

Turkey's EU Accession: The Long Road from Ankara to Brussels

ROUNDTABLE WITH

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On October 3, 2005, Turkey's bid to join the European Union turned a corner with the opening of long-awaited accession negotiations. The terms of accession and Turkey's long-term prospects for EU membership, however, remain unclear. To understand better the factors that will shape the course of EU-Turkey relations, the *Yale Journal of International Affairs* asked two experts, representing the EU and Turkish perspectives, for their thoughts on the accession talks.

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■ **What are the most pressing challenges Turkey faces in the EU accession process?**

Denis Chaibi: *Accession will require drastic reform in Turkey*

A long and difficult journey started on October 3, 2005. Turkey's accession talks will put Ankara's EU bid, as well as the EU's role and identity, into a new perspective. To become a member, Turkey must meet three basic condi-

tions, known as the Copenhagen Criteria. On the political level, Turkey must create stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for minorities. Economically, the EU expects Turkey to create a functioning market economy. Turkey must also adopt the entire body of EU laws, known as the *acquis communautaire*, and adhere to the various political, economic, and monetary aims of the European Union. This third criterion will require Turkey to reform itself drastically to adopt, implement, and enforce the EU's values and legislation. Although it is often said that Turkey is "too big, too poor, and too Muslim" to join the EU, its size, its GDP per capita, and its religion should not be the main stumbling blocks on the road to accession. It is more the way Turkey will deal with these political, economic, and legal issues that will be decisive.

Burak Akçapar: *Accession talks will not be immune to distraction*

The accession negotiations entail a complex process of legal and policy changes. Incorporating and implementing the entirety of the EU's prolific legislation—some 100,000 pages—into the national legal system is an arduous task by any standard. The EU's founding treaties, regulations, directives, case law, and other documents will have to be translated and adopted, and the bureaucratic and judicial authorities must be retrained to implement and enforce them. The upside is that Turkey will be better off, irrespective of whether the EU accepts it as a member. Ten years down the road, Turkey will be firmly anchored in the highest standards of governance. The reforms that led to the opening of accession negotiations have already dramatically upgraded Turkey's democratic and economic credentials.

The EU representatives assert that the speed and ultimate fate of the accession negotiations will be determined by how well Turkey adopts the EU's rules and regulations. If adopting EU laws were the only issue, Turkey could surprise even the most hard-headed pessimists. Yet it is painfully obvious that the accession talks will not be immune to distracting influences.

Already, France and Austria have promised to hold referenda on the question of Turkey's accession. Even after EU governments agree on the terms of Turkey's membership, the European people will be consulted, either through parliamentary ratification or public referenda. That in itself will be a gargantuan step, especially considering that there is currently not much popular support in much of the EU for the entire enlargement enterprise. This is partly the reason why Turkey will have to negotiate under the most stringent terms of accession any candidate ever had to endure in EU history.

■ What can Ankara and Brussels do to overcome popular opposition to Turkish accession to the EU?

Burak Akçapar: *Turkey must do a better job promoting its image*

The negotiations will take place against the backdrop of a less tolerant EU public opinion. But most European wariness against Turkish membership is the result of misconceptions. Turkey is not a newcomer to Europe. Turkey has been part of European defense, politics, culture, and sports for generations. Derided and resented for being less prosperous, Turkey may instead be regarded as a contributor to Europe's economic vitality if it can sustain significant economic growth. Arguing against Turkey on the basis of religion is unfounded. The EU is not a theocratic union. While the overwhelming majority of Turkish people are Muslim, Turkey does not have a religious agenda for Europe.

EU voters want to be reassured that their leaders are following the optimum policies. This reassurance can only come by patiently but consistently explaining to the European masses why having Turkey in the EU is infinitely better than leaving it out. As part of the negotiation process, the EU and Turkey will thus need to engage in an intensive political and civil society dialogue to prepare European public opinion.

Admittedly, not all of the arguments against Turkey's membership will disappear. Turkey will continue to be large, populous, and predominantly Muslim. However, progress in the negotiations should dispel many of the arguments against Turkish membership. As Turkey becomes even more democratic, modern, and prosperous, it must also do a better job promoting its image.

It is important to point out that the never-ending question of whether Turkey belongs in Europe has also caused the EU to lose some luster among the Turkish public. The question of managing public support, however, is not unique to Turkey. Most, if not all, previous candidates experienced a drop in public support for the EU during their accession negotiations.

Denis Chaibi: *The thorniest issue may prove to be the EU's absorption capacity*

According to Eurobarometer polls, only 35 percent of EU citizens support Turkish membership, with 52 percent against it. In Austria, support is as low as 10 percent. Old prejudices against Turkey, mainly based on religion and history, are still very present—and in some member states, gaining ground. The tension between European and Turkish identities is rooted in six centu-

ries of animosity and conflict. However, the EU was built on the premise of peace and economic integration between former enemies.

Perhaps the thorniest issue in the negotiations will not be religion or history but the EU's capacity to absorb Turkey. Financially, Turkey's integration can only happen after an overhaul of the EU's redistribution mechanisms. The more fundamental changes would be institutional. Turkey is likely to have the largest population in the EU by 2010, which would be reflected in its representation in the European Parliament and its votes in the European Council. Without reforms to accommodate Turkey, member states would bypass EU institutions for fear that their political interests would not be well served in a union in which Turkey wields such clout.

There is also the issue of employment. There are already more than three million ethnic Turks living in Europe. Some politicians have warned of an influx of cheap labor as a few million footloose and job-hungry Turks head west. This same fear of competition from cheaper labor arose during the last round of EU enlargement in Eastern Europe in 2004. However, fears of the "Polish plumber"—an image used during the French referendum campaign to symbolize cheap competition from the new member states—have been largely unrealized. The prospect of unfettered immigration spooked many governments, and at the last moment twelve nations exercised their right to keep a battery of restrictions in place for up to seven years. Just three—Britain, Ireland, and Sweden—chose to open their doors immediately to workers from the new member states. In Britain, one of the most attractive places to work in Europe, only 170,000 Poles have come so far.

This represents much less than 1 percent of the British working population, and has had a much smaller impact on wages and social conditions than many other government policies. The only way for politicians to assuage similar fears of an influx of Turkish workers is to start making the case why negotiations with Turkey are so important for the security and stability of Europe. At the same time, Turkey will have to win the hearts and minds of EU citizens.

■ How can Turkey contribute to the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)?

Denis Chaibi: *Turkey could set a positive example for democratization*

Turkey's membership would build one of the strongest bridges between Europe and the Muslim world. Among other things, this would enable the

EU to shape developments in the Middle East and the Caucasus. Ankara's accession would also promote multiculturalism as an integral part of the EU's identity. This would put the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy in a different light.

Turkey has its own strong views on international issues. Its inclusion in CFSP could raise some internal disputes, especially if Ankara is perceived as a Trojan horse for American interests. On the other hand, inclusion of the 800,000-strong Turkish army—Europe's largest—would strengthen the EU's defense capabilities. Through its strategic location and good ties with neighboring Middle Eastern countries, Turkey could set a positive example for democratization in the region and could greatly contribute to the EU's security objectives.

Burak Akçapar: *Turkey remains indispensable to efforts to stabilize surrounding regions*

The case for Turkey's EU membership was particularly strong when the EU appeared to be galloping toward a more integrated and high-profile Common Foreign and Security Policy. Turkish membership would enable the EU to play a more pronounced role in regional and global affairs. Turkey remains indispensable to efforts to stabilize surrounding regions along the principles of democracy and peaceful interdependence.

Yet Turkey will also want to bring its own contributions to EU foreign and security policy. Greater convergence, complementarity, and synergy between Turkey and the EU should not depend only on Turkey's acquiescence to adopting EU policy decisions. Policy convergence needs to involve reasonable levels of policy *uploading* and *downloading* by both sides in the particular area of foreign and security policy. Done correctly, this would facilitate further synergy and build mutual confidence in the accession process. A good example of policy convergence during accession negotiations can be found in Spain, which uploaded some of its foreign policy, particularly toward Latin America, to the EU.

Of course, Turkey's contribution to the EU foreign policy is closely linked to the EU's will to develop a common foreign policy in the first place. The French and Dutch referenda on the proposed EU constitution in 2005 slowed the exuberance of European elites to develop the EU project into a political union with a stronger military dimension. In the wake of these powerful expressions of dissent, European elites cannot take for granted the emergence of a coherent Common Foreign and Security Policy.

At the same time, however, it would be equally misguided to jump to the conclusion that the recent setbacks mark the end of efforts toward a common European foreign policy. A less coherent Europe would need Turkey's assets and cooperation as much as a coherent Europe. The world will not sit still as European leaders and EU institutions ponder how to re-energize the EU. The challenges detailed in the European Security Strategy and the overall questions associated with managing Europe's neighborhood are alive and real. There is still work to be done in the more fundamental task of explaining to the European public the importance of European unity to confronting foreign and security challenges.

■ How can Turkey keep negotiations on track?

Denis Chaibi: *Necessary reforms risk domestic political backlash*

The sooner Turkish authorities realize that this is not a bartering process, the easier it will be for all parties involved. The problem with moving away from the bartering process is that it is much more difficult to claim success on the domestic political scene. Turkey will have to reevaluate the role played by the army and the "deep state," a shadowy network of ruling elites. While the risk of domestic political backlash is significant, Turkey's authorities will have to deal delicately with addressing problems in the justice system. Although the independence of the judiciary is sacred under the Copenhagen Criteria, this independence is often used by judges to contravene the fundamental freedoms of association, expression, and religion. Cases brought by prosecutors aligned with nationalist causes also reflect the power that the administrative oligarchy has managed to keep so far. As an example of this, the recently dropped charges against well-known novelist Orhan Pamuk, condemned for the non-violent expression of opinion, shocked the European Parliament and public.

The drastic changes undertaken by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul have to be acknowledged. The two leaders' previous parties were both strongly opposed to the EU, but Erdogan and Gul still managed to bring Turkey to the EU negotiating table. It is a particular achievement for their party, the AK Party, to have ensured its success against the prejudice of the bureaucratic oligarchy.

To maintain the momentum of the reform process, the Turkish government will also have to get used to minimizing the significance of declarations of opposition from certain EU members while ensuring that good contacts are

established with the states where real opposition can increase. The Turkish government will have to build solid foundations for its relationships with the EU. These ties will help Turkey weather the political turmoil that is likely to surge at each popular consultation about Turkish membership. The best way for Turkey to bolster its relationships with EU member states is to focus on the implementation of the *acquis communautaire*.

■ **Do you think negotiations will result in full EU membership for Turkey?**

Burak Akçapar: *European integration will not be complete without Turkey*

Accession negotiations have just begun, and experience has shown that accession processes develop their own momentum. Turkey may surprise many in terms of how fast it adopts the EU legislation. Most Europeans remain undecided about Turkish accession. Beyond the historical unease in European minds regarding Turkey, there is hope that, if amply informed, enlightened Europeans will tread the path of wisdom and support Turkish accession. While Turkey will have to promote its case with the EU publics, European leaders and intellectuals should also join in the effort.

Turkey will not accept a “privileged partnership,” or any other substitute for full membership. Without Turkey’s membership the European integration project will not be complete. The failure of Turkey’s EU dream could sooner or later seal the end of the EU’s Turkish dream. People in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and America will be watching very closely how Europe defines itself during Turkey’s accession bid. The lessons they end up drawing will help shape the future of all.

Denis Chaibi: *The last word belongs to the voters*

Although the negotiating framework makes no explicit references to alternatives to accession, Turks would be mistaken to consider that the only outcome of the talks can be full EU membership. Because of European public opinion and promises of future referenda, Turkey might have to accept the status of a privileged partnership, at least initially. But Europe was not built by referenda. If national referenda had been held in some of the six original member states, there would perhaps have been no EU in the first place.

There is still a gap between the EU leaders and their citizens on Turkey. Some optimists have argued that the decision to open negotiations with Turkey was motivated by visionary thinking and will be accompanied by equally

visionary political leadership to convince voters that this is the right course. Others have argued that Turkish accession will so dilute the European project that the EU might become altogether irrelevant. Europe's leaders need to work hard to make the EU fit for Turkey, but the Turkish government also needs to make its country fit for the EU. By 2015 both the EU and Turkey may have changed beyond recognition. But the very last word will still belong to the voters. ■