

Crunch time on Turkey

Richard Youngs
Senior Researcher and Programme Coordinator at FRIDE

October, 2004

This month the European Commission is due to issue its opinion on whether Turkey has met the necessary criteria to open entry negotiations with the European Union. On the basis of that opinion European leaders will decide at the European Council in December whether to offer Turkey a date for starting talks. In the event of a positive decision, entry talks are expected to begin some time in the first half of 2005, but most diplomats predict they will last at least a decade.

The progress Turkey has made warrants an EU decision to open entry talks. But this is only part of the equation. So far, with their focus on a date for the start of talks and the mechanics of enlargement, European governments have not dedicated enough effort to encouraging a still-needed deepening of democratic norms and practices in Turkey.

When Turkey was accepted as a candidate at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, a decision on the principle of Turkish membership appeared to have been taken. If Turkey met the economic and political criteria it would, it seemed, now have a clear route into the EU. But, while Helsinki formally accepted Turkey's candidature, there was no agreement on how quickly or to what extent the EU should proactively facilitate Turkey's entry. Indeed, as Turkey has inched along its protracted path of democratisation, differences within the EU have grown.

After Helsinki, the UK, with some support from Spain, pushed for a firm date for opening negotiations with Turkey. France and Germany opposed this. But European leaders have become increasingly wary about being labelled as responsible for a negative EU decision. In February 2004, Gerhard Schröder travelled to Ankara, in the first visit by a German chancellor for 11 years, to proclaim his support for Turkish membership.

Other opinions have meanwhile begun to sharpen against Turkey. The German Christian Democrats said they supported a 'privileged partnership' but not full entry – which raises the possibility that a change of government in the 2006 German elections could derail entry negotiations. The French right have called for a referendum on enlargement with a separate question on Turkey. The Austrian government has begun to signal that it has serious reservations. The new Spanish government has been notably less forward-leaning than its predecessor about helping Turkey quickly into the EU. Diplomats from several European countries admit that their governments have been hiding behind those states seen as most likely to scupper Turkey's entry. Athens' lifting of its veto on Turkish accession at Helsinki was a major development. But low-level tension continues between Greek and Turkish forces in the Aegean – indeed, for the first time Greece lodged a formal complaint against Turkey in May 2003 – and many Greek politicians continue to be sceptical. Opinion polls suggest mounting public hostility as the prospect of Turkey's joining draws nearer. In France some polls put opposition as high as 90 percent.

European misgivings were not helped when President Bush took it upon himself to express the view, at the EU-US summit in June 2004, that Turkey was ready for membership – a clear dig at European prevarication. The fact that the UK has been

Turkey's strongest advocate within the EU has also had drawbacks for Ankara, both because of the fall-out from Iraq and a continuing suspicion that London is motivated primarily by the idea that Turkey's membership will help dilute European integration.

The buck is being passed. Asked whether Turkey was making progress in its reforms, a French spokesman said it was 'not for France to judge' but rather the Commission. Sensing that member states are trying to avoid responsibility, several European Commissioners have begun to voice concern. Suggestions have meanwhile started to appear from official sources that Turkish membership might cost up to 20 billion euros a year in subsidies. If the Commission is ambivalent, European leaders would have to assume a heavier political risk with their electorates if they opt in December to give Turkey the green light for negotiations.

The enduring differences suggest that Europe has still not decided how it views Turkey strategically. The more sceptical European actors seem to see Turkey as a 'security recipient.' For them, after Turkey's reforms, Europe is rather uncomfortably being caught up by its own declared principles. Democracy was set as a condition for membership when it seemed unlikely that the EU would ever be faced with a genuinely democratic Turkey. For the more enthusiastic actors, on the other hand, Turkey has potential as a 'security provider.' The sceptics see Turkey as a barrier against the Islamic world while the enthusiasts think it should be courted as a bridge to that world. The 9/11 attacks intensified the debate. One strand argued that the attacks made it even more urgent for the EU to embrace Turkey, another that they implied the greater need was for realist-type security cooperation.

So far, European governments, interest groups and Brussels institutions have all interpreted political developments in Turkey through the lens of their respective positions. Those drawn to containment have lamented the limits to Turkish reforms. Those who prefer engagement have celebrated the far-reaching nature of change in Turkey.

What is most acutely needed at this stage is a more careful and measured focus on the issue of Turkish democratisation itself.

One common argument is that the EU has long been set on imposing tougher entry conditions for Turkey than other candidate states. Ankara has often complained that it has been expected to reform before the start of talks, whereas the negotiations with the Eastern European states were themselves part of the reform process. Turkey complains that after each raft of reforms the EU has simply raised the hurdle another notch, bringing in a list of further changes required.

It would indeed be seen as discriminatory if Turkey were now refused negotiations. Eight harmonisation packages have been implemented, and the reform process has accelerated under the Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. These reforms have provided for international observation of elections, authorised radio and TV broadcasts in Kurdish, eased restrictions on the right to demonstrate, scrapped an anti-terror law and repealed an article allowing leniency for honour killings. Most significantly the Erdogan government has pushed through measures curbing the military's ability to meddle in politics. It has limited the National Security Council (NSC) to a merely advisory role, upped the number of civilians on the NSC to nine (against the five military officers), strengthened parliamentary scrutiny of the military budget and cut military representation on a number of civilian bodies.

Prime Minister Erdogan also forced through a deal to bring moderates into the Turkish-Cypriot administration, against the will of his generals. In its efforts to find a

pre-entry deal on Cyprus the EU enjoyed more support from Turkey's Islamist government than from its traditionally pro-Western military establishment. Sceptics' assumption that Turkish recalcitrance on Cyprus would provide another reason for opposing entry no longer holds.

Significantly, these developments appear to have reversed the roles of the army and the Islamists. The military inched towards accepting some reform in the late 1990s as it saw the EU as a protection against the rise in Islam, reflected in the success of the Islamic party Refah during the 1990s. But at the same time, self-styled moderate Islamists switched to support EU entry on the assumption that European democratic norms would provide protection against the military. It is now the generals who profess the strongest doubts about EU membership, suggesting Turkey might be better aligning itself with Russia or Iran rather than the EU.

Signs that additional obstacles are being raised will at this point rightly be interpreted as a lack of genuine intent on Europe's part to reward political change. This still appears to be a real prospect. When Turkey offered to deploy troops in Iraq, it was reported in Turkey that diplomats from a number of European countries had suggested this would jeopardise Turkey's entry prospects. Some in the EU recently suggested that the AKP's (then) plans to criminalise adultery could constitute grounds for blocking entry negotiations.

It would be deeply damaging for the EU now to raise its entry conditions in a discriminatory fashion. If the EU is seen not to be living up to its declared principles, its wider international credibility will suffer, quite apart from the difficulties that would ensue in its strategic relationship with a spurned Turkey.

But the bar must not be lowered, either. While most concern has – justifiably – focused on the consequences of Turkey being once again rejected, the EU must also guard against the opposite danger. It must not secure Turkey's path into the EU at the expense of failing to focus more effectively on the country's remaining democratic challenges.

The Turkish military retains significant powers and influence. The armed forces continue to enjoy a formal, constitutionally-mandated role to protect the secularism of the state. The Supreme Military Council is exempt from judicial review. The civilian government still does not have the final word in defence and security policy as in fully-democratic states. The military intervened to ensure that government plans regarding religious schools were dropped. There are still very real concerns about Turkish ownership of the democratic reform process. Piecemeal reforms have been introduced each time the EU has threatened or cajoled, but they are pursued in a top-down fashion without any discernible groundswell of public pressure or engagement.

The danger here is that some in Europe appear ready to accept a form of limited democracy in Turkey, which would improve basic rights and assuage the frustrations that lie behind Islam's rise, without undermining the military-guaranteed stability of the Kemalist state. They say a controlled, but 'Islamist' democracy would be of more strategic value to the EU, that an Islamist government would make Turkey a much more credible interlocutor with the Muslim world, while a still-powerful army could keep the lid on potential radicalism. And they would argue that, not only has Turkey made sufficient progress to warrant EU accession, but it should also not be pushed harder to reform its political structures.

These views are as misplaced as those raised against Turkish entry. An agreement to begin negotiations should not be seen as a finishing line but as a way for the EU to

embark on a more proactive effort to establish a pervasive democratic culture in Turkey. While it has been issuing democratic benchmarks for years, the EU has only recently begun actively assisting this effort within Turkey to any significant degree. The network of civil society contacts, democracy projects and technical advice that was so influential in Eastern Europe – well before entry talks – have remained thin and underdeveloped in Turkey. This is where attention now needs to turn.

Some say the consequences of an EU 'no' to Turkey would be apocalyptic. The fear is overstated. Turkey is unlikely definitively to 'turn eastwards,' as is often suggested. The verdict on Turkey this autumn should be fair. But the primary focus must increasingly be on the country's long-term democratic development. A positive decision from the EU is no more than Turkey deserves, but the energetic promotion of democracy must not be sacrificed to strategic engagement.

Las ideas expresadas por los autores en los documentos difundidos en la página web no reflejan necesariamente las opiniones de FRIDE. Si tiene algún comentario sobre el artículo o alguna sugerencia, puede ponerse en contacto con nosotros en comments@fride.org / The views expressed by the authors of the documents published on this website do not necessarily reflect the opinion of FRIDE. If you have any comments on the articles or any other suggestions, please email us at comments@fride.org.