

# *A Study of Turkey-EU Relations*

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**Abstract:** Turkey is a developing and transcontinental country with fast-growing industrial base, strong agricultural power and vigorous tourism. Although it has been endeavoring to become a member country of the European Union for over 60 years, the prospects of Turkey's ambitions for full EU membership still don't appear to be bright now. This kind of "interwoven but not united" relationship is maintained across four domains: geography, politics, economics and culture.

## **1. Overview of Turkey**

Turkey, officially the Republic of Türkiye, is a developing country that occupies a unique geographic position. It is a transcontinental country located at the junction of Eurasia which is surrounded by the sea on three sides, the Black Sea in the north, the Mediterranean Sea in the south, and the Aegean Sea in the west. Acting as both a bridge and a crossroad between Asia and Europe, Turkey is extremely important geographically and geopolitically.

Till today, it is the 19th-largest economy and one of the fastest-growing countries in the world in the ranking of economies by GDP at PPP. Turkey is a member of NATO, the G20, and also a founding member of the OECD. It adheres to diplomatic diversification which has three key points of its main foreign policy: close contact with the United States, access to Europe, and friendly relations with neighboring countries. It also focuses on developing relations with countries in Asia Pacific, Central Asia, the Balkans, and Africa, including China, Japan, and South Korea.

Turkey's main GDP contributors are the manufacturing industry, agriculture and tourism. With a strong industrial base, it is one of the world's emerging economies and is world-famous for manufacturing; Its agricultural power ranks among the top ten in the world, with half of the country comprising farmland and nearly a quarter of the people working in agriculture<sup>[6]</sup>; Tourism is one of Turkey's most dynamic and fastest growing economic sectors.

## **2. Turkey's arduous and bumpy journey to join the EU**

Though Britain has been eagerly determined to leave the EU, many neighboring countries, including Turkey, try their utmost to join it. In 1959, Turkey was one of the first countries to take the initiative to cooperate closely with the young European Economic Community.

According to the official EU website, in 1987, Turkey applied to obtain full membership of the European Economic Community; in 1995, Turkey-EU Association Council concluded an agreement establishing a customs union; in 1999, Turkey was officially declared eligible to join the EU, and became a candidate country; in 2005, EU decided to open accession negotiations; in 2013, visa

liberalization dialogue was launched between EU and Turkey; in 2015, the first EU-Turkey Summit was held.<sup>[3]</sup>

After more than 60 years, however, Turkey's arduous and bumpy journey to join the EU is still stuck at an impasse and is listed impressively as a candidate country on the official EU website.

### **3. Failure of Turkey's accession to the EU: four domains**

#### **3.1 Geography**

The most obvious cause the EU denies Turkey's membership is that Turkey is not a genuinely European country. Turkey covers an area of 783,600 square kilometers, of which 97% is located in Asia Minor, which is geographically part of Asia, and only 3% is located in the southeastern Balkans in Europe. And that tiny part of the area in Europe became Turkish even only because the Turks conquered it in 1453 and expelled, murdered, or forcibly converted the Greeks who lived there.<sup>[4]</sup> If Turkey were allowed to join, "Europe" would border on Iran, Iraq, and Syria where conflicts thrive and people live in turmoil, and bringing Pakistan and Nigeria into the EU could be just around the corner.

#### **3.2 Politics**

##### **3.2.1 Social System**

The social system collision is a great contributor to the dim prospects of Turkey's accession to the EU. Today, Turkey falls far short of reaching the Copenhagen criteria, that is the EU's membership eligibility criteria, which require that candidate countries must have institutions that robustly safeguard the rule of law, democracy and human rights, possess an effective and well-functioning market economy as well as being capable of implementing the provisions of Community law.<sup>[1]</sup> However, Turkey's politics are fundamentally "Third World". Human rights are routinely abused—free speech violations, gender equality, the denial of minority rights and unfair trials are common scenes for Turks. Hundreds of cases of political violence are taken place and exposed every year, including forcibly extracting confessions from criminals with cruel torture techniques. Relevant reports or remarks concerning the Kurdish independence movement and commitment of genocide against Armenians are strictly prohibited to go public in Turkey, let alone the sporadic actions of blocking internet sites commanded by the government.

There was one iconic incident that deeply demonstrates that Turkey is not a mature European-style democracy, the 2016 military coup attempt. On the evening of July 15, 2016, Turkish time, a military coup took place in Ankara, Turkey's capital, while President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was away on holiday. More than 100 soldiers took control of the television station, then the chief of the Turkish general staff and the air force chief, before announcing that they were taking over the government. This short-lived coup incident, which lasted less than 24 hours, left 265 people dead, including 161 civilians and police officers, and 1,440 wounded according to Turkey's Foreign Ministry. The military overrode the political parties, which seriously undermined Turkish mechanism of democratic political balance. In fact, military involvement has long become a distinctive feature of Turkish politics. Such a state of affairs not only reveals that the Turkish military was plagued by in-fighting and factionalism, but also highlights Turkey's seemingly perpetual crisis in its civil–military relations which will definitely be a significant obstacle on the road to democratization.<sup>[8]</sup>

### 3.2.2 Population

Turkey's population in 2022 is about 84 million, and the total population of the EU in 2022 is about 442 million. While Germany, the EU's most populous country, has a total population of around 83 million in 2022. So if Turkey enters the EU, Turkey would soon become the country that accounts for the largest population than any member state of the EU, and the EU's political and demographic map will be altered significantly. The shift of power will be made dramatically and instantly for the entry of Turkey, especially in the European Parliament, where countries are allocated seats according to population and political consultation. Turkey would overnight become a key player in European politics and have more leverage than the traditional core countries, like France and Germany. More importantly, Turkey might be even able to ask for Turkish to become an official European language.

### 3.2.3 Refugee Problems

Turkey is witnessing an unprecedented and continuously increasing influx of people seeking refuge from Syria which has exceeded 3.6 million to date (out of a total of 4 million). In general, Turkey has always been a generous host and is the country hosting the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide for eight consecutive years, and has already spent 40 billion U.S. dollars and a large number of domestic resources on addressing this crisis. So once Turkey joins the EU, the refugee problems may become extremely serious and complex.

In addition, a new wave of refugees is heading toward Turkey's borders and Turkey can't afford to deal with it alone. Turkey is helping the European Union resettle refugees, but the promised financial aid has not been fully and timely delivered. If the EU fails to live up to its promises, Turkey will be forced to open the floodgates, threatening a repeat of the millions of refugees Europe saw in 2015.

### 3.2.4 Cyprus problems left over from history

In 1974, when the ethnic conflict in Cyprus reached its peak, the Turkish government invaded Cyprus under the pretext of "protecting the safety of Turkish residents" and quickly occupied the northern part of the island. After successfully occupying about 35 percent of Cyprus, Turkey did not bring this island into its own territory, but turned it into an independent country.

However, The EU now admits only the Republic of Cyprus in the south, and neither admits nor favors the Turkish-ruled region in the north. It acknowledges Turkey just as an occupying force all along. More importantly, the south Cyprus that the UN recognized is now a member of the EU, but Turkey does not trade with or even recognize it.<sup>[7]</sup>

On the 47th anniversary of its military operation against the island, Turkey unilaterally declared a "two-state solution" for Cyprus. This move caused a huge international controversy and was unanimously opposed by the European Union. Neither Turkey, Cyprus nor the EU has any intention to resolve the crisis through military means, but Turkey's unilateral decision will solidify the structural contradictions and tensions between the two main ethnic groups, and make the peace and reunification process of Cyprus far in the future.

## 3.3 Economics

Turkey's underdeveloped economy outshone greatly by the member countries of the EU is perceived as an invisible barrier to further integration. The official website of the EU shows that, in 2021, Turkish GDP per capita is 13,250 USD, which is less than half the EU average—32,900 USD.

Turkish agriculture is characterized by subsistence and semi-subsistence farming which have low

productivity of the factors of production and market only a small portion of the production. 27 percent of the population is still employed in agriculture and the average size of agricultural holdings in Turkey is much smaller than those in the EU. Therefore, the EU's advanced Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) could possibly exclude Turkey's primitive, small-sale farmers from getting in.

The membership of Turkey would place heavy and unbearable strains on EU finances. In order to deepen and expand the integration and reduce the imbalance of regional economic development, the EU specially set up the European Structural Funds to support those backward regions or regions with an industrial decline in need. However, all of Turkey is eligible for the funding conditions, which leaves the EU with a dilemma: either change its fund mechanism or face crushing transfer payments. Also, wealth is so unequally distributed in Turkey that a huge bunch of immigrants may head west to the EU, greatly increasing the Turkish population in the EU regions and bringing about unpredictable systemic economic threats.

### **3.4 Culture**

#### **3.4.1 Cultural Origin**

The history and culture of Turkey originated from Central Asia and the Middle East. As a result, the cultural bond between Turkey and the EU is very weak, but those within the EU are exceptionally strong. Because their invaluable shared experiences, from the marvelous legacy of Renaissance and Enlightenment, to the priceless lessons of the Second World War which stipulated the motivation for establishing a united Europe, greatly contributed to their close cultural connections.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### **3.4.2 Religion**

Even if Turkey were fully within the geographical boundaries of Europe, it could not be permitted to join the EU because of the fierce cultural conflict—99.8 percent of its population is Muslim while more than 85 percent of people in the EU believe in Christianity. This is rather pertinent as no applicant with strong Muslim religion has ever been accepted within the union. As a nation with an overwhelmingly Muslim population, Turkey is bound to witness fierce cultural conflicts against Christianity in the EU on account of both sides' fundamentally incompatible and different beliefs.

According to the 2021 Human Rights Violation Report by Turkey's Association of Protestant Churches, Protestant Christians in Turkey lack legal recognition as a church and a faith community, severely restricting their freedom of religion and belief.<sup>[5]</sup> Also, hate speech fueled by the press and social media against Christians is increasing currently. Because they are not officially accredited legal entities, they are still not capable of establishing their own places of worship or using existing church buildings for any religious purposes.

In addition, among the EU member countries and candidate member countries, Turkey is the only one that needs to record the religion of its citizens, which violates citizens' legitimate right of not disclosing their religious beliefs. Some minority groups in Turkey constantly face intense exclusion, criminal prosecution, and even suffer from political, economic and cultural discrimination.

### **4. Conclusion**

The unique geographic position, intricate political issues, relatively backward economy and intense cultural conflict hinder Turkey from joining the EU. Despite these insurmountable obstacles,

neither Turkey nor the EU can afford to be separated from their interwoven relations. Turkey's arduous journey to join the EU can't happen overnight and will not be one side's wishful thinking, it has been a multidimensional, multi-actor and unpredictable one in which not only national governments but also social institutions, interest groups, and even extra-regional actors are involved. Today, relations between Turkey and the EU are at a critical juncture, their ambivalent relationship may make great strides and be reconsidered and remolded at the right time towards the same direction with the joint efforts of both sides.

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