



EU-Turkey relations: One year on – Turkey’s progress towards the EU

Key conclusions of the 3rd Bosphorus conference

organised by the British Council, Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and the Centre for European Reform

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In October 2005, when we met in Istanbul for the second Bosphorus conference, Turkey had only just been given the go-ahead for accession negotiations with the EU. The mood then was a mixture of relief, excitement and a certain amount of apprehension. Our discussions focused on how to make the negotiations a success.

One year later, the mood has changed significantly. There is no doubt that Turkey has made progress in the accession talks: the first chapter has been opened and closed, and the legal ‘screening’ process is on course to be completed in December. Already, a large part of the *acquis* is being applied in Turkey, through the custom union and co-operation in other areas. More than 2,000 experts and officials are involved in the accession process on the Turkish side. In Brussels, the Turkish team is lauded as efficient, focused and committed.

While technically Turkish accession is progressing as well as can be expected, politically it is in trouble. Excitement has given way to disillusionment on both sides. The EU is concerned about Turkey’s slowing reforms and its reluctance to honour its commitment to open its ports to ships sailing under the Cypriot flag. Turks are angry that the EU is making difficult or politically unacceptable demands without being able to guarantee that Turkey will eventually join the EU. Forthcoming elections – in Turkey and key EU states such as France and the Netherlands – have further raised the political heat.

Double standards? EU accession is always tough

The key conclusion from our Istanbul discussions must be this: if current tendencies towards mutual recrimination and incomprehension continue, the accession process may soon stall or even fail. This would be a major blow for the EU since it would have to admit the failure of one of its most successful policies, namely enlargement. And it could prove disastrous for Turkey if the end of the EU dream fuelled nationalism and undermined the modernisers. Worryingly, even among the

participants of the Bosphorus conference – predominantly pro-European Turks and pro-Turkish Europeans – not everyone seemed to think that a suspension of the accession talks would be a disaster.

The main advice that our participants (both from EU countries and from Turkey itself) had for Turkey was: be constructive and keep your eyes on the prize. When discussing the EU, Turkish politicians, officials, journalists and experts frequently complain about double standards. They think that the EU is particularly tough on Turkey. They cite issues ranging from ‘benchmarking’ to demands for the recognition of “Armenian genocide”. Turkey suspects that whatever else it accomplishes, the EU countries will not let it join due to their own deeply engrained prejudices.

Those participants who had played an active part in previous enlargements reassured Turkey that accession negotiations were always tough, politicised and ultimately uncertain. For example, France vetoed the UK’s accession twice. And it was not until 1972 – a full decade after the UK first started accession negotiations – that it could be sure that it would be allowed to join. Similarly, five years into Spain’s accession negotiations there had been very little progress, partly due to the political objections of the then-member-states.

Equally, Turkey’s complaints about the new, stricter requirements of the accession process have to be put into perspective. Croatia is obliged to meet the same requirements but does not see them as an anti-Croatian plot. Today’s accession process – with its accession criteria, benchmarks and regular reports – is much more formalised and in many ways more objective than in the past, when progress depended on political judgement alone. Insofar as Turkey was subject to special treatment (or “double standards”), it may not necessarily have been to the country’s detriment. For example, unlike Slovakia, Turkey was allowed to start accession negotiations although it was not in full compliance with the political Copenhagen criteria.

The impression that the EU is less than fully committed to Turkish entry has also been fuelled by Angela Merkel, Wolfgang Schäuble and others saying that the EU should offer Turkey a privileged partnership instead of full membership. Upsetting as such remarks may be, Turkey should bear in mind the following: Although some EU governments were tempted to veto the start of Turkish accession talks, none did so. The EU has stuck to its pledge to negotiate with Turkey (the first chapter of the *acquis* was negotiated during the EU presidency of Austria, where only 10 per cent of voters want Turkey to join). But doubts about whether the EU should enlarge further, and include Turkey, do exist. EU politicians and the media will air these doubts, as part of an open and frank political dialogue. Often, however, such remarks are aimed at home consumption in individual EU member countries, and not at the EU or Turkey.

Cyprus, or how to muddle through

In two respects, Turkey does stand apart from other candidate countries, both past and present. First, the issue of Cyprus threatens to hugely complicate the accession process. Second, among the European publics, Turkey enjoys the least support of any candidate or potential candidate. Therefore, the prospect of a French or Austrian

referendum on Turkish accession introduces an extra degree of uncertainty into the accession process.

Some Turkish participants expressed anger about the EU's handling of the Cyprus issue. They said that since it was the Greek Cypriot government that had rejected the Anan plan, it was not fair of the EU to now ask for concessions from Ankara and the Turkish Cypriots. Before reunification talks could begin, balance would have to be restored through either the EU or Cyprus or both making concessions. Moreover, they said that the current focus on individual issues (ports opening) and confidence building measures had obscured the need for a comprehensive settlement. "How can Turkey take small steps", asked one expert "if it does not even know in which direction it is going?"

Turkish participants insisted that Turkey could only comply with the Ankara protocol (by opening its ports) if the EU fulfilled its promise to open up to trade with Northern Cyprus – a step that is currently blocked by the (Greek) Cypriot government. On the basis of this experience, Turkish participants warned that even if Ankara opened its ports, Cyprus would use its veto over every step in the accession process to extract more and more concessions. EU experts said such concerns were unfounded. First, the other EU countries would not allow Cyprus to be so obstructive. Second, Cyprus would not be in a position to dispute the Commission's authoritative judgement on whether Turkey had fulfilled its obligations in a particular area of the *acquis*.

The current impasse over Cyprus is partly related to the forthcoming Turkish elections. If the Erdogan government made Cyprus-related concessions now, these would play into the hands of the nationalist opposition in Turkey. Little progress can therefore be expected before the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2007. Some conference participants suspected that Erdogan would rather risk a suspension of the accession talks than open Turkish ports for Cypriot ships.

However, to resume accession talks after a suspension, Turkey may be required to make concessions that are bigger than what it is asked for now. Therefore, many participants agreed that it was imperative that the EU and Turkey "muddle through" until after 2007. While Cyprus was important, some warned that it was more important to minimise the collateral damage that the Cyprus issue would do to the overall accession process.

A possible way out has already become apparent. If Turkey does not open its ports, the EU may suspend negotiations on only those chapters of the *acquis* that are related to the customs union (the number of chapters affected, between three and 12, is a political rather than a technical decision). The two sides could also establish new institutional procedures, such as a new EU envoy or the activation of a dispute settlement mechanism under the customs union agreement. Such mechanisms would help the EU and Turkey to play for time, and they could be part of a step-by-step approach towards an eventual settlement.

EU participants argued that any progress towards a settlement would require unilateral concessions from both sides. Ankara's decision to link the question of ports opening to the issue of Northern Cypriot trade was described as "understandable but wrong". This link has not provided Turkey with additional leverage. The quest for a

political solution under UN auspices had to be resumed with caution. If another round of negotiations failed in the middle of Turkey's EU accession, the damage would be considerable.

How to shape public opinion

Current opinion polls are disheartening for Turkey. Less than half of the people in the EU 25 support any further enlargement, and 48 per cent are against Turkish accession. In Austria and France, the countries that have promised referenda on Turkish accession, opposition stands at 81 per cent and 54 per cent, respectively. Turkey clearly suffers from an image problem. In a survey of the "national brands" of 35 countries, Turkey consistently comes last. Even Turks themselves give their countrymen low marks on such issues as integrity and efficiency.

However, there are several reasons why Turkey should not be too discouraged by current opinion polls:

- Opposition towards Turkish membership is not uniform: in ten out of 25 EU countries, there are more people in favour of Turkish accession than against.
- Opposition towards enlargement is related a country's economic performance and its citizens' general attitudes towards the EU. Europe's economic recovery and the recent bounce-back in support for the EU could mean that attitudes towards enlargement will also change.
- Prejudices about Turkey are superficial and largely based on ignorance.

Although a lack of knowledge is behind much of Turkey's tainted image abroad, this does not necessarily mean that more information will improve attitudes. People are attached to their prejudices and national stereotypes. Boring government PR campaigns will not change them. Most participants agreed that so far Turkey's PR efforts have had no positive impact. Experts warned that the management of a "national brand" was too important to be outsourced to PR consultants. Turkish and EU politicians need to create a "positive story" about Turkey and tell it at every opportunity. What Turkey and the EU need to do is to highlight the positive aspects of the "new Turkey": its political reforms that are bringing it closer to the European mainstream; its dynamic economy and increasingly close business links with the EU; its vibrant culture, including food, music and sports; and attractiveness for holiday-makers.

Some ideas on how to sustain momentum

For Turkey

- Be constructive: anger has no place in foreign policy. Ankara's reactions often play into the hands of those who oppose Turkish accession.
- Be prepared for the publication of the regular report in November. Have a media strategy ready, publish positive, forward-looking op-eds in major European newspapers.
- Keep the eye on the final prize – accession – and do not let yourself be distracted by political discussions within individual member-states or draft reports from the European Parliament.

- Be aware that a suspension of the accession talks could be very costly: resumption may require even bigger concessions.
- Try to de-sensitise public opinion about EU matters. Negative political rhetoric about the EU has contributed to falling public support for EU membership. Lower support levels, in turn, reduce the government's room for manoeuvre.
- Help those in the EU who support Turkish membership, for example by abolishing, or considerably modifying, article 301 of the penal code.
- Align yourself with the EU in as many policy areas as possible. For example join the energy community that the EU is creating with the countries of South-Eastern Europe and adopt the declarations of the EU's common foreign and security policy.
- On Cyprus, looking forward will be more helpful than dwelling on past wrongs. Try to push the Cyprus issue down the political agenda so as not to endanger the accession negotiations. Do not dismiss small steps and confidence building measures. Do not reinforce the link between the issue of port opening and trade for Northern Cyprus.
- Stop claiming that opening ports would amount to recognition of the Republic of Cyprus: China has a myriad of trade and transport links with Taiwan without having moved any further towards recognising it.
- Reconsider your PR campaign.
- Use the foreign press corps in Turkey as a resource to spread good news about Turkey.
- Engage with the EU beyond the narrow focus on the accession process. For example, take a more pro-active approach towards the EU's discussion about the constitutional treaty.

For the EU

- Realise that by being too tough on Turkey you are losing influence. Turks will only be reinforced in their view that the EU imposes double standards and will not admit Turkey no matter what it does.
- Present a more consistent strategy to Turkey: keep stressing that the EU is not moving away from its decision to open accession negotiations with the aim of eventual Turkish membership.
- Understand that the Turkish government may not have much room for manoeuvre on Cyprus in the run-up to the elections. Find a way of muddling through until after the elections while pursuing useful reconciliatory steps.
- Fulfil the promise to open up trade between Northern Cyprus and the rest of the EU. If there are delays with trade opening, give extra aid to Northern Cyprus.
- Help Turkey and other candidates to better understand the nature of the accession process. This should alleviate concerns about double standards.
- Beef up your communication strategy in Turkey. An annual budget of €1 million and limited resources at the EU Delegation obviously are not enough to explain what EU accession is about.

For Turkey and the EU

- Highlight the positive aspects of Turkish accession. But do not confine yourself to political and strategic arguments – they do not convince the

broader public. Sell the “new Turkey” through education, business, culture, sports and tourism.

- Look at what lies behind ‘enlargement fatigue’. Stress that public support for EU policies can go up as well as down.
- Harness the power of business – a consistently positive force in the accession process. Turkish business has done a great job lobbying for Turkish accession in the EU and at home. EU investment in Turkey will help to raise standards of living, which in turn will help to sustain Turkish public support for accession and alleviate EU fears about Turkey’s economic backwardness.

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