



Turkish politics and the fading magic of EU enlargement

By Sinan Ulgen

★ In previous EU accessions, the Union's credible commitment to enlarge and the candidate's commitment to reform reinforced each other. But in Turkey's case, European prevarications over whether the country should become a full member have undermined the Turkish government's determination to push through the changes needed for membership. The accession process is heading for a vicious circle of Turkish disillusionment and EU reluctance.

★ While mixed messages from EU leaders have undermined support for accession in Turkey, there are also country-specific reasons why Turkey's pro-EU consensus has unravelled quite so quickly: Turkey's political system is deeply polarised, its accession process is too politicised, and the expectations of many Turks about what EU accession could deliver were simply too high.

★ At the grassroots level, plenty of Turks still support joining the EU. A pro-EU, pro-reform consensus could quickly be rekindled if the government reached out to the opposition, and if the opposition gave up its eurosceptic rhetoric. The EU can help to restore momentum to the Turkish accession process by redoubling its efforts to resolve the Cyprus stalemate, which is one of the main obstacles to progress in the accession talks.

In previous rounds of EU enlargement, the Union's commitment to admitting new members and the candidate country's determination to get ready to join tended to be mutually reinforcing: the EU's positive messages strengthened the pro-reform, pro-EU coalitions in the candidate country and enabled them to deliver the economic and political reforms necessary for accession. Visible, positive change within the candidate country, in turn, underpinned the EU's readiness to enlarge.

In most countries, the pro-EU internal consensus weakened as the accession talks progressed and the immediate political, economic and social costs of reforms became more apparent. Nevertheless, the virtuous circle of EU commitment and the candidate's determination helped to carry all previous applicants over the finishing line. The Turkish case is different. The magic of enlargement has started to fade and reforms are faltering.

The virtuous circle unravels

In 1963, Turkey became only the second country after Greece to sign an 'association agreement' with the then European Economic Community. This so-called Ankara agreement envisaged full membership, for which Turkey formally applied in 1987. However, progress in EU-Turkey relations remained painfully slow, not least because successive governments in Ankara failed to address blatant democratic shortcomings. In 1999, the EU finally accepted Turkey as a candidate for membership. This status upgrade ushered in a period of vigorous reforms. So, initially, it looked as if the virtuous circle of EU anchor and domestic transformation was working in yet another candidate country.

The coalition government that ruled Turkey at the time introduced an ambitious package of constitutional and legal changes. It abolished the death penalty, gave more freedom to the media, civil

society and non-Muslims, made it harder to close down political parties and allowed for broadcasts in the languages of ethnic minorities such as the Kurds. These changes were underpinned by a strong cross-party consensus in favour of EU accession. Even the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which was a junior partner in the government at the time, did not obstruct their ratification.

However, political infighting and a deep economic crisis in 2001 undermined the popularity of the coalition government, paving the way for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to win the 2002 election in a landslide. The AKP fully espoused the objective of EU accession, and over the following two years pushed through many courageous changes that the EU wanted to see before the actual accession negotiations could start. It further strengthened freedoms of expression and association, as well as minority rights, and it reduced the political influence of the military. The cross-party consensus on EU membership initially remained intact. The main opposition party, the left-of-centre Republican People's Party (CHP, which was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), gave its full backing to these reform bills.

In 2004, the European Commission judged that Turkey had done enough to fulfil the political aspects of the Copenhagen accession criteria. EU governments decided unanimously to let Turkey start membership negotiations in December that year. However, the EU's apparent agreement to let Turkey join turned out to be shallow. The EU's original 'framework' for the negotiations included the option of permanently denying the Turkish people the right to work in other EU countries without a permit – one of the four fundamental freedoms of the EU single market. It also contained the idea of disbursing EU regional aid to Turkey under rules different from those applying to other member-states. The negotiation framework made many Turks question whether the accession talks would lead to full membership or some sort of second-class status.

The Turks became even more disillusioned a year later, when the EU decided to impose sanctions on their country in a dispute over the divided island of Cyprus. The Republic of Cyprus joined the EU as part of the 'big bang' enlargement in May 2004 – although yet another attempt to reach a political settlement on the island had failed when the Greek Cypriots voted against the 'Annan plan' in a referendum just ahead of their accession. Since then Cyprus has become a 'single issue member-state', using its seat at the Brussels table to gain advantages vis-à-vis Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot part of the island. It has obstructed EU-Turkey talks and blocked the opening of various 'chapters' (areas of EU law and policy that Turkey needs to adopt before it can join). It has also prevented the EU from passing a regulation that is needed to let Northern Cyprus trade with the rest of the EU – a promise that EU leaders made in 2004. Turkey, for its part, has refused to open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot ships and planes, even

though a previous agreement with the EU requires it to do so. In 2006, the EU reacted to Turkey's refusal by suspending eight of the 33 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* that Turkey needs to negotiate.

Nicolas Sarkozy's election as president of France in 2007 represented another turning point. Sarkozy started to speak out openly against full membership for Turkey, which emboldened leaders from other EU countries where scepticism about Turkish accession is widespread. Alongside Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, Sarkozy has championed the idea of offering Turkey a 'privileged partnership' instead of regular membership. However, whereas Merkel has not obstructed the accession process, Sarkozy has blocked EU-Turkey talks on five chapters, which he argues are only relevant for full members (and hence not for Turkey). In total, France, Cyprus and the EU are now blocking 17 chapters. Since Turkey has opened talks on 13 chapters since 2005, this leaves only three for further progress.

The negative rhetoric on Turkey espoused by some EU leaders has also influenced public opinion. Already suffering from 'enlargement fatigue' after 2004, many West Europeans have remained sceptical about the prospect of Turkey joining. The share of EU citizens supporting Turkish membership has remained stuck at around 30 per cent, and in some countries it is even lower. Widespread public opposition to further enlargement has made many EU politicians even less inclined to speak out in defence of Turkish accession.

Turkey's pro-EU coalition proved fragile

The negative messages coming from the EU have undermined the political momentum for reforms in Turkey. This would have happened in any country. But Turkey's pro-EU coalition proved exceptionally fragile, because of the nature of the country's political system and the special features of its accession process.

★ Politicisation

The goal of EU membership is by its very nature political. A country that seeks to join the club must adopt the EU's political values and norms, as laid down in the Copenhagen accession criteria. The process of joining, however, is largely technical. A country needs to negotiate dozens of chapters of EU law and policies, from farm subsidies to chemical standards. This process has no political milestones other than the opening of accession talks and, eventually, their conclusion. This allows the accession countries' ministries and the European Commission to work away without much political drama.

Turkey's accession never fully turned into this technical process. Although Turkey has made noticeable progress on legal and technical harmonisation over the last five years, the drama never stopped. The EU-Turkey relationship has remained almost exclusively focused on a few high-profile political issues: the division of Cyprus, the

debate about a privileged partnership, and fundamental questions about Turkey's place in Europe. Because of these heated political debates, many Turks started to regard the EU as an antagonistic entity rather than an ally and a future partner.

★ Polarisation

Turkish politics is dominated by an ongoing, and often acrimonious, debate about the 'right' balance between secularism and religion, as well as between nationalism and the liberal values upheld mainly by the cosmopolitan classes. Many traditional Kemalists believe that the ruling AKP is pushing the country towards a more religious order and away from traditional nationalist ideals. The opposition CHP insists that Turkey should stay staunchly secular but its members are less keen on cosmopolitan liberalism. The MHP (now the second biggest opposition party) adopts a more extreme nationalist position but seeks a middle-ground on the secularism versus religion axis.

In this charged political environment, policy debates have always been characterised by posturing rather than consensus-seeking. The political style of the AKP government has made matters worse. The party's leaders argue that the AKP alone represents the "will of the nation" because it has an absolute majority in parliament. The government seems to think that this majority imbues all its policy initiatives not only with legality but a political legitimacy that needs to be accepted by all. The AKP's uncompromising stance has significantly narrowed the scope for bipartisan consensus.

Turkey's pro-EU reform agenda has fallen prey to the deepening polarisation of its political culture. The mere fact that the AKP government has been broadly in favour of EU accession has made the opposition parties move to a more eurosceptic line. The deep schism between the AKP, on the one hand, and the CHP and MHP, on the other, has also frustrated reforms that would have indirectly contributed to Turkey's EU preparedness.

For example, in 2009 the government launched a bold initiative to grant more cultural rights to Turkey's Kurds, as well as disband and disarm the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, a militant separatist group) to facilitate a political settlement between the government and independently-minded Kurds. If this so-called democratic opening had been successful, the country would have addressed its gravest security threat and its EU prospects would have brightened. However, the CHP and MHP were so firmly opposed to the initiative that no constructive dialogue was possible and the AKP eventually shelved the idea.

Another example is the AKP's attempt to amend the constitution. The package that the government proposed in April 2010 contained many changes that the EU would welcome, such as the appointment of an ombudsman for human rights, granting civil servants the right to strike and introducing judicial

oversight for military tribunals. However, the package also contained measures that the opposition claimed would undermine the independence of the judiciary, such as new rules for appointing the members of the country's highest court. Since an agreement between the AKP and the opposition parties proved elusive, the government decided to push through the changes with the help of a referendum, scheduled for mid-September 2010.

★ Unrealistic expectations

Although Turkey has been holding multi-party elections since 1946, the country is still in transition to a fully functioning democracy. Because of its turbulent history, geographical location in an unstable region and complex society, Turkey is still grappling with fundamental questions about its social and political order. The trauma caused by the break-up of the Ottoman Empire resulted in an overriding concern for the unity of the nation state. Internal and external security took priority over the development of a pluralistic democracy and the protection of individual rights and freedoms. The fact that Turkey was a frontline state during the Cold War further underpinned this ordering of priorities. Even after 1990, large parts of the political class and the electorate remained convinced that the need to maintain a cohesive society and avert external threats justified restrictions on political opposition, minority rights and the role of religion in public life.

However, democratisation has now gone far enough to create an atmosphere in which these long-standing core beliefs can be challenged. Today's debates finally reflect the heterogeneity of Turkish society. Given the significant role that the EU played in bolstering democratic reforms, many social, religious and ethnic groups pinned their hopes of achieving their specific goals to the EU process. The Kurds and other minorities hoped that it would deliver democratic and cultural rights. Religious groups – from the more conservative parts of the Sunni Muslim majority to Alevis and Christians – expected it to guarantee religious freedoms. Many people expected a quick abolition of visa requirements. Liberals hoped for wholesale democratic reforms.

However, these various groups quickly realised that the EU anchor was not firm enough to resolve long-standing political, religious and cultural issues and that the EU had, in any case, no magic formula for these. The weakening of public support for EU accession was inevitable, given how unrealistic the initial expectations had been.

The government changes course

In its early years in government, the AKP had been the main driving force behind the changes required by the EU. But after 2005 it changed its stance and the reform drive lost momentum. There are at least three reasons for this rather abrupt shift. First, AKP leaders realised that the EU process would not deliver some of their key domestic goals, such as lifting the ban on

headscarves in universities. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in 2004 that the headscarf ban did not violate the European Convention on Human Rights. Although the ECHR is not an EU body, many Turks associate it with the EU and the verdict weakened EU support among the more conservative members of the ruling party. Second, AKP leaders, like many other Turks, became disillusioned with the EU because of the Cyprus dispute, perceived double standards and ambiguous messages.

Third, the AKP no longer considered the EU anchor vital for its own survival. The AKP emerged from the split of an existing Islamist party barely a year before it got elected into government and many AKP leaders had in the past been associated with political Islam. In its early years in power, the party made a particular effort to prove that it was not 'Islamist'. One of the most effective methods was the whole-hearted embrace of the goal of EU accession. Turkey's liberal circles and the business community, which had initially been highly sceptical of the AKP, started supporting the government because it was implementing pro-EU reforms. Once the AKP government became more confident and entrenched, these reforms slowed down.

While the government has continued paying lip-service to the goal of EU accession, the political and economic changes enacted since 2005 have been selective and timid. It has concentrated on steps designed to reduce the political role of the military, strengthen religious freedoms and increase political control over the judiciary – all steps that also enhance the AKP's political power. However, reforms required for a broader democratisation and liberalisation of the country – such as lowering the threshold that parties need to overcome to enter parliament from the current 10 per cent or modernising the rules for party financing – have been neglected.

The initial pro-EU reform drive was bipartisan in nature. The opposition parties supported the most important reforms, including various constitutional amendments. However, once the EU accession process flagged and the AKP's own commitment weakened, the opposition adopted a more confrontational stance on EU-related issues.

However, it would be wrong to describe the situation in Turkey as one where a pro-EU AKP faces a eurosceptic opposition. The main opposition's anti-EU rhetoric is a tactical tool, rather than the product of deeply held beliefs. The CHP, for example, was the first Turkish political party to have opened a representative office in Brussels. Other opposition parties have sought to join the party political families represented in the European Parliament. The CHP elected a new leader in May 2010, whom many people regard as more liberal and open-minded than his predecessor. It remains to be seen whether Kemal Kilicdaroglu will bring his party back towards a more EU-friendly stance.

Moreover, at the grassroots level, the split on EU-related topics is much less pronounced than among the party leaderships. Many AKP supporters, as well as those voting for centre-left parties and many members

of the Kurdish minority, continue to support EU accession. Only far-right nationalists, both at the political and the grassroots level, staunchly oppose EU membership. Therefore, there is hope that if and when Turkey's current political polarisation is reversed, support for EU-linked reforms can quickly be rekindled across the political spectrum.

Finding the reset button

Turkey will never join the EU if accession is solely a government-sponsored vision. The politicisation of the accession process and the polarisation of Turkey's political system has been as damaging to Turkey's EU ambitions as the faltering of the EU's commitment. Turkey must rebuild a pro-EU domestic political alliance that includes at least parts of the political opposition. For the EU and Turkey to find a 'reset' button for their strained relationship, the following things need to happen:

- ★ The Turkish government must adopt a much more ambitious agenda for democratic reforms, including steps to ensure the full independence of the judiciary, the lowering of barriers to political representation and a further strengthening of the freedoms of expression and association. The AKP should make a genuine effort to create a political climate conducive to dialogue and consensus-building.
- ★ The Turkish opposition must return to a more EU-friendly political message. The EU accession objective can and should once more become a bipartisan goal for society and the political class. In particular, the CHP – the main opposition party - - should revise its stance so that it can no longer be accused of being an obstacle to pro-EU reforms. With a new leader in charge, the CHP has an opportunity to change course and turn the party once again into a constructive force in fulfilling its founder's aim of anchoring Turkey firmly in the West.
- ★ The EU must re-engage with Turkey's political opposition. Representatives from the previous European Commission mistook the opposition parties' anti-EU rhetoric as political conviction and more or less gave up on them. It should have paid less attention to political posturing and engaged constructively with non-AKP political forces, in particular outside the Ankara parliament and party headquarters. Since the Commission did not do this, the opposition parties came to view it as pro-government and pro-AKP rather than pro-Turkey, which further undermined their enthusiasm for the EU.
- ★ The EU must redouble its efforts to unblock the Cyprus stalemate. In particular, the EU must finally live up to its promise to enable the Turkish Cypriots to trade with the rest of the EU. Turkey could then open its ports to Greek Cypriot ships and the EU could lift the suspension of the eight chapters that it

currently blocks. Since there are hardly any new chapters left for the EU and Turkey to negotiate, such a sequence of steps is required for the two sides to restore momentum to the accession process.

- ★ The Turkish government, with EU support, must implement an internal and external communications strategy for EU accession. In the past decade, Turks have become much more confident about the future of their country. Turkey's economy has been growing fast and the country's influence in neighbouring regions has risen significantly. At the same time, the EU has looked less and less attractive, partly because of the frustrating experience of the accession negotiations, but also, more recently, because of the EU's own troubles with over-indebted eurozone countries. For many Turks, a future outside the EU is becoming an

acceptable, even desirable, scenario. The government needs to work harder to counter this growing euroscepticism. It must clearly communicate the benefits of EU membership to Turkish workers, families and businesses. And together with the EU, it needs to explain how Turkish membership would contribute to regional stability and help solve a lot of international problems, from weapons proliferation to energy security.

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