

ANNUAL UPDATE: TURKEY'S ROAD TO THE EU

The European Council took an historical decision on 17 December 2004 to open accession talks with Turkey on 3 October 2005. This article is an evaluation of the major developments in Turkey-EU relations between these two significant dates. The author focuses on the debate about Turkey in the EU and the debate about the EU in Turkey separately to understand the general trends for both parties. The Referenda on the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands and federal elections in Germany are pointed out as main arenas where discussions about Turkey are heightened in Europe, while rising Euroskepticism is placed at the center of the EU discussion in Turkey.

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Last year was a historic year in Turkey-EU Relations and the decision of the European Council, on 17 December 2004, to open accession talks with Ankara on 3 October 2005 was the climax. Chris Morris, BBC Europe Correspondent, summed it up best by saying: “[t]here are still years of negotiations and plenty of pitfalls ahead, but if Turkey ever joins the European Union, people will look back on this summit as a decisive moment.” The process, which resulted in this decision after a 40-year struggle to be part of the club, was not smooth. Turkey witnessed many discussions, activities and campaigns by pro-Turkey and Turkey-skeptic groups especially in the last few months of 2004. Turkey’s EU membership turned out to be one of the most hotly-debated issues around Europe. It was, in fact, the beginning of a trend, which would lead to further discussions.

Many in Europe and Turkey were expecting that the decision made at the European Council on the 17th of December (also referred to as 12/17) would put an end to discussions about Turkey’s full membership in the EU. However, statements from conservative party leaders in France, Germany and Austria, just one day after the decision, provided insight into the big political discussions on Turkey’s accession that lay ahead. Angela Merkel, Leader of the Christian Democrat Union-Germany, made it very clear that criteria for Turkey’s EU accession should go beyond the Copenhagen Criteria: “Turkey is not European enough in terms of culture and history to join the EU. Moreover, the European Union is full and there’s no room for Turkey.”¹

The EU began 2005 with a full agenda. The approval of the European Constitution was at the top of the list. Discussions on Turkey were expected to be downgraded during that time. However, Turkish accession turned out to be one of the central elements of the discussions related to the approval of the European Constitution, especially in France and the Netherlands. It is hard to understand the connection between the two issues, but for many politicians Turkey’s accession had already become one of the issues to be discussed for domestic political consumption.

While Turkey was at the center of the debate in the EU, the EU also remained at the center of discussions in Turkey. However, these discussions did not portray the enthusiasm that was held prior to the December 2004 European Summit. Moreover, the Turkish government was not as active as before regarding the EU process. There was a clear slowdown for different reasons, which has been explained by many experts as “EU fatigue” in Turkey, after an intensive period of reform. However, this is a multi-dimensional issue which deserves more consideration.

Debate on Turkey in the EU

Turkey’s EU accession is hotly debated in a number of EU countries – in particular France, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus. In 2005, the discussions about Turkey’s membership were shaped around referenda for the ratification of the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands. In Germany, federal elections were at the center of the debate. Culture and history are the central and most common arguments for Turkey-skeptics in these countries. In Austria the opposition to Turkey’s accession seemed only to be that “Turkey is simply not European.”² Greek Cypriot

¹ *Deutsche Welle*, 18 December 2004.

² “Main political parties in Austria oppose Turkey joining the EU,” *Euractiv*, <http://www.euractiv.com/Article?tcmuri=tcm:29-117845-16&type=News>.

arguments, however, are related specifically to the Cyprus issue, rather than culture and history.

In the first half of 2005, especially in those countries where referenda would take place for the approval of the Constitution, we witnessed a pre-referendum environment with campaigns, debates, conferences, books, TV programs etc. Most political parties made their position very clear and organized big campaigns for “yes” or “no” camps.³ Discussions over Turkey became one of the key issues of the debate and campaigns in France and the Netherlands. While some political parties claimed that saying “yes” to the Constitution would mean saying “no” to Turkey, others claimed that saying “no” to the Constitution would result in saying “no” to Turkey. The connection between Turkey’s accession and the European Constitution was difficult to establish, even for those people who were experts on both issues. Discussions on Turkey became part of domestic politics and were used by many politicians for their own gain.

Turkey’s accession has held a place on the internal political agendas of most European countries since the debates on the decision to open negotiations with Turkey in 2004. This trend has solidified in 2005 and will clearly be part of the European political debate until Turkey’s accession process is complete. A good example of this is how Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy in France have used the debate about Turkey in their political rivalry. Similarly, for the debates on the European Constitution, “the Turkey card” was exploited. For instance, in the months leading up to France’s referendum on EU Constitution, Chirac became so alarmed by the prospect of anti-Turkey campaigners making the vote a referendum on Turkish membership that he promised France a separate referendum to approve Turkey. Rather than emphasize the social, political, economic and international effects of the Constitution, some politicians preferred to use Turkey’s accession as an integral part of their “yes” or “no” campaigns.

Turkey was not only part of the discussion in the pre-referenda period, but also in the aftermath of the failure to approve the constitution in France and the Netherlands. While other issues, like globalization and problems of social integration and economics were the main reasons why voters rejected the Constitution, Turkey was used as a scapegoat by some politicians as one of the main culprits for this result. Public opinion over possible Turkish membership in the EU was seen as a significant reason for rejecting the Constitution in France and the Netherlands.

After the results of the referenda on the European Constitution, federal elections in Germany came onto the agenda as another internal political battlefield for Turkey discussions. The CDU/CSU declared at the very beginning of their campaign that the Turkish membership issue would be one of the key subjects of their election campaign. Their point of view was that Turkey cannot be a member of the EU and that there should be a different formula, namely a privileged partnership, for Turkey-EU relations. Schröder’s SPD and Fischer’s Green Party also made their positions clear. Schröder showed clear support for Turkey’s EU accession in his election campaign, and his coalition partner Fischer stated that “Turkey belongs to Europe and Turkey is a very important country for Germany’s and Europe’s security... Turkey’s entry to the EU would be almost as important as the D-Day landings.”⁴ Therefore, German political parties have already made up their minds on this issue and these discussions are likely to continue during full membership negotiations. The outcome of the 18 September

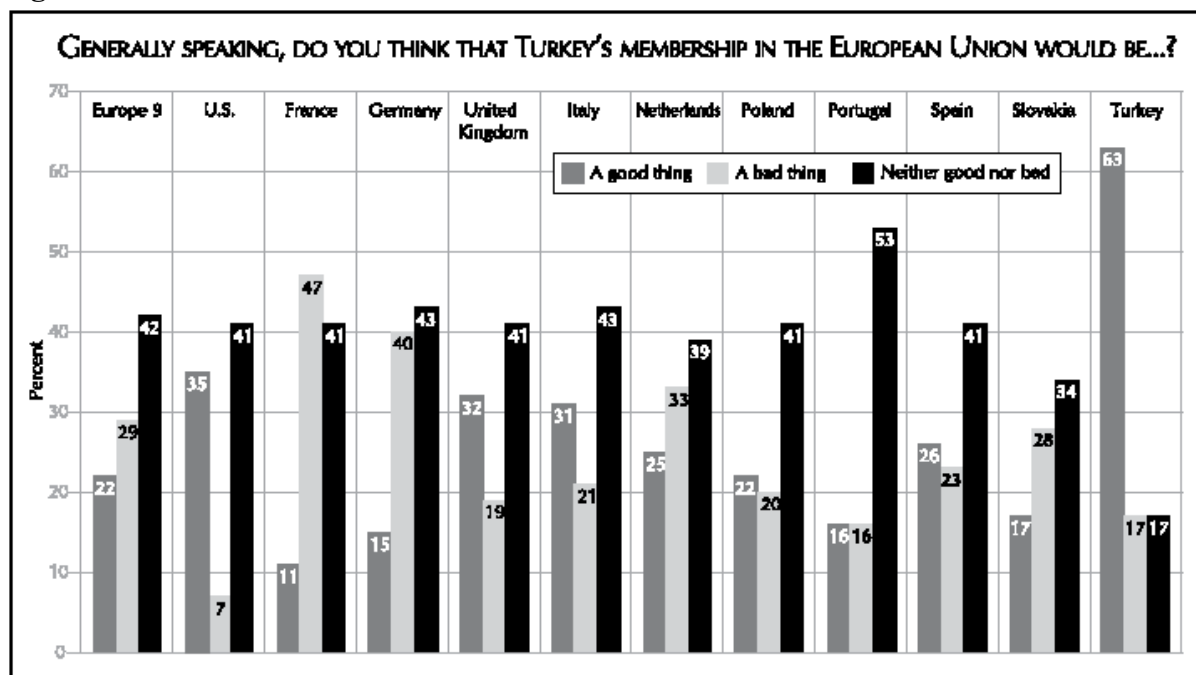
³ Only the French Socialists, in contrast to the other parties, were as divided as ever on the Constitution.

⁴ *BBC News*, 20 October 2004.

German federal elections sent a message to some politicians in Germany and in some other EU countries. Although we cannot claim that Angela Merkel's failure to win a commanding majority had any connection to CDU/CSU policy on Turkish accession, election results, at the very least, demonstrated that being against Turkey's accession did not mean a victory in an election.

Public opinion about Turkey in EU member states is a very significant aspect when attempting to explain why the issue is important to member state's internal politics. The percentage of people who think that "Turkey's accession to the EU would be a bad thing" is higher in some EU countries (see Figure 1) than in others, but even in the most Turkey-skeptic countries, around 42 percent of the population does not have a clear opinion on this issue yet. This data is important to consider in evaluating the behavior of some European politicians about the Turkey issue. Many Turkey-skeptic politicians in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria make their arguments on the hypothesis that the "majority of public opinion is against Turkey's accession." However, although the number of people, who are opposed to Turkey's accession is considerable, these figures clearly show that the arguments of Turkey-skeptic politicians are far from reality and quite often groundless. These arguments frequently have domestic or personal political concerns behind them. For some politicians targeting the Turkey-skeptic part of the public is a method of achieving their political aims. Angela Merkel's statement two days before the German federal elections (16 September 2005) underlines this argument: "I ask for the votes of people, who are against Turkey's full-membership and who are for privileged partnership with Turkey."

Figure 1



Source: Transatlantic Trends - Key Findings 2005, The German Marshall Fund of the United States (Europe 9 averages (EU9) represents the combined responses of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, and the United Kingdom)

Debate about the EU in Turkey

We should also consider the trends and opinions in Turkey about the EU and the EU accession process to better understand Turkey-EU relations. We have always seen clear support from the Turkish public for the accession process and full-membership in the EU. If we look at different research results over last few years, around 75 percent of the Turkish public was in support of Turkey's EU membership in 2004. However, the period 2004-2005 has become a turning-point for Turkey in terms of the polarization of the Turkish public on this issue. The EU reform process and the significant changes in the country, perceptions about EU applying double standards to Turkey, statements and policies of some European leaders and the rise of nationalism in Turkey (also related to the growth of anti-Americanism) could be seen as reasons of this polarization. As a result, the support of the Turkish public for EU membership has decreased to 63 percent (see Figure 1). Prior to this period, the Euroskeptic camp was not visible in Turkey apart from some extreme right or left groups, but last year this camp became much more visible and voices in this camp started to be more noticeable and obtain greater support.

There are, of course, reasons behind this change. Many people in Turkey have begun to feel that a number of EU countries and some leaders are not sincere towards Turkey. Turks believe less and less that EU membership will ever really be possible and are beginning to believe that Turkey has made too many concessions without getting enough in return. Among Euroskeptics, there are also a considerable amount of people who see the collapse of the status quo as a threat to their individual and institutional interests. Many reforms have been realized in Turkey in the last few years and with more democracy and freedom, division of power and institutional and societal dynamics have changed. Such a change has affected some people, who had benefited from the status quo and since they see the continuation of the process as a further threat, they have joined the Euroskeptics. At the end of the day, however, governments are elected by the votes of people and if there is dissatisfaction among the Turkish public related to EU policies, we may also begin to see fewer moderate policies from the government in Turkey-EU relations. We have already seen evidence of this shift in some statements from Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Gül. They have made it very clear that Turkey had done its homework and that they will not make further concessions before the EU fulfills its obligations.

Other Issues in Turkey-EU Relations during 2005

The Reform Process in Turkey

Turkey has progressed in its political reform process, in particular by means of far-reaching constitutional and legislative changes adopted over the last years, in line with the priorities set out in the Copenhagen Criteria. Continuation of this dynamism and full and effective implementation of reforms are essential for the success of the process. However, 2005 was not a very active year in Turkey's reform process. Although the Turkish government took concrete steps to implement reforms, there was a clear slowdown compared to previous years. Many people explain this as reform fatigue and this is partly true. 2004 was a very lively year in Turkey-EU relations and the 12/17 decision was perceived as a big success in Turkey, which came after 40 years of struggling. It could be evaluated as a moment for citizens and institutions to reorient themselves towards further reform. The agenda in Europe also changed in the beginning of 2005 and approval of the European constitution was the top priority. Perhaps some people in Turkey have interpreted Chirac's request that Turkey not have a high public profile during the European Constitution referendum process as a reason not to carry out reforms. However the impression created as a result of the slowdown was that Turkey was

not genuinely interested in reforms and had only carried them out in order to get a negotiation date from the EU in December 2004.

Cyprus and the Customs Union

The 12/17 decision of the European Council stated clearly that the signing of the Protocol regarding the adaptation of the Ankara Agreement (to take into account the accession of the ten new Member states) was a condition to start accession negotiations with Turkey on 3 October 2005. This meant the extension of the Customs Union to the Greek Cypriot Administration.

Turkey signed the additional protocol extending its Customs Union with the European Union to cover 10 new EU member states on 29 July 2005. Together with this signature, an official declaration was made by Turkey, which legally constitutes an integral part of the signature and letter. It was reiterated that "The Republic of Cyprus referred to in the Protocol is not the original "Partnership State" established in 1960. Turkey will continue to regard the Greek Cypriot authorities as exercising authority, control and jurisdiction only in the territory south of the buffer zone, and not representing the Turkish Cypriot people- and Turkey will treat the acts performed by them accordingly. The signature, ratification and implementation of this Protocol did not amount to any form of recognition of the Republic of Cyprus referred to in the Protocol; nor prejudice Turkey's rights and obligations emanating from the Treaty of Guarantee, the Treaty of Alliance, and the Treaty of Establishment of 1960. Turkey's existing relationship with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus will remain unchanged." The Greek Cypriot Administration reacted to this declaration and called on the EU Presidency to prepare a counter-declaration. It took the EU almost 2 months to agree on a counter-declaration.

Women's Rights

Women's rights are always in the spotlight of Turkey's accession process, as the EU has indicated on several occasions the need for Turkey to improve its record in this regard. Women's rights are also an integral part of Turkey's reform process. However, police brutality during a women's demonstration in Istanbul on 7 March 2005, a few days before International Women's Day, shocked the EU and severely jeopardized Turkish attempts at improving its human rights image. It was a setback for the government as well. The EU's Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn, Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn and British Europe Minister Denis MacShane were in Turkey on the very same days. "We were shocked by images of the police beating women and young people demonstrating in Istanbul," the three EU representatives said in a joint statement. This incident will likely find place in the Regular Report 2005 of the European Commission on Turkey, which will be published in November.

The Opening of accession negotiations

Accession negotiations with Turkey will be opened on 3 October 2005. France, Austria and the Greek Cypriot Administration are trying to push new elements into the negotiation framework document, to which Turkey is strongly against. While France and Austria try to include alternatives formulas, namely a privileged partnership, the Greek Cypriot Administration would like to include references to the Cyprus issue and recognition of the Republic of Cyprus as a precondition. This struggle will continue until the negotiation framework document is signed but we should not expect major changes in this document.

The screening process will follow formal opening of the negotiations. Turkey wants to start the negotiations with the topic “Science and Technology,” which is “relatively easy” due to the shortness of time in the screening process. This will allow Turkey to open and close a chapter in short order, which is also in line with the priorities of the UK Presidency.

Conclusion

We witnessed many ups and downs in Turkey-EU relation after the 12/17 decision. The agenda of the EU was full, especially with the European Constitution issue, and Turkey’s accession turned out to be one of the basic elements of the discussions. This had negative consequences in terms of support of the European public to this accession. At the same time, demotivation in Turkey due to the discussions in the EU, rise in Euroskepticism and reform fatigue caused a clear slowdown in EU process of Turkey. The UK Presidency and efforts of Blair were the biggest chances for Turkey to overcome some critical problems in the eve of the accession negotiations. 3 October 2005 will mark a new period in Turkey-EU relations but for the smooth functioning of the process more effort will be needed from both sides. Turkey’s determination to continue the reform process is vital but considerable amount of efforts will be necessary to convince the European public as well.