

Enlargement – Turkey (Türkiye)

Turkey is the largest of the present candidate countries seeking to join the European Union and its candidacy is the most hotly debated. Because 99% of Turkey's population is Muslim, those in favour of its membership view the process as having great importance for integrating Islamic nations with the West. However, geographically only 3% of Turkey's landmass lies within continental Europe – the rest lies in southwest Asia. People who oppose Turkish membership point to this, as well as other cultural differences, as reasons why Turkey could never truly be considered 'European' and should therefore not be allowed to join the EU. This raises fundamental questions about the nature of the EU.

Recent History

The Republic of Turkey was formed from remnants of the old Ottoman Empire after the War of Turkish Independence (1919-1923). Its first president was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who shaped a secular republic from the formerly Islamic nation. Turkey underwent several coups in the latter half of the twentieth century, which left the army with a controlling influence in many civilian institutions, including higher education and the media (this control has been surrendered in order to meet EU membership standards).

Turkey was an important western ally during the Cold War. It joined the Council of Europe in 1949 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1952. In 1963, the Ankara Agreement of Association was signed as a step towards creating a customs union between Turkey and the European Community. Turkey applied to join the European Community in 1987, but its application was delayed because of the reforms taking place under the Single European Act (1986). In 1999 and 2002, the European Council made statements supporting eventual Turkish membership once the country fulfills all of the demands of the *Copenhagen Criteria*. Membership negotiations officially began in 2005.

Issues concerning Turkish membership

Many Europeans dispute whether Turkey is a suitable country to join the EU. The Turkish economy is largely based on agriculture, which employs 40% of its workers. 18% of its population is classed as poor by the World Bank. There are concerns within the EU that allowing Turkey to join would carry excessive economic costs.

However, reforms within Turkey – though incomplete – have brought them very close to the *Copenhagen Criteria* in several ways including establishing a stable economy, lower interest rates and falling inflation. The judicial and prison systems have also been reformed, international human rights legislation has been recognised and safeguards against torture have been enacted, although abuses are still fairly common, particularly in rural areas. In addition, while the military has withdrawn influence over large parts of civilian life, it still threatens to intervene in politics.

This came to a head when the mildly Islamist AK party, under PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won elections in

August 2007, and installed Abdullah Gul (the former Foreign Minister) as President. Many opponents of Turkish EU membership voiced concern that the AK party harbours a hidden Islamist agenda. For example, there is on-going debate in Turkey about the government's decision in February 2008 to remove a ban on women wearing headscarves in universities.

However, in July 2008 a Turkish court ruled against an attempt to ban the AK Party for anti-secular activities; the EU had warned that banning the ruling party could hinder Turkey's EU membership bid. Indeed, since it first came to power in 2002, the AK party has pursued quite strongly pro-EU policies and has presided over a period of more comprehensive reform and economic growth than previous, secular, governments. Supporters of Turkish membership of the EU feel that it could prove Islamic society is compatible with the West. Nevertheless, domestic support for Turkey's accession has declined as the population increasingly feels the country would be unwelcome in the EU even if fulfils the accession criteria.

Cyprus

The relationship between Turkey and Cyprus forms a significant hurdle to membership negotiations. In 1983, the Turkish northern part of the island declared itself the independent Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Because the Greek-Cypriot government does not recognise the TRNC's independence, Turkey refuses to recognise Greek-Cyprus or to trade with the country, which is now a member of the EU. Turkish harbours are blocked to ships carrying the Cypriot flag, which is illegal under an EU-Turkey customs agreement. This issue came to a head in December 2006, when member states reacted to Turkey's failure to end this blockade by suspending eight of its EU negotiating chapters. There was increased hope of reunification when Demetris Christofias was elected President of the Republic of Cyprus in February 2008. He has held talks with Turkish Cypriot North leader, Mehmet Ali Talat, but no substantial progress has yet been made.

Facts and Figures

- Turkey's national debt fell from 91% of GDP in 2001 to 64% in 2005 and 46.3% in 2009, but rose slightly to 48.1% in 2010. The Copenhagen Criterion sets a maximum of 60%.
- The total Turkish population is greater than that of all ten member states that joined the EU in 2004.

Quotes

'Turkey has always been a European country... it's not about religion and religious differences, it's about values.' – Jack Straw, British Foreign Secretary, 2001-06

Technical Terms

Copenhagen Criteria: standards that must be met before a country can join the EU, as set down at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993.

Links

<http://www.tccb.gov.tr/pages/>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1022222.stm