

A Road Full of Obstacles: Turkey's European Union Journey

by Duygu Bayram & Didem Özçakır

Turkey and the European Union have a long history, starting from the 1960s. However, after nearly 60 years of debates, there is still no solid ground and improvement in its membership process. In this article, we are examining this story that is full of diplomatic relations, ups and downs.

After its foundation, Turkey showed great interest in becoming a part of the newly emerging diplomatic international community. This especially accelerated after World War 2, since a vast majority of these international organizations were created after it. Considering its geopolitical significance compared with its economic and military power, it was no surprise that Turkey was looking for international allies. Turkey sending troops to the Korean War to become a member of NATO in the light of growing Soviet threat, or declaring war to Germany during the last days of the Second World War to be a part of the United Nations and the new order can be examples to this trend of trying to be represented in international mediums.

In such an atmosphere, Turkey applied to be involved with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959 after demonstrating an interest in taking part in the international world by being an active member of other such international organizations like NATO. The project, EEC, was praised for being the most successful peace project and was formed in 1958. The council of ministers of EEC approved the application, resulting in the Ankara Agreement, entering into force in 1964. Three phases were defined to complete Turkey's full integration to the EEC, which were named preparation, transition and final periods. The goal of the Turkey – EEC association was to ensure the development of the Turkish economy and welfare by establishing trade relations between the parties.

Ankara Agreement is very important in the sense that it forms the legal basis of Turkey's application for full membership. It was signed at a time when Soviet influence and threat was ever-growing. Turkey's geopolitical location, its control of the straits and the importance of straits in Soviet power made Turkey a strategic ally for the western block. They simply did not want to take the risk of losing Turkey as a puppet state to Soviets like the Eastern European countries, since this would mean Soviets gaining power through the Middle East as well. Signing the Ankara Agreement or its counterparts with countries like Greece was in their interest.

In 1970, the preparation period of EEC integration ended and transition conditions were set. This period foresaw the free movement of industrial and agricultural products. In 1971, EEC abolished tariff and quantitative barriers to imports to Turkey and Turkey returned the favour. However, Turkey – EU relations started to become unstable in the 1970s and this state continued until the later half of 1980s. The military coup of 1980 resulted in the formal suspension of Turkey – EU relations.

In 1984, civil authority was reestablished in Turkey and the country was opened to international trade market again. Turkey – EEC relations started to be reconsidered upon this despite being frozen for four years. In 1987, Turkey applied for full membership without completing the steps decided in the Ankara Agreement. The application was declined as the phases were not complete; however, the relations continued as Turkey agreed to follow the agreement. The European Commission confirmed the eventual membership of Turkey to the EEC in 1987, however, stated that this had to be done in more favourable times. The conflict in Cyprus and the tension between Greece and Turkey were defining factors which lead to a decline. Besides, they stated the country had to improve its economic, political and social conditions before full membership.

Turkey prepared to complete the Customs Union in 1995, and in 1997, Customs Union was established between Turkey and the EU. As a result, Turkey reached its final period of EU relations. Customs union is very important as it gave more opportunity for trade, and eventually growth, for Turkey. Besides, it is very important for integration in the European Community, creating newer aspects in the relationship between two parties.

Helsinki Summit was held in 1999. In this summit, Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate state, equal to other candidate states. Following this summit, the European Commission prepared an Accession Partnership that was accepted in March 2001. This approval was followed by the Turkish National Assembly's its own National Program. In compliance with these plans, Turkey has taken tremendous steps for being in line with the standards of European Union membership throughout the 2000s. These steps include vast regulations regarding freedom, human rights, democracy and rule of law. For example, the abolishment of capital punishment in Turkey was a step taken in accordance with these regulations of the EU membership.

In 2004 Brussels Summit, the decision of starting official accession negotiations between Turkey and the Union was taken. The accession negotiations started on 3 October 2005. For a country to become an official member of the EU, the country's eligibility in 35 different chapters has to be approved. These chapters include a variety of subjects from education to energy. Until today,

16 of these chapters were opened, the others remain closed. The reason why we can not have any progress in opening of the rest of the chapters is due to the political background of countries due to the situation of Cyprus. The tension in the Mediterranean Sea causes a serious obstacle for the negotiations to proceed as of 2020.

Will Turkey ever become a full member of the EU? Will the European Union be as strong as it is today when it manages to do so? Or will this idea of EU membership will only rest as a project in our imaginations? We will see in the following years how this 60-year journey will conclude. (1)
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