

Turkey may now be on the road to joining the EU, but it also should question whether membership is still in the country's interest.

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According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, 47 per cent of Turks view European Union (EU) membership as 'desirable'. Now, the EU is signalling to Turkey that it is ready to build a new bridge leading towards the country's accession. [Edel Hughes](#) assesses whether this new attempt is truly promising.



Last month's visit by European Union (EU) Commissioner for Enlargement Štefan Füle to Turkey and the subsequent launch of the '[Positive Agenda](#)' with Turkey is the latest in a series of signals suggesting the EU is becoming more amenable to Turkey's membership. Füle described the 'Positive Agenda' as "a bridge, but not above or around the accession negotiations. It is a bridge leading towards them".

The agenda, Füle stated, is "not just an isolated element in the relationship between Turkey and the EU. It is an opportunity to establish the framework to integrate a number of key aspects of our relationship and to approach them in positive spirit based on dialogue and openness." Its launch followed a statement by German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle on May 15th 2012 asserting that EU-Turkey relations and accession negotiations must be 're-dynamised'. Germany, notably along with France and Austria, has long expressed caution about the prospect of Turkey acceding to the Union with Wolfgang Schäuble, for example, having previously advocated a 'privileged partnership' with Turkey that would be short of full membership.

The EU enlargement process has traditionally proceeded on the assumption that expansion of the Union is beneficial for both applicants and existing members, thereby ensuring its popularity even when applicant countries have had to implement extensive changes in order to comply with the conditions of entry. In 2004, when ten new countries joined the Union, it was suggested that the enlargement was an act of West European 'charity' towards neighbours in the continent's East but that the EU was also acting in its own self-interests. The question of EU membership is one that has occupied the minds of successive Turkish administrations but Turkey is undoubtedly the EU's most contested candidate. Having first applied for associate membership of the then European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959, it was resolved that an agreement formalising relations with Turkey would be in the best interests of both Turkey and the European Community.

This sentiment of mutual interest has, however, largely been absent from the more recent debates surrounding Turkey's prospective membership and the discourse has been framed in such a way that there are few perceived benefits to the Union from having Turkey become a full member. Some notable milestones in Turkey's bid for membership include the signing of the Association Agreement in 1963 and the conclusion of a Customs Union in 1995, which allowed Turkey preferential access to the European single market and provided for substantial adjustment funds. Eventually, in October 2004 the European Commission recommended that Turkey had sufficiently fulfilled the criteria necessary to open accession negotiations.

Formal accession talks with Turkey were opened on October 3rd 2005 in Luxembourg, where a negotiating framework was presented, noting that "negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand." In November 2006 the European Commission recommended that eight of the thirty-five chapters in Turkey-EU negotiations for membership be suspended due to Turkey's failure to meet the requirements to normalise trade relations with the Republic of Cyprus and the question of Cyprus continues to effectively stagnate the process, with just one chapter of the [acquis](#) having been concluded.

This is despite Turkey's stated concerns that the Cyprus dispute is being used as a smokescreen for more

fundamental objections to its place within the Union. There are, of course, several questions that Turkey must continue to address, particularly in the area of fundamental human rights protections. Nonetheless, the concerns which raise debates regarding Turkish membership are not issues that are unique to Turkey; a point rarely noted. During Štefan Füle's recent visit to Turkey he raised the issues of freedom of expression and broadly framed anti-terror legislation, which continue to be problematic in Turkey. That said, it is likely that several current Member States would fail to comply with the criteria applied to applicant countries in the area of human rights and respect for and protection of minorities should they be judged by these standards.

The carrot-stick approach adopted by the EU has provided the catalyst for reform in a number of key areas. However, with little in the way of concomitant progress towards membership it is unsurprising that the prospect of accession is becoming less popular domestically. According to a Eurobarometer survey in 2010, 47% of Turks view EU membership as 'a good thing', a drop from 71% in 2004. In a study conducted by TEPAV, the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, in 2011 39.4% of those polled indicated they would vote no if a referendum on Turkey's accession to the EU was held. This negative sentiment undoubtedly reflects a growing impatience with the length of time invested in the EU process but perhaps also reveals an increasing contentment, even pride, with Turkey's place in the world.

Turkey has been seen as a resurgent force in the Middle East in recent years, not least due to the 'zero problems with neighbours' foreign policy adopted by the influential Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Fevzi Bilgin writing in the Washington Review of Turkish and Eurasian Affairs noted that when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called on Hosni Mubarak to listen to the demands of the street, the Egyptian protesters in Tahrir Square chanted his name over and over again. Indeed the revolutions in the Middle East prompted many commentators to point to Turkey as a model for democracy in the region.

The renewed interest in Turkish accession evidenced by Štefan Füle's visit to Turkey and the publication of the 'Positive Agenda' comes at a time when difficulties concerning the Euro lead commentators to question the very viability of the European project. In contrast, figures published in April of this year showed a rise in Turkey's GDP by 8.5% in 2011 after a 9% increase in 2010, making Turkey one of the world's fastest growing economies. Germany remains Turkey's main trading partner but as *The Economist* notes, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are as important as a block. The pertinent question may no longer be whether the EU can 'absorb' Turkey but rather whether it is in Turkey's interests to be absorbed.

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