

Is the European Union Ready for Turkey?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Oct 5, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On October 6, the European Union (EU) Commission, the executive arm of the EU, will issue its much-anticipated report on whether Turkey has satisfied the EU's accession rules, the Copenhagen Criteria. The report will serve as a recommendation to the EU Council, the top ministerial body of the union, which will meet on December 17 to decide on Turkey's EU accession prospects. Based on the commission's recommendations, the council will either open accession talks with Turkey -- paving the way toward the country's eventual EU membership -- or keep Ankara's application, which dates back to 1987, on the backburner. Is Ankara ready for the EU? And, if so, is Brussels ready for Turkey?

Turkey on the EU Path: Ready or Not?

In the 1990s, the EU objected to Turkey's membership on the argument that Ankara did not satisfy the Copenhagen Criteria, which stipulate that candidate countries must maintain "institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law and respect for their minorities." The EU contended that, due to its policies toward the Kurds and the elevated role of the military in politics, Ankara was far from satisfying these criteria. Since 1999, however, the current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and the previous Democratic Left Party (DSP) coalition have undertaken reforms that have revolutionized Turkey's political landscape and undermined such arguments. For example, the Kurds now have the right to broadcast and implement language-education programs in Kurdish, a privilege that the sizable Bulgarian and Macedonian communities in Greece, an EU member, do not enjoy. Turkish civilian-military relations have also been reconfigured. The National Security Council -- previously headed by the military and with sole responsibility for drafting Turkey's national security and foreign policy doctrines and passing them to the government for implementation -- is now subject to executive authority (see [PolicyWatch no. 781 \(templateC05.php?CID=1659\)](#)). State Security Courts, which once served as military tribunals for prosecuting civilians, have been eliminated, and military expenditures have been brought under civilian supervision.

Is the EU Ready for Turkey?

As a result of the recent reforms, and as a liberal democracy, Turkey is in compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria and deserves to begin accession talks toward eventual EU membership. Nevertheless, there seems to be significant resistance within the EU toward Turkey.

The French objection. The fiercest resistance to Turkey seems to emanate from France. French prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and finance minister Nicholas Sarkozy (the rising star of French politics and a likely challenger to French president Jacques Chirac) are both vehemently against Turkey's EU membership. On September 22, Raffarin questioned Turkey's European aspirations, stating, "Do we want the river of Islam to enter the riverbed of secularism?" Meanwhile, Sarkozy demanded that Turkey's membership be brought to a referendum in France, a practice not deemed necessary for the accession of other countries, including the ten states that joined in May 2004. President Chirac, perhaps playing the good cop, has voiced support for Turkey's accession, especially after Ankara agreed to renew its fleet of passenger airplanes with a purchase of twenty-six French-made Airbuses worth \$3 billion.

The 'Mitteleuropa' factor. Other than France, resistance to Turkey is most fierce in Austria, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, whose EU commissioners have objected to Turkish accession. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party government, which has overwhelming support among nearly a million Turkish German supporters, supports accession, while the opposition Christian Democrat Party, with almost no Turkish German support, is against it, arguing that Turkey should be offered a "privileged membership" instead of full access. (The Greek-majority government of Cyprus and, to a lesser extent, Denmark and Sweden, also object to Turkey's membership.)

The 'Turkey caucus.' Support for Ankara is strongest in those Mediterranean countries that are most similar to Turkey. Portugal and Italy (whose prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, is a personal friend of Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan) see Ankara as a balance against the new EU members from Eastern Europe. Greece prefers a European Turkey to a non-European Turkey. Great Britain regards admitting Turkey, a democratic, secular, pro-Western country, into the EU as a smart strategic decision. Some of the new EU members in Eastern Europe, especially the Czech Republic, view Ankara's membership favorably for the same reason; they also hope that Turkey's accession would help bolster the EU's Atlanticist stand.

Why Resistance to Turkey?

In countries where politicians rally against Turkey, a convenient excuse for their stance seems to be "negative public opinion." Yet, public opinion does not seem to be overwhelmingly in favor of Turkey, even in countries whose leaders are supportive of Ankara's accession. In Great Britain, for example, only 33 percent of the people want Turkey in the EU, while in Portugal, only 17 percent seem to support Turkey's accession. The EU is hardly a democratic institution: as a government-level body, it does not allow public input into its decisionmaking processes. If not public opinion, then what are the reasons behind resistance to Turkey's membership? European bureaucrats, who will ultimately decide on Turkey's membership, look at the process in terms of assets and liabilities:

Turkish accession would bring around 82 million people into the EU, should Ankara start accession negotiations now and enter the union upon completion of such talks by the middle of the next decade. In that case, Turkey would become the second most populous state in the EU after Germany, giving Ankara about as many votes as Germany (the EU allocates its members' weighted voting powers in accordance with their population).

The fact that Turkey is overwhelmingly Muslim does not help, given how much difficulty countries like France, Belgium, and the Netherlands have had integrating their much smaller Muslim communities.

Brussels sees Turkey's relative poverty as a financial drain. Turkish income levels are below the EU average, although they are on par with, or even better than, those of current EU members like Lithuania and other countries in accession talks, like Bulgaria and Romania.

The EU's Decision: Implications for Turkey, Europe and the United States.

The fact is that the EU is not wealthy enough to absorb a country the size of Turkey, yet it is also too proud to admit this shortcoming. Hence, it is unable to offer Turkey unconditional accession talks. Even though the October 6 report

is likely to praise Turkey's reform efforts, it is also likely to place conditions on Turkey's path to the EU, including more requirements to be fulfilled by Turkey, resulting in delayed accession. It could also envision an open-ended negotiation strategy and even referenda in individual countries on Turkey's membership. So far, accession talks have always been unconditional and have always resulted in full membership for candidate countries. The EU's strategy regarding Turkey appears to differ from past practice. A conditional and unfair evaluation and accession strategy from the EU would likely lead to an anti-European backlash in Turkey.

The EU accession process has moved Ankara away from Washington since the EU declared Turkey a candidate for membership in 1999, and especially since the AKP came to power in 2002. Nevertheless, it is in U.S. interests to work for an unconditional "yes" from the EU in December for two reasons. One is that optimism in Turkey will deflate any nationalist or Islamist backlash. It is better that Turkey moves closer to France than to Iran. Second, any conditions will allow Paris and Berlin to effectively blackmail Turkey, enforcing strict discipline. If Turkey receives an unconditional "yes," the union's Damoclean sword might be removed from above Turkey's head. Thus, by lobbying for Turkey's accession, Washington might help reinforce Turkey's pro-American position.

At this stage, given the transatlantic divide, direct U.S. lobbying on behalf of Turkey would have limited effectiveness. Washington might be better served by using indirect means, lobbying through friendly countries in the union in support of Turkey's membership.

◆ Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

Policy #905

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)