

SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES PROGRAMME
EUROPEAN STUDIES CENTRE
ST ANTONY'S COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Turkey's EU Membership Debate
and the Copenhagen Summit

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THE PAST OF TURKEY-EU RELATIONS

The prospect of decisive progress, regarding Turkey's EU accession process, as manifested in the EU Copenhagen Summit of December 2002, has brought to the fore how the European Union views the possibility of Turkey's full membership and has also opened a discussion on the essence of the European Union identity.

Although the initial establishment of Turkey-EU relations dates back to 1963, when the Turkey-EEC Association Agreement was signed, political developments in Turkey precluded any discussion on Turkey's further integration in the European Economic Community until the late 1980s. The rejection of Turkey's initial application for admission in 1989 did not deter Turkish governments from aiming at Turkey's full membership in the European Union. Increasing political, economic and social problems, however, were no good omens for that and gave the impression that Turkey's interest in the European Union was rather theoretical. The presumed remoteness of the possibility of Turkey's accession to the European Union had –until recently- allowed for overoptimistic promises and large diplomatic moves on the European Union side. Those moves exaggerated the European Union decisiveness to face the difficulties emanating from Turkey's prospective full membership. The readiness of EU institutions to incorporate a country with the demographic, economic and social features of Turkey was never adequately discussed, while interest in short-term political gains prevailed.

Nonetheless, the enlargement process of the European Union and the decision of successive Turkish governments to actively pursue the goal of full EU membership have changed the nature of the debate on potential Turkey's membership in the European Union. The introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria in 1993 set the political conditions that all states interested in joining the European Union should fulfil and provided Turkey with a reform guideline. When Turkey succeeded in signing a customs union treaty with the European Union in 1995 and expressed its intention to comply with the political and economic criteria to achieve its full membership, the prospect of the latter seemed more realistic. When the EU Council in Helsinki decided in 1999 to nominate Turkey as a candidate state for EU membership, Turkey's prospective membership in the European Union was firmly put into the EU agenda. Although Turkey's full and effective compliance with the EU admission criteria is far from given, the debate has been rising since then: Very few doubted that radical political reform was necessary for Turkey to fulfil the EU admission criteria; others argued,

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however, that even if Turkey fulfilled all the EU admission criteria, it should never become eligible for full membership in the European Union. The prospect of the EU Copenhagen Summit in December 2002, where decisions on the EU enlargement were to be made, led to a more eloquent articulation of views on Turkey's EU membership and the formation of supporter and opponent groups. Both have been characterised by lack of homogeneity as regards views on Turkish and EU identity.

OPPONENTS OF TURKEY'S EU MEMBERSHIP

The opponents of Turkey's full membership in the European Union can be divided into two major sub-groups, the Euro-federalists and the advocates of the view that Turkey has no European identity. The Euro-federalists oppose Turkey's accession to the European Union, because this would –in effect– impede the development of an internally stronger, more coherent, federal European Union. Given the recent decision to expand the European Union borders toward Eastern Europe, Malta and Cyprus, Euro-federalists view the strengthening of EU institutions, in other words the “deepening” of the European Union, as an issue of absolute priority. The possible integration of a country with the population, territorial size and per capita GDP of Turkey would endanger the functionality of the EU institutions, while the latter would still be struggling to “absorb” the effects of the enlargement decided in 2002.² According to that viewpoint, Turkey's membership in the European Union would disturb balances of power sharing, finance and politics, thereby weakening some of the strongest pillars of successful EU policies.³ Moreover, the planning and implementation of a common European foreign and security policy –already facing difficulties within the European Union– would be further complicated through the accession of a country with special strategic links with the United States. In that sense, Turkey's EU membership could eventually comprise a “Trojan horse”, leading to the demise of the European Union project from within. Euro-federalists argue that the European Union should pursue close economic and political partnership and cooperation with Turkey, as with other countries in the periphery of the European Union, such as Russia and the Ukraine. However, this partnership should never lead to full membership in the European Union.

The advocates of the view that Turkey has no European identity base their opposition to Turkey's membership in the European Union on cultural grounds.⁴ They argue that the hammering of a common European identity is a prerequisite for the successful conversion of the European Union from a predominantly economic to a predominantly political union. The development of federal structures and institutions requires an increasing identification of European peoples with the emerging European federal state. Europe's Christian culture is viewed as the sole element that could act as cementing factor in the formation of a European identity. The admission of Turkey, a country with a strong and homogeneous Islamic heritage and culture, in the European Union would render any efforts for the development of a European identity based on Christian culture ineffective and, therefore, greatly impede the

² Valery Giscard D'Estaing, “Pour ou Contre l'Adhésion de la Turquie à l'Union Européenne”, Interview to *Le Monde*, 9 November 2002

³ Heinrich August Winkler, “Ehehindernisse: Gegen einen EU-Beitritt der Türkei”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 November 2002

⁴ Ingo Friedrich, “Beitritt der Türkei ändert EU-Charakter”, Interview to *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, 9 January 2003

development of a common European identity. The European identity project, they stress, will fail, if it is based upon the “moving ground” of multiculturalism and not on what has united the peoples of Europe for the last two millennia.

PROPOSERS OF TURKEY'S EU MEMBERSHIP

The proponents of Turkey's membership in the European Union are also divided to the advocates of a non-federal economy-based European Union (Euro-sceptics) and the champions of the secular and multicultural character of the European Union. Euro-sceptics⁵ have traditionally viewed the plans for a politically stronger, federal European Union with suspicion, if not outright hostility. In view of that, they have no reason to share the concerns of Euro-federalists regarding the impact that the potential membership of Turkey would have on the development of a closer European Union. On the contrary, Euro-sceptics, who envision the future European Union as a primarily economic organization regulating an immense, fully integrated, globalised market, heartily support Turkey's accession to the European Union: Turkey is a rapidly developing country with significant natural resources, a growing, young population and a huge potential for European business activities.⁶ Its accession to the European Union will help provide the political security climate and legislation improvements necessary for profitable investment and will secure the primacy of European corporations in the Turkish market. Besides, Turkey's accession to the European Union is viewed as an event, which will inevitably hinder further political integration within the European Union, thus guaranteeing the preponderance of the EU economic pillar. Turkey's close strategic alliance to the United States is also considered a factor that could hamper the development of European security policies. Turkey's EU membership would strengthen the group of member states favouring the preservation of the NATO-based security role of the United States in Europe at the expense of the development of exclusively European security and defence policies.

The proponents of the secular, multicultural character of the European Union view Turkey's membership as a unique opportunity for the European Union to prove its tolerant, liberal character. No place should be allowed to religion in European politics, as the political use of religion has historically been proven catastrophic for European peace. The accession of Turkey, a populous Muslim country, which has consistently tried to strengthen its bonds with Europe, would disprove the allegation that the European Union is a “Christian Club” and show that xenophobic views have no place in the political environment of the European Union.⁷ Turkey's Islamic culture and heritage is no obstacle for its participation in a union characterised by the preponderance of humanistic and liberal values. Moreover, Turkey's inclusion to the European Union would further manifest the multi-cultural character that Europe already has.⁸ The large numbers of immigrants that have settled in Western Europe since the end of the Second World War have irreversibly altered the monolithic character of European nation-states. The admission of a Muslim country like Turkey will demonstrate that the European Union has not only remained untouched from views with intolerant, racist underpinnings, but can also celebrate its diversity.

⁵ British politicians and opinion-makers have always had a prominent role within the Euro-sceptic camp.

⁶ Editorial, “Giscard d'Estaing's Blunder”, *Financial Times*, 12 November 2002

⁷ Denis MacShane, “Europe must embrace Islam too”, *The Observer*, 24 November 2002

⁸ Daniel Cohn-Bendit, “Objection, Monsieur le Président Giscard D'Estaing”, *Liberation*, 19 November 2002

THE IMPORTANCE OF TURKEY'S EU MEMBERSHIP DEBATE

Disagreement on whether Turkey should become a member of the European Union does not, however, prevent both proponents and opponents of Turkey's EU membership from agreeing on the fact that Turkey has not yet fulfilled the political criteria set for states interested in joining the European Union. Issues like the persistent violation of human and minority rights in Turkey and the political role of the Turkish military still hamper Turkey's road to the European Union, and reform efforts preceding the Copenhagen Summit were deemed insufficient by the European Commission report on Turkey's EU membership application in October 2002. The decision of the European Council to review Turkey's compliance with the Copenhagen criteria in December 2004 and then decide on a date for the commencement of Turkey's accession negotiations, adopted the EU Commission's view that Turkey did not fulfil the Copenhagen criteria, but provided Turkey with ample time to reform and prove its firm commitment to European liberal and democratic values before the reconsideration of its application.

The debate on Turkey's eligibility for membership in the European Union has abated since the end of the Copenhagen Summit, but will probably be rekindled again when Turkey's compliance with the European democratic and liberal model defined by the Copenhagen criteria is reviewed. Whether Turkey finally becomes a member of the European Union or not, will directly pertain to the success of Turkey's persistent quest for a European identity. The fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria serves as a litmus test for Turkey's sincere intention to join the European political and multi-cultural paradigm and effectively become an EU member. On the other hand –provided that Turkey fulfils the Copenhagen criteria–, the reply of the European Union to Turkey's application for full membership will also pertain to the identity of the European Union itself. Whether the European Union becomes a federation or remains a primarily economic organisation, a "Christian fortress", or a religion- and culture-blind polity, remains to be seen. The decision on Turkey's application for EU membership will definitely provide hints to answer these questions.