in meeting formal EU criteria helped to provide to key economic actors.

The second important manifestation of the golden age period was in the realm of democratization. Turkey made important strides in terms of progressing towards a consolidated or

substantive democracy during this period. Critical reform packages have been introduced representing important advances in terms of dramatically extending the boundaries of civil and human rights and the rule of law in Turkish politics. The abolition of the death penalty and the steps taken towards the recognition of Kurdish identity were striking elements of reform. The reform process represented the initial steps in the direction of a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem by offering a set of cultural rights which involved the use of the Kurdish language for education and broadcasting purposes. This represented a fundamental break with the dominant approach of the Turkish state elites which tended to view the Kurdish problem primarily in economic and security terms. There is no doubt that the kind of democratization reforms that passed through the Parliament during this period would have been inconceivable in the absence of powerful incentives and pressures from the EU given the strong resistance from the nationalist circles which tended to view such reforms as an existentialist threat to the unity of the Turkish state.

The third broad realm in which the formal Europeanization process appears to have made a profound impact is in foreign policy behavior. The emphasis of Turkish foreign policy during this period shifted quite dramatically towards the use of “soft power” resources. Whilst the EU process constituted a centerpiece of Turkish foreign policy, there was also an explicit attempt to develop a multi-dimensional foreign policy popularized by the slogan of zero problems with all neighboring countries. Significant progress made in terms of improving relations with countries, such as Greece and Syria,

with whom Turkey had problematic relations in the past. Similarly, significant efforts were made to develop relations with Russia and the Black Sea neighbors. Turkey has undertaken important initiatives to improve its relations with the Arab Middle East and increase its presence in the Islamic world by active participation in the Islamic Conference Organization. Yet another striking feature involved the need for an internationally acceptable solution to the Cyprus dispute along the lines of the Annan Plan. This represented a dramatic departure from the established policy stance of the Turkish state. More recently, Turkey has played an important mediating role in conflicts involving the United States and Iran as well as Israel and Syria. What is also remarkable during this period is the democratization of foreign policy itself. Foreign policy is no longer monopolized by a limited number of state actors. New actors, such as business associations and civil society groups, emerged as active participants in the foreign policy process. Furthermore, foreign policy issues are opened to public debate and previously fixed positions on a number of issues including Cyprus, relations with Armenia, and Kurds in Northern Iraq are challenged in the process. All these elements put together signify a very significant shift in the direction of a benign regional power which would not have been possible in the absence of an on-going deep Europeanization and democratization process.

## **The End of EU Enthusiasm**

Since 2005 a change in the process of Europeanization has taken place. The more recent foreign policy stance of

the AKP government in the post-2005 era deviated from an all out Europeanization drive to a possible shift towards a kind of “loose Europeanization” or “soft Euro-Asianism” strategy. The loss of enthusiasm for the EU membership project in Turkey both on the part of the government and the public at large within a short space of time represents quite a paradox. A number of factors were at work to bring about this dramatic change of mood.

### EU Factors

The intense debate generated in the aftermath of the Brussels Summit in 2004 concerning Turkey’s European credentials particularly, such as France and Germany in the very core of the EU, has helped to create a serious nationalistic backlash in Turkey and strengthened the hands of anti-EU, anti-reform groups both within the state and the society at large. The media representations of Europe in Turkey as a monolithic bloc also contributed to this change of mood. The increasing questioning of the very basis of Turkish membership and Turkey’s European credentials by influential political figures such as Sarkozy and Merkel, at a time when the decision to open up accession negotiations had already been taken, made a deep impact in terms of influencing this change of mood. Indeed, there was a striking drop in public support for EU membership from a peak of 74 % in 2002 to around 50% by 2006 and 2007. The fact that Europe was also going through an international constitutional stalemate culminating with the rejection of the proposed Constitutional Treaty in the French and Dutch referenda injected an additional mood of pessimism. Media

representations or misrepresentations of the constitutional crisis in Turkey played a role in terms of contributing to growing Euro-scepticism by helping to portray the EU as an unattractive, crisis-ridden project.

Key decisions of the EU concerning Turkish accession also exercised a profound impact in undermining enthusiasm. The first of these was the clause on *the possibility of permanent safeguards on full labor mobility following Turkey’s accession to the EU as a full member*. This immediately generated criticism even among the most vocal supporters of Turkey’s EU membership as a clear case of *unfair treatment*. Whilst a temporary safeguard on labor mobility was quite understandable, the imposition of a permanent safeguard effectively meant that Turkey would be relegated to a second division status, a special partner position even if it were to become a full member.

The failure of the EU to fulfill its promises to the Turkish Cypriots in return for their co-operative attitude generated another major blow. The EU’s failure to deal with the Cyprus conflict problem on an equitable basis was interpreted as yet another case of *unfair treatment*. The fact that the negotiation process was partially suspended due to the Cyprus dispute and specifically the failure to open its ports to vessels from The Republic of Cyprus proved to be the ultimate blow in this context. The EU’s unbalanced approach to the Cyprus dispute appeared to confirm the widely held perceptions that Cyprus was being used as creating yet another obstacle on the path to Turkey’s full membership; the Cyprus issue was itself not critical and was being used as an instrument of exclusion. The negative external environment was

amplified by a steady deterioration of relations with the United States. The growing instability in Iraq and the human costs of the Iraq War were interpreted as a direct consequence of American unilateralism and aggression helped to contribute a major increase in anti-American and anti-West sentiments.

## **Domestic Factors**

There were also important domestic factors at work, a key element of which was the weakening commitment of the AKP leadership to the goal of full EU membership. There is no doubt that the party has been significantly transformed as it has progressively moved to the very “center” of Turkish politics which became even more evident in the context of 2007 general elections whereby the liberal representation within the AKP has increased markedly. Yet, one of the core issues on the party’s political agenda is the issue of “religious freedoms” and arguably the party leadership realized through encounters with some of the key decisions of the European Court of Human Rights that the domain for action for a religion-based party within the EU is clearly circumscribed. This might have been instrumental in re-shaping the attitudes of the party leadership to the question of EU membership. Evidence of this loss of enthusiasm is shown by the fact that the AKP government has not actively pushed for some of the key reforms emphasized by the EU. Certain steps have been undertaken to modify the controversial article 301 of the penal code and new legislation has been introduced to protect the rights of the non-Muslim minorities. However, these measures have been implemented in a rather defensive and

lukewarm manner. Given its broad mandate, the government could have taken more radical steps, such as abolishing the article 301 of the penal code altogether. The opening of the Halki Seminary could also have represented a major move in terms of recognizing the rights of Christian minorities.

The elections of July 2007 represented a major opportunity for the AKP to revitalize the Europeanization and reform agenda. The party emerged from the election with an even larger coalition of support which could have been utilized to re-activate a large-scale reform agenda. Yet, with an exaggerated sense of its own power and a diminished sense of the importance of the EU anchor, the party leadership clearly missed an opportunity during the fall of 2007. The proposal involving a new constitution was an important reform initiative. Instead of pushing for a new constitution in a vigorous manner and trying to forge the kind of societal consensus needed to render such a radical project workable, the party’s focus increasingly shifted towards the promotion of fundamental religious freedoms, such as allowing female students to wear the headscarf in the universities. The crucial mistake here was to present these issues in an isolated fashion in the form of a constitutional amendment and not as part of a broader reform package. This helped to create a very serious backlash and even alienated liberal opinion which had hitherto been quite supportive of the AKP’s reformist and moderate credentials. The optimistic mood of the immediate post-election era was replaced by a serious re-polarization of the Turkish society culminating with the court case against the AKP in the early part of 2008 on the grounds of violating the

very basis of the secular constitutional order. The consequences of these developments for Turkey-EU relations have been rather negative. From a European perspective, fundamental question marks were raised about Turkey's democratic credentials. The eventual verdict of the Constitutional Court in the summer of 2008 did not involve the closure of the AKP, although the party ended up with a serious warning and faced monetary penalties. This decision, at least, helped to reverse the high degree of uncertainty which the court case had generated and injected an air of stability into economic and political life and created the possibility of a new opening in Turkey-EU relations.

Crucial developments in the internal politics of Europe over the past few years, such as the development of right-wing populism based on the fears of immigration and loss of jobs fuelled by the rise of Islamophobia, have undoubtedly made a deep negative impact. The events of 9/11 have left a deep imprint on the European landscape and have clearly fuelled anti-Muslim sentiments. The clear swing of the pendulum towards right of center, Christian Democratic parties in recent years have also generated an unattractive environment for Turkish membership. What is important to recognize, however, is that the "Turkey question" is a reflection of deeper uncertainties and fears in European societies and the problems that they are facing in terms of adopting themselves to the pressures of globalization.

### **The Current Status**

Currently, the prospects for Turkey's ambitions for full EU membership do not appear to be very bright and the

"grand coalition for special partnership" appears to be firmly entrenched. Perhaps what appears to be most worrisome is the loss of enthusiasm on the part of the liberal, pro-European elites for the EU membership process. With key chapters for negotiation already suspended what is likely to happen is that the government in power is likely to pursue a loose Europeanization agenda of gradual reforms falling considerably short of deep commitment for full membership. The pursuit of a loose Europeanization agenda is perfectly consistent with the vision of a privileged partnership. The EU membership process for Turkey has lost much of its early momentum. There are important developments, however, which create grounds for renewed optimism. First, the fact that the Constitutional Court case against the governing party did not end up with a decision to ban the party constitutes a favorable development. The outcome of the court case against the AKP could have had very serious destabilizing consequences in terms of its impact on domestic politics, the economy as well as the future trajectory of Turkey-EU relations. In the European circles, the decision to close the party could have been interpreted as a major break-down of the democratic order in Turkey with the natural consequence of suspending the negotiation process altogether. It would then have been very difficult to revitalize the negotiation process. Second, the change of government in the Republic of Cyprus, and more recently, the re-initiation of formal negotiations for the re-unification of the island have helped to create a new climate of hope in the direction of reaching an

equitable settlement to the Cyprus dispute.

The current constitutional crisis in the EU may ironically create an opportunity space for Turkey. Clearly what is at stake in the constitutional debate is the future direction of the European project. If the future path of the EU involves a British style integration process of a relatively loose, intergovernmental Europe with relatively flexible boundaries which allows significant scope for national autonomy, the prospects for Turkish accession will be considerably improved. In contrast, if the dominant style of integration is based on the French project of deep integration – the idea of Europe as a “place” with fixed boundaries as opposed to a flexible “space” – the natural inclination will be to include Turkey as an “important outsider” rather than a “natural insider” in a special partnership style arrangement. Our interpretation of the current constitutional impasse in Europe having reached a peak with the negative vote in the Irish referendum of June 2008 is that the dominant tendency in the foreseeable future is likely to be the first scenario of flexible integration which clearly constitutes a development in Turkey’s favor.

In the current conjuncture, the EU clearly suffers from an enlargement fatigue having absorbed ten new members in 2004 and two additional members in 2007. Furthermore, this was the most complex wave of enlargement to date, involving the incorporation of countries with deep legacies of communist regimes. The current enlargement fatigue, however, may not necessarily be a permanent phenomenon. The EU within the course of the next five to ten years

may again find itself in the midst of a new wave of enlargement which would involve expansion towards the Balkans and Eastern Europe. There is already strong support for further enlargement of the EU towards the East among the new member states. In a world where Russia has become progressively more assertive and given the solid base of support for further enlargement which exists among the new member states for further eastern enlargement it is highly probable that a new wave of enlargement will take place in the medium term and once this process gathers momentum, it might be difficult to exclude Turkey from this on-going dynamic

## Conclusion and Prospects

A favorable external environment for enlargement is quite crucial for revitalizing Turkish membership aspirations in the medium term. A favorable external context *per se*, however, is insufficient and needs to be accompanied by a parallel process of the emergence of a strong political movement at home which is deeply committed to the reform process and to membership. A crucial element in this context will be the position of the secular middle classes in Turkey. If these groups in Turkish society feel that full membership of the EU is a necessary anchor for preserving a liberal constitutional order and preventing their marginalization in an increasingly conservative society, they may create the impetus for the emergence of such a political movement which, in turn, may capitalize on a possible wave of further enlargement to successfully press for Turkey’s inclusion in the EU as a full member.

What can be done in the short run to reinvigorate Turkey's drive for EU membership? Certainly, an approach based on promoting mutual co-operation without a firm membership signal is not likely to be very productive. This will tend to accelerate the already existing trend towards a special partnership arrangement. There is clearly a need to re-dramatize the process and provide it with a new momentum by highlighting the fact that the main benefits of membership, at least from the Turkish perspective, materialize once membership is actually achieved. The emphasis ought to be on accelerating the process rather than opting for a slow motion scenario with an uncertain future. The most practical option would be for civil society groups in Turkey and the EU institutions to put more pressure on the current AKP government to revitalize the reform process. Turkey itself could demonstrate its renewed commitment by developing a concrete

timetable for membership going so far as to set a new target date for membership on a unilateral basis. The appointment of a new chief negotiator with a strong commitment to the EU membership process could be another pro-active step in this direction. At the same time, however, the EU could strengthen the hands of the Turkish government by taking a more active interest in resolving the Cyprus dispute which constitutes the most immediate and concrete obstacle on the path of Turkish membership. The current mood in Cyprus makes one more optimistic than ever before that the negotiation process may end up with a successful settlement. Key European states and the EU institutions through active engagement could play a critical role in helping to resolve the Cyprus dispute which would inevitably inject a new wave of optimism concerning the future of Turkey-EU relations.

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