

# The EU's tacit yet unspoken attitude towards Turkey's EU accession process: viewing Turkey as 'a European outsider'

 Hakan Samur <sup>a</sup>,  Turgut Demirtepe  <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Batman University, Turkey; <sup>b</sup> Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkey


**Abstract:** Turkey's accession process to the European Union has been a prolonged journey. The objective of this article is to scrutinize the role of the European Union in extending this process. A thorough analysis of the relations between Turkey and the EU from the 1960s to the present demonstrates a notable discrepancy between the EU's official rhetoric and its tangible actions concerning Turkey's membership. In official statements, the EU has consistently underscored Turkey's Europeanness and its suitability for membership. However, an examination of the EU's attitude reveals a stark contrast to these declarations, suggesting that the EU's commitment to Turkey's membership is superficial at best. It is frequently asserted by the EU that Turkey suffers from significant shortcomings in meeting the economic, political, and institutional criteria required for membership, which are often cited as key obstacles to accession. However, even during periods when Turkey has made genuine and determined efforts to address these deficiencies, the EU's stance has largely been characterized by *institutional inertia* and lack of genuine engagement. Moreover, the constructive approach extended to other candidate countries has conspicuously not been applied to Turkey. Similarly, since the 1990s, reluctance toward Turkey's accession has been openly articulated by certain EU officials. Through a qualitative and diachronic analysis of key events and official statements, this study aims to illustrate all these points with concrete examples and to argue that the primary impediment to Turkey's EU membership lies not in the country's shortcomings, but rather in the EU's principled and persistent opposition to Turkish accession.

**Keywords:** EU, Turkey, accession process, Europeanness, privileged partnership

## Introduction

Can Turkey become a full member of the EU? The protracted process of Turkey's accession to the EU, spanning 65 years, remains shrouded in uncertainty regarding its eventual completion. One perspective attributes this prolonged and ambiguous process to Turkey's own deficiencies, highlighting several key issues: democratic deficits and human rights concerns (Aydin-Düzgüt & Keyman, 2013; Öniş, 2000),

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 Associate Professor, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Turkey; e-mail: mtdemirtepe@comu.edu.tr.

economic challenges (Eder, 2003), unresolved conflicts with Cyprus (Ker-Lindsay, 2007; Suvarierol, 2003), geopolitical concerns (Kazan, 2005), and inadequate reforms and compliance with EU standards (Usul, 2011). This study, however, adopts an alternative perspective, positing that the primary impediment to Turkey's EU accession lies in the EU's negative stance, notwithstanding the significance of internal factors.

From the outset, the EU's official discourse has consistently affirmed Turkey's status as a European country, recognizing its eligibility for membership. Despite this, the EU has periodically underscored the unique challenges posed by Turkey's accession compared to previous enlargements. These challenges encompass a range of factors, including population size, demographic growth, territorial expanse, geographical location, economic conditions, infrastructure, and defense capacity, as collectively noted in a European Commission report on Turkey (European Commission, 2004, p. 4). Given the EU's acknowledgment of Turkey as a European entity eligible for membership, coupled with the identification of distinctive elements, it would be prudent for the EU to formulate a tailored accession plan for Turkey. Should financial or other constraints preclude the realization of such a plan, it remains logical to extend a degree of support and constructive engagement comparable to that demonstrated in previous enlargements. This approach would reflect a commitment to equitable treatment and genuine consideration of Turkey's candidacy.

Far from adopting such an approach, the EU has, as argued in this study, demonstrated a pragmatic, dual, and contradictory attitude toward Turkey throughout the course of their relations, revealing a lack of genuine commitment to the country's membership. On the one hand, the EU encourages Turkey to adopt a European identity and maintain relations with the Union under the pretense of eventual membership. On the other hand, Turkey is systematically precluded from attaining full membership. In essence, the EU aims to foster a perpetual aspiration within Turkey for eventual membership, while in practice ensuring that this objective is never realized. Consequently, the EU's envisioned role for Turkey remains that of "a European outsider." The concept of a European outsider aptly encapsulates the EU's dual and contradictory approach to Turkey's membership in rhetoric and practice. Stated differently, the situation suggests that, even in the event of Turkey's full compliance with the economic and political criteria stipulated by the EU, accession would still remain unattainable. After providing an overview of the accession process in this introduction, the objective of this article is to uncover the inconsistency between rhetoric and practices of the EU towards Turkey through a period-by-period analysis.

The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology within a diachronic analytical framework. The data sources consist of both primary materials (such as official EU documents, European Commission reports, Council of Europe decisions, and public declarations by key political actors) and secondary sources (including academic articles and scholarly books). The analysis follows a

chronological structure, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, shifts in rhetoric, and discrepancies in the European Union's stance towards Turkey over time. This qualitative approach enables the study to interpret the evolution of EU-Turkey relations through a systematic evaluation of discourse and policy developments.

Throughout each period, diverse countries and groups have inevitably held varying perspectives on Turkey's accession. This analysis, however, focuses on the attitudes and opinions manifested in the Union's policies, official documents, and, occasionally, the statements of its senior officials, rather than on these differing viewpoints.

Turkey has been endeavouring to join the EU since 1959. The Ankara Association Agreement, signed in 1963, established associate membership and aimed at achieving a customs union in the long term. Turkey's formal application for full membership was submitted in 1987, and candidate country status was granted in 1999. In 2005, Turkey commenced accession negotiations, which can be considered the final stage of the membership process. Throughout the Union's official discourse, Turkey's status as a European state has never been questioned, with assurances frequently given that no obstacles to EU membership would remain once the necessary conditions are met. The initiation of Turkey's accession negotiations exemplifies the Union's official position, demonstrating a complete lack of hesitation regarding Turkey's geographical Europeaness.

While Turkey navigates these complex processes, European integration has witnessed several enlargements. Greece, which applied for associate membership in 1959 like Turkey, achieved full membership in 1981. Croatia, which commenced its negotiation process in 2005 alongside Turkey, joined the Union in 2013. The Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs), having shed their former ideological constraints and undergone comprehensive political and economic transformations in the early 1990s, were granted membership in 2004 or 2007. Notably, there has yet to be an instance of a country beginning accession negotiations that ultimately resulted in a negative outcome. From this perspective, the initiation of Turkey's accession negotiations might suggest that significant obstacles to its membership have been surmounted. However, this impression is misleading when considering that Turkey has been mired only in the negotiation phase for 19 years. Yet, the longest negotiation process for any current member lasted just over six and a half years (Portugal), with the average duration being four years (Leppert, 2022). More critically, as will be discussed subsequently, the conditions set forth in the Negotiation Framework Document (NFD) imply that even if Turkey were to achieve full membership, it would constitute little more than a Pyrrhic victory.

To summarize the current situation, Turkey is acknowledged as a European country with potential membership but remains unaccepted as an official member despite the passage of time. According to the EU's criteria for full membership, the reasons for Turkey's prolonged process can be attributed to numerous issues, including democratization, human rights, economic conditions, and social standards.

However, a closer examination of Turkey's relations with the Union since the 1960s indicates that meeting these criteria is not the sole or even the primary factor. It appears that the EU has intentionally stalled the accession process, unfairly discriminated against Turkey, and withheld the necessary support for Turkey to address its deficiencies. The EU's pragmatic approach and the frequent application of double standards in its dealings with Turkey are recurring themes in both political discourse and academic literature. Relevant references will be made to existing studies addressing this issue where appropriate. What renders this study original is its attempt to comprehensively examine the various manifestations of such pragmatism and the inconsistency between rhetoric and action across different sub-periods, while also substantiating the analysis with new empirical examples.

## **1. Economic integration period of the EU**

From the very inception of the Ankara Treaty, the explicit mention of supporting Turkey's efforts towards future accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) demonstrates the Union's acceptance of Turkey as a European state (European Council, 1977). In this regard, the Ankara Treaty mirrored the Association Agreement concluded with Greece two years prior. Indeed, Walter Hallstein, the then President of the European Commission, frequently underscored the notion that "Turkey is part of Europe" during the signing ceremony of the Treaty, concluding his address with the assertion that "...one day the last step is to be taken: Turkey is to be a full member of the Community. This wish and the fact that it is shared by us and our Turkish friends alike, is the strongest expression of our community of interest" (Hallstein, 1963, p. 3). Thus, from the outset, despite the absence of concrete actions, there was no ambivalence in the Union's official stance regarding Turkey's Europeanness geographically and the desirability of its membership.

Two pragmatic considerations significantly influenced the European side's initial keen interest in Turkey. First, it is often posited that the geopolitical realities of the Cold War shaped this policy, highlighting the importance of maintaining strategically located Turkey as an ally against the Soviet Union (Müftüler-Baç, 1997, p. 3; Eralp, 2009, p. 149). Turkey's strategic position was pivotal in the perception that it was an integral part of the West, particularly when juxtaposed with other European countries such as East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, which were considered part of the Eastern bloc (Park, 2000, p. 32).

The second factor, which warrants further elaboration to elucidate the EEC's genuine stance towards Turkey's accession, pertains to the economic dimension. The paradigm of market integration, or market citizenship, has been central to European integration, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s (Wiener, 2007, p. 21; Everson, 1995, p. 79). In this context, the EEC's approach to Turkey was fundamentally shaped by the Community's objective of opening the Turkish market for trade in industrial

goods and by the critical role Turkish migrant workers played in filling labor shortages in some member states' economies. The Ankara Treaty was essentially an agreement designed to integrate Turkey into the customs union, and to this end, the Community issued optimistic signals, implying the prospect of eventual membership.

The Additional Protocol, signed on November 13, 1970, and entering into force on January 1, 1973, marked the transition to the second phase of the Ankara Treaty, thereby further consolidating bilateral relations. Recognizing the importance of commercial interests, the Community took steps to expedite the process. Consequently, a provisional agreement was signed on September 1, 1971, to ensure that the commercial provisions of the Additional Protocol would become operational promptly. This move underscored the EEC's intent to secure its economic interests through closer integration with Turkey.

If market orientation lies at the heart of European integration, the right to free movement of workers has always been its most critical component. In this regard, the EU's approach to Turkey's accession can be traced through the issue of granting free movement rights to Turkish workers. Referring to the Treaty of Rome, the Community promised in Article 12 of the Ankara Treaty that the free movement of Turkish workers would be gradually realized. The Additional Protocol provided an even clearer timetable, stipulating that the right to free movement for Turkish workers would be progressively granted between December 1, 1976, and December 1, 1986, and that Turkish workers within the Community territory would not face discrimination regarding working conditions and remuneration. This demonstrates that, during a period when Turkey was receiving positive signals about its Europeaness and eligibility for membership, the Community also exhibited a favorable stance towards the freedom of movement.

In its focus on economic relations, the EEC was even willing to overlook Turkey's political conditions and democratic shortcomings. Following the military coup in Turkey on May 27, 1960, which suspended democracy, the first bilateral contacts between Turkey and the Community, scheduled to start on June 7, were postponed for only a few months and commenced on October 14. A similar situation occurred after the military memorandum of March 12, 1971. Despite EEC statements condemning the anti-democratic developments, the ensuing crisis in relations was brief (Dedeoğlu, 2007, p. 106). Within a few months, a provisional agreement facilitated the speedy implementation of the Additional Protocol, reflecting the Community's prioritization of economic over political considerations.

In summary, by the 1960s, the prevailing conditions of the Cold War and the Community's own emphasis on economic integration suggest that the EEC's attitude toward Turkey was primarily driven by security concerns and economic pragmatism. The EEC initiated measures to expedite the process of economic cooperation, conveniently overlooking non-economic issues, and maintained Turkey's membership prospects as a long-term objective. This approach underscores the

strategic and economic motivations that shaped the Community's engagement with Turkey during this period.

## **2. Towards deeper and wider integration**

The dynamics of Turkey's relationship with the European Economic Community (EEC) began to shift in parallel with the Community's efforts to deepen integration beyond purely economic matters. Since the early 1970s, discussions emerged regarding the expansion of partnership relations to encompass a broader array of non-economic areas. Preliminary studies and various policy instruments were introduced to this end. However, the 1973 Oil Crisis interrupted many of these initiatives, preventing their effective implementation. Once the crisis's impacts were mitigated, efforts towards deeper integration were revitalized in the late 1970s, resulting in the more effective utilization of the European Political Cooperation (EPC), the initiation of elections for the European Parliament, and the introduction of the Common Monetary System. Consequently, the EEC's vision of Turkey, previously assessed predominantly through an economic lens, began to evolve towards a broader perspective.

Initially, while Turkey retained its importance within the Community's security strategy, it began to lose its economic appeal, prompting a change in the Community's approach. The severe adverse effects of global economic crises, the international embargo following Turkey's 1974 Cyprus Operation, and domestic political instability led Turkey to suspend its obligations to the Community under the Additional Protocol—first for one year in December 1976 and then indefinitely in October 1978. Turkey's problematic progress towards customs union harmonization diminished the anticipated economic benefits for the Community. Additionally, by signing bilateral cooperation and partnership agreements with North African and Middle Eastern countries in 1976 and 1977, the EEC created challenges for Turkey's position in various sectors, particularly concerning labour force movement (Ozansoy, 2021, pp. 101-118). This evolving scenario underscores how the EEC's strategy towards Turkey began to encompass a wider array of considerations beyond the economic domain, reflecting the Community's broader integration agenda.

The movement towards deeper integration within the European Economic Community (EEC), juxtaposed with Turkey's declining economic favourability, precipitated a divergence in both rhetoric and action regarding the Community's stance towards Turkey. Initially, the EEC responded to Turkey's challenges in meeting its obligations with diminishing sincerity compared to the 1960s. Instead of addressing the underlying issues and developing constructive strategies for a country with which it was engaging towards membership, the EEC resigned itself to a gradual estrangement and stagnation of relations. Furthermore, the EEC neglected its own commitments, which might have incentivized Turkey to prioritize its

relations with the Community. For instance, the EEC excluded agricultural products from the scope of the association agreement, and Germany notably made no efforts to improve conditions for its Turkish workers, despite obligations under the Additional Protocol (Ozansoy, 2021, p 101-118). The right to free movement was denied even to Turkish workers already residing in the Community, with minimal advancements made towards equality (Aral, 1997, p. 3).

Despite ongoing customs union negotiations, the EEC increasingly regarded Turkey with diminished economic regard and adopted a stricter stance in other domains. In 1978, while intensifying efforts through the European Political Cooperation (EPC), the Community included candidate countries like Greece, Portugal, and Spain within the framework. Conversely, the EEC relegated Turkey to a status of mutual information sharing akin to arrangements made with Middle Eastern countries (Fonseca-Wollheim, 1981, p. 38). Consequently, Turkey lacked significant political influence within the EPC through this designation (Cerami, 2010, p. 19). The Community response to Turkey's request to join the EPC again accentuated the existence of a partnership relationship that could lead to membership (European Commission, 1978, p. 8), but the request received a strong negative reaction from several member states, including France (Müftüler-Baç, 1997, p. 61). The EPC case serves as an early example of the Community's strategy to maintain Turkey at arm's length from deeper integration while preserving the discourse of eventual membership on the agenda.

Greece, Spain, and Portugal initiated their applications for full membership in the mid-1970s, which ostensibly justifies their different treatment compared to Turkey, particularly in sectors like agriculture and within the framework of the European Political Cooperation (EPC). However, it is crucial to recall that it was the EU itself that initially outlined Turkey's potential for full membership back in the 1960s. If the EU genuinely harboured intentions of integrating Turkey, it would have been prudent to avoid placing Turkey at a disadvantage relative to Greece, its regional rival, particularly in crucial areas such as agriculture and diplomatic relations. Moreover, the neglect by both the EEC and its member states of their treaty obligations exacerbated a gradual decline in trade volumes to Turkey's detriment during the customs union process. The uncooperative stance of the EEC can also be argued to have contributed to Turkey's suspension of tariff reduction commitments. Taken together, these factors undermine the credibility of the optimistic outlook painted in the 1960s regarding Turkey's path to full membership.

From the mid-1980s onward, the European Community demonstrated renewed impetus for comprehensive integration efforts extending beyond mere economic dimensions. This stance was notably articulated in the Adonnino reports of 1985, which proposed practical measures for broadened cooperative activities (Adonnino, 1985, pp. 1-33). The adoption of the Single European Act in 1987 underscored a transformative phase in the European integration towards deeper multifaceted processes. Against this backdrop, Turkey, dissatisfied with its status as

an associate member, formally applied for full EU membership on April 14, 1987, initiating a sequence of events that would illuminate the Union's true stance on Turkey's aspirations. However, a substantive response to Turkey's application was withheld until December 1989 (European Commission, 1989, pp. 1-10). The Commission's comprehensive opinion effectively closed the door on Turkey's accession prospects. Even before delving into Turkey's specific shortcomings, the early sections of the report, such as "Introduction" and "General Considerations", delineated the Community's current challenges, and these chapters alone were sufficient to realize that Turkey's membership prospects were in vain. In these chapters, it was mentioned that the Community had entered a critical period through the Mediterranean enlargement and the Single European Act, how heavy its burden was and that Turkey's membership could not be put on the agenda for these reasons. Subsequent sections highlighted Turkey's structural deficiencies in both economic and political realms, emphasizing the formidable hurdles to near-term resolution. Despite this pessimistic context, the report maintained that Turkey remained theoretically eligible for membership without articulating a pathway to realization.

### **3. Post-Cold war period**

In the post-Cold War era, as the EU re-evaluated its role and objectives within the global order, it became evident through its decisions and discourse that Turkey's path to membership was no longer seen as desirable. The shift in threat perceptions and security interests following the Cold War altered the strategic calculus for Turkey within the EU framework. Despite efforts by some to position Turkey strategically, such as its potential role in stabilizing the Balkans (Buzan & Diez, 1999, p. 47), the geopolitical dynamics had evolved significantly. Therefore, Turkey's application to join the Western European Union (WEU) in 1987 was met with acceptance only as an associate member in 1992 (Lesser, 1992, p. 12), marking a significant moment of exclusion from the EU's broader security architecture. This exclusion contributed to a perception in Turkey that it was being relegated to a "second class partner" status by the Union (Criss, 1995, p. 202).

Furthermore, the EU's treatment of Turkey contrasted sharply with its enthusiastic support for Central and Eastern Europe Countries (CEECs) during this period. Unlike the strategic initiatives and comprehensive pre-accession strategies developed for the CEECs, such as those outlined in the Essen European Council in December 1994, Turkey did not receive similar proactive measures (Lundgren, 2006, p. 123). Special programs were implemented for the CEECs encompassing institutional reforms, legal transformations, agricultural reforms, rural development, and environmental and infrastructure upgrades. Conversely, Turkey was confronted with lists of deficiencies that needed to be addressed before any pathway to membership could be considered. While the EU's critical assessments of Bulgaria and Romania in their accession processes were rigorous, these countries were



acknowledged as candidates and provided with supportive frameworks aimed at facilitating their integration, rather than obstructing it (European Commission, 1997a, 1997b; Noutcheva & Bechev, 2008, p. 126). In contrast, Turkey's candidacy was sidelined without progressing to serious consideration. This period thus reflects a distinct divergence in the EU's treatment of Turkey compared to other aspiring members, highlighting a broader strategic recalibration and reluctance towards Turkey's full integration into the Union.

In the 1990s, a notable disparity emerged in the EU's financial support towards Turkey compared to the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs). Over the period from 1990 to 2000, Turkey received significantly less financial assistance, amounting to only 28 percent of the support allocated to Romania and 21 percent of that directed to Poland (Lundgren, 2006, p. 124). This quantitative analysis underscores a clear discrepancy in financial aid. Unlike the substantial funding provided to the CEECs specifically tailored for accession preparations, Turkey's assistance was primarily aimed at bolstering its economy in anticipation of the customs union (Romya Bilgin & Mercan, 2011, pp. 491-510).

Moreover, a growing sentiment within EU circles during this period, although not explicitly articulated in official documents, began to express reservations about Turkey's suitability for membership based on religious, cultural, and civilizational grounds. Jacques Delors, the President of the Commission during Turkey's membership application and a key figure in European integration history, notably characterized the EU as a Christian club where Turkey had no rightful place. This sentiment was echoed by various executives of member states during 1990s and 2000s (Bilgin, 2004, p. 276; Dahlman, 2004, p. 560). Thus, while the accession process ostensibly continued, there was a discernible discourse suggesting that Turkey should never be admitted as a full member.

Having lost its strategic advantage in the EU's security considerations following the Cold War, Turkey shifted its focus to economic cooperation as a means to strengthen its candidacy for full membership in the Union. On January 1, 1996, Turkey achieved a significant milestone by becoming the first and only country to enter into a Customs Union with the EU without being a full member, aiming to pave the way towards eventual accession. This arrangement, however, placed Turkey in a disadvantaged position where it had to adhere to trade and customs regulations without having participated in their formulation. The Decision of the EC-Turkey Association Council in 1995, which outlined the implementation rules for the Customs Union, reiterated Turkey's eligibility and its ultimate goal of membership as per Article 28 of the Ankara Treaty (European Union, 1995).

Among Turkish political elites, the Customs Union Treaty was perceived as the most advanced form of integration short of full membership, with the expectation that it would position Turkey ahead of other aspiring candidates (Öniş, 2000, pp. 468-469). However, despite initially opening the doors to a customs union for economic reasons, the EU closed the path to full membership for Turkey at the

Luxembourg Summit in December 1997. During this pivotal summit, while affirming Turkey's eligibility for membership after a 38-year wait, the European Council ultimately disappointed Turkey by accepting the other 12 candidate countries instead (European Council, 1997). These decisions led to arguments that Turkey's political standing vis-à-vis the EU became even more uncertain compared to some states with controversial political and economic records (Aliboni, 1998, p. 1), sparking debates on the subjectivity in evaluating membership criteria (Eralp, 2000, p. 19).

After being excluded in December 1997, Turkey finally achieved candidate status within the EU during the Helsinki Summit in December 1999. This shift in stance was influenced significantly by concerns within the EU about potential damage to its economic and security interests if Turkey were left isolated (Öniş, 2000, p. 470). Additionally, the crisis in the Balkans underscored expectations that Turkey could play a constructive role in regional stability, further bolstering its candidacy (Eralp, 2009, p. 155). Ankara's strong reaction following the Luxembourg Summit, which included freezing political dialogue with the EU, coupled with changing perspectives in certain member states such as Germany, also contributed to a favourable reconsideration of Turkey's candidacy. However, despite attaining candidate status, Turkey's accession negotiations were only initiated after an intense and unprecedented diplomatic effort (Park, 2000, p. 38).

Throughout the 1990s, it became evident that Turkey was not envisioned as a full member in the EU's strategic plans. Turkey's exclusion from the Western European Union (WEU) and from various infrastructure, environmental, transport, and communication networks designed for the socio-political, economic, and cultural integration of pre-accession countries underscored this reality. Rumford aptly pointed out that Turkey was effectively sidelined from the EU network, making the candidate status granted in Helsinki largely symbolic in terms of its practical implications (Rumford, 2000, p. 332). Nonetheless, despite its limited impact on integration into EU networks, candidacy marked a new phase in Turkey's Europeanization through legal and institutional reforms.

The period from 2000 to 2005 represented a peak in optimism regarding Turkey's relations with the EU. During this time, Turkey enacted extensive legislative changes, including revising more than a third of its constitution, adopting new Civil and Penal Codes, and introducing eight harmonization packages that brought about significant transformations. These reforms expanded rights and freedoms, strengthened democratic institutions, civilianized administration, abolished torture, promoted gender equality, and addressed historical grievances of non-Muslim communities (Secretariat General of the European Union, 2007, pp. 1-32). The EU's engagement in Turkey's Europeanization process was influential, serving as a catalyst for rapid reforms within the country (Müftüler-Baç, 2005, pp. 17-31).

Turkey's rapid Europeanization, spurred by its commitment to reforms and bolstered by tangible support from the EU, fostered justified expectations,

particularly within Turkey, that accession negotiations would resume unhindered. This anticipation was realized with the decision made at the Brussels Summit in December 2004 to commence negotiations in October 2005, contingent upon two key preconditions (European Council, 2004). The first precondition required Turkey to extend the Ankara Treaty to incorporate the ten newly-admitted EU members. This requirement posed a potential crisis as Cyprus, a member state unrecognized by Turkey, was among these new entrants. However, diplomatic negotiations successfully navigated this challenge through compromise. The second precondition mandated the enactment of various legislative reforms, a condition which Turkey promptly fulfilled.

The European Parliament convened on December 15, 2004, ahead of the Brussels Council, and voted decisively with a majority of 407 to 262 to initiate accession talks with Turkey. Parliamentarians marked the occasion by displaying placards bearing the flags of Turkey and the EU alongside the word “yes” in multiple languages.

On the surface, it appeared that Turkey-EU relations had never been closer, signalling a definitive turning point. However, the framework established for Turkey’s accession under the Negotiating Framework Document (NFD) represented a step backward compared to previous milestones in 1989 and 1997. The NFD introduced one general principle and three critical conditions that cast doubt on whether EU membership, a longstanding goal for Turkey, could indeed be realized under the terms proposed.

The Negotiating Framework Document (NFD) introduced a novel general principle regarding negotiation logic, a feature previously absent in the documents of other candidate countries except Croatia, which began negotiations concurrently with Turkey. This principle stipulated that negotiations were open-ended and did not guarantee a definitive outcome. This cautionary statement was notable given that no previous instance existed where a country initiated negotiations yet failed to achieve membership. Following this warning, the document acknowledged that even if Turkey could not fully meet all membership criteria, it could still integrate closely with European structures under robust ties. This statement, which was not articulated in Croatia’s document, implied that alternatives other than full membership might have been possible for Turkey. This divergence indicates that the EU has adopted a more stringent stance toward Turkey and seeks to constrain full membership, primarily due to domestic political pressures within member states—such as public opinion reservations in France and Germany.

Distinctive conditions were applied uniquely to Turkey across three policy areas: free movement of persons, structural policies, and agriculture. These included extended transition periods, derogations, special arrangements, and notably, permanent safeguard provisions post-accession. The provision for permanent safeguards envisioned scenarios where Turkish citizens and the state could be

excluded from fundamental European benefits such as free movement rights, agricultural trade, and developmental assistance for disadvantaged regions and groups.

During the deferrals of its application in 1989 and 1997, Turkey consistently aimed for membership on equal footing with other nations, conditioned upon fulfilling the *acquis communautaire*. However, the new conditions cast doubt on the feasibility of accession even if all *acquis* requirements were met, and suggested significant limitations would persist. Such terms implied that if Turkey were to join under these conditions, it would not merely be a European outsider, but rather a member with constrained rights akin to a “foreigner inside”. Adding to the complexity, the NFD underscored that due to substantial financial implications, Turkey's accession could not occur before the establishment of the Financial Framework in 2014.

After extending substantial support to Turkey during its period of rapid reforms, the stringent conditions imposed on the opening of accession negotiations can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the European Union sought a Turkey aligned with its political values rather than a country perceived as undemocratic, yet it remained hesitant to fully embrace Turkey as a member state. Despite the commencement of negotiations, Turkey continued to be viewed as “a European outsider”. This entrenched and persistent scepticism towards Turkey's membership was evident in both the decision to initiate negotiations and subsequent developments within the EU (Redmond, 2007, p. 306). Even in countries that were relatively receptive to strengthening relations with Turkey—such as Germany during the Gerhard Schröder era (1998–2005)—a scenario in which these relations would culminate in full membership was never seriously placed on the agenda (Öner, 2014). Secondly, the prospect of negotiating the accession stirred negative sentiments within public and political spheres across many member states, prompting the implementation of various braking and postponement mechanisms. This cautious approach was notably reflected in the Commission's report recommending the start of negotiations with Turkey. Romano Prodi, President of the Commission at the time, underscored the conditional nature of the decision by describing it as a “qualified yes” in his introductory remarks on the report (Prodi, 2004, p. 2).

Simultaneous to the initiation of membership negotiations, EU political circles and academia began openly discussing the improbability of Turkey achieving full membership and suggested exploring alternative frameworks. Barry Buzan and Thomas Diez, among others, highlighted the disparity between the EU's outwardly optimistic stance on accession and its actual reservations, advocating for a re-evaluation of Turkey's status beyond a binary acceptance or rejection (Buzan & Diez, 1999, p. 54). This discourse evolved into proposals within EU circles for a “privileged partnership” with Turkey, championed notably by Angela Merkel and senior politicians in Germany, Austria, and France. This concept aimed to offer Turkey a status with extensive privileges short of full membership (İçener, 2007, pp. 415–438). Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Chair of the European Convention on the Future of Europe, revisited the historical context of Turkey's relationship with the EU,

suggesting that the economic basis underlying promises made in the 1960s had been largely fulfilled with Turkey's accession to the Customs Union. He proposed that the EU should promptly extend to Turkey a "sophisticated, honourable, and precise" offer of cooperation, implying a partnership rather than a pathway to full membership (D'Estaing, 2004). This debate on the concept of "privileged partnership" persisted in the European Parliament long after the initiation of negotiations with Turkey, reflecting ongoing deliberations and divisions within EU institutions (Türkeş-Kılıç, 2019, pp. 29-55).

The promising dynamics of the early 2000s dissipated, giving way to a steady deterioration in relations between Turkey and the European Union (EU). Out of the 35 negotiation chapters, only one has been successfully opened to date, with subsequent closures. The Council suspended negotiations on eight chapters in December 2006 due to Turkey's failure to meet obligations outlined in the Additional Protocol. France intervened in 2007 to block negotiations on five chapters, and Cyprus followed suit in 2009 by blocking six chapters. France's stance, particularly under Sarkozy's administration, exemplifies a contradictory approach: obstructing chapters directly pertinent to Turkey's path to full membership despite ongoing negotiations (Bilefsky, 2007).

It would be unjust to solely attribute the slowdown in the negotiation process to Turkey. The Union's reluctance and obstructive stance, evident in the Negotiating Framework Document (NFD), the introduction of alternative cooperation frameworks during negotiations, and the overall negative attitude manifested throughout the process, all contributed significantly. By the 2010s, EU-Turkey relations had deteriorated markedly. This culminated in the European Council's June 2018 declaration acknowledging Turkey as a candidate and important partner in various domains such as migration, counter-terrorism, and energy, but also noting a distancing from the EU and a standstill in negotiations. The closure or opening of new chapters was no longer on the agenda (European Council, 2018, pp. 11-13). In September 2023, the European Parliament adopted a report with a substantial majority (434 in favor, 18 against, and 152 abstentions), underscoring the urgency of finding a parallel and pragmatic framework to overcome the current deadlock. The Parliament urged the Commission to explore potential alternative formats (European Parliament, 2023).

In addition, certain external developments with the potential to foster rapprochement between the two sides have periodically emerged. Notable among these are the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be used as illustrative cases in this study. However, the European Union has never regarded these developments as reference points for accelerating Turkey's accession process. From time to time, such external dynamics have imparted a positive momentum to EU-Turkey relations. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Turkey was in a position to supply the medical equipment urgently needed in Europe, a period of humanitarian and economic solidarity unfolded between the two parties

(Aydin-Düzgit & Şenyuva, 2022). Nevertheless, this solidarity did not lead to any diplomatic initiative that could have advanced the accession process.

Similarly, Turkey, by maintaining a balanced approach in its relations with both Russia and the West during the Ukraine War, has garnered appreciation from certain circles within the European Union. Some have even speculated about the possibility that a new wave of EU enlargement, potentially triggered by the conflict, might include Turkey's accession (Öniş, 2023). However, despite accelerating the accession processes of Ukraine and Moldova and initiating membership negotiations with these two countries on June 25, 2024, the EU has yet to take any concrete steps regarding Turkey's accession.

## Conclusions

Milan Kundera once characterized Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland in the post-World War II era as geographically central and culturally Western, despite their political alignment with the East at the time (Kundera, 1984, p. 33). Conversely, Turkey's claim to European identity during the same period was primarily based not on geographical or cultural factors, but on its strategic alignment against the communist bloc and its fulfilment of economic expectations set by the EEC. As the EU underwent substantial deepening and enlargement processes in the post-Cold War era, Turkey's prospective membership became increasingly uncertain. Nonetheless, Turkey's strategic significance in European geopolitics, albeit diminished, persisted due to regional instabilities and issues like migration.

The EU consistently engaged Turkey under the expectation of full membership, leveraging its strategic role. However, the EU's commitment to Turkey's accession has been marred by reluctance to fully embrace it. The EU's reluctance has been examined in this article through a number of economic, political, cultural, governance, and institutional evidence. (1) As an example of economic evidence, the continuation of a Customs Union from which Turkey is excluded in decision-making processes and whose content is predominantly designed in accordance with EU interests; (2) as political evidence, the persistent safeguard clauses in the Negotiating Framework Document (NFD), the suspension of accession negotiations, and the disregard of Turkey's constructive role during the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis in the accession process; (3) as cultural evidence, the rhetoric of some EU elites characterizing the Union as a "Christian club" and the prejudices embedded in identity perceptions; (4) from a governance perspective, the lack of reform support offered to Turkey compared to other candidate countries; and (5) as institutional evidence, the insufficiency of financial aid and strategic commitment relative to that extended to the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) are critically addressed. As a result, despite its official recognition as a European state, Turkey has remained a country looking at the Union from the outside and oscillating between periods of momentum and stagnation.

Commenting on the EU's enlargement strategy in 2020, Lippert characterized Turkey's accession process as "almost a dead case" (Lippert, 2021, p. 286). While outright rejection of membership seems unlikely, the EU's stance indicates an unwillingness to fully embrace Turkey as a member. Thus, the question of Turkey's EU accession is likely to persist in a state of indefinite uncertainty, leaving Turkey acknowledged as European and eligible for membership, yet ultimately unaccepted. To overcome this impasse, it is recommended that the EU provide transparent and equitable negotiation processes, while Turkey focuses on democratic reforms and alignment with the EU *acquis*. Alternatively, models such as a "privileged partnership" could offer a viable framework for both parties.

It should be emphasized in conclusion that this study has sought to illuminate the discrepancy between the European Union's rhetoric and actions regarding Turkey's accession, highlighting the differential treatment Turkey has faced compared to other candidate countries. The question of why the EU has adopted such an ambivalent stance toward Turkey's membership is a complex and multifaceted issue, extending beyond the scope of this article. While it is tempting to attribute this ambivalence to cultural prejudices or historical perceptions of Turkey's identity, as occasionally reflected in the statements of senior EU officials since the late 1980s, such an interpretation risks oversimplification. The EU's official discourse has consistently avoided explicit references to Turkey's cultural or religious distinctiveness as a barrier to membership. Nonetheless, subtle undertones in informal statements or policy approaches may suggest the influence of such factors. A comprehensive exploration of these underlying dynamics would require further research, drawing on a broader range of sources and perspectives. This study, therefore, underscores the need for future scholarship to probe these complexities, while affirming that the EU's inconsistent engagement has been a primary impediment to Turkey's accession.

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