

The EU should offer a 'gradual integration' membership to Turkey, as well as to the UK if it decides to downscale its role in the EU

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/11/26/the-eu-should-offer-a-gradual-integration-membership-to-turkey-as-well-as-to-the-uk-if-it-decides-to-downscale-its-role-in-the-eu/

26/11/2013

*Although accession negotiations between the European Union and Turkey officially began in 2005, little progress has been achieved. **Cemal Karakas** argues that it is time to consider a new form of membership for Turkey, which would allow gradual and partial participation in certain policy areas. He suggests that this model could be extended to other candidate countries, and indeed to countries such as the UK which might want less engagement with the EU.*



Eight years after the start of the accession negotiations between the European Union and Turkey, the situation reveals a grim picture: of the 35 accession chapters, only one has been successfully completed and 14 chapters are currently under negotiation. The remaining chapters have either been suspended by the European Commission or not even opened due to the Turkish refusal to recognise Cyprus.

Despite the tense relationship between the EU and Turkey, there is a consensus in favour of supporting Turkey in its EU reform programme. At the same time, the political and academic debate on accession alternatives and their implications continues, with the Commission describing the negotiations as an 'open-ended process'.

The negotiation framework: discrimination against Turkey

There are three new elements in the [negotiation framework](#) which can be subdivided according to their distinct phases. The first is the negotiation phase. The Commission has established certain benchmarks which Turkey must fulfil before an accession chapter can be opened or concluded. The Commission decides together with the EU member states as to whether these minimum demands have been met.

The second is the ratification phase. Although not provided for in the negotiation framework, the member states, such as France and Austria, reserve the right to hold a referendum on the accession of Turkey following the conclusion of negotiations. The third is the accession phase. If Turkey is to gain EU membership, the negotiation framework envisages for the first time in the history of EU enlargement the possibility of permanent safeguard clauses. The Commission could include these in areas such as free movement of persons, structural policies or agriculture.

These three new elements represent discrimination against Turkey when compared to previous accession candidates. But even if Ankara accedes to the EU, the application of the permanent safeguard clauses would result in a 'full membership minus'. In the case of Turkey's non-accession, point two of the negotiation framework stipulates that 'it must be ensured that Turkey is fully anchored in the European structures through the strongest



Catherine Ashton and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (Credit: EEAS, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

possible bond'. The offer of institutional ties below the level of full membership represents a unique case in the history of EU enlargement and 'differentiated integration'. This can be traced back to the pressure applied by countries critical of Turkey's accession.

The concepts of 'differentiated integration' and 'external flexibility'

The debate surrounding 'differentiated integration' concerns both the possibilities of 'external' and 'negative' flexibility of the EU with regard to accession candidates, as well as the 'internal' and 'positive' flexibility with regard to (new) member states.

The concept of 'differentiated integration' demonstrates an interesting and disparate picture. Several EU member states, for example, declined to introduce the euro as a common currency, do not make soldiers available to the EU under the Common Security and Defence Policy, or remain outside the Schengen Area; while non-EU members like Iceland, Norway or Switzerland do take part in these initiatives.*

With a view to the political practice of 'differentiated integration' and 'external' flexibility with European third countries, the EU set up a free trade association with the [EFTA](#) states as well as an accession association with Turkey. In the case of the EFTA states, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, this resulted in the founding of the European Economic Area in 1994. In the case of Turkey, a customs union was agreed in 1996. In both cases, European third countries are obliged to put the [acquis](#) in the integrated areas into national law, but neither the EFTA states nor Turkey have decision-making powers, and instead they only hold rights to information and consultation.

A promising accession alternative: the concept of gradual integration/membership

From the viewpoint of the EU, the leeway for accession alternatives ranges between 'full membership minus' and the customs union. Furthermore, accession alternatives only make sense if they take into account the negotiation framework, which through the permanent safeguard clauses address the most important concerns within the EU regarding Turkey's accession: the fear of unrestricted movement of persons (and workers), of transfer payments in the tens of billions of euros from the EU structural funds and agricultural spending, as well as of institutional overstretch, taking into account the [Copenhagen criteria](#) on the integration/absorption capacity of the EU.

From Turkey's point of view, any alternative to full membership must involve a political, legal and material improvement over the status quo. In addition, Turkey insists on not being treated as a special case, i.e. the accession alternative must apply not only to Turkey, but must also be transferable to other accession candidates.

In this context, the concept of gradual integration/membership could be an attractive accession alternative. This model is the first concrete operationalisation of the negotiation framework and the 'full membership minus' proposal and represents a new dynamic integration method to gain membership. It does not exclude the possibility of accession and has been met by the Turkish public with a more widespread acceptance than the '[privileged partnership](#)', which is favoured by several European Christian-Democrat and Conservative parties.

The model of gradual integration/membership was introduced to the debate in 2005. At its core, it implies the successive thematic and structural integration of Turkey into the EU in several steps, although the activation of the next integration level is conditional. This depends on both mutual willingness and the implementation of political and economic reforms. Possible areas for more integration would include trade relations, e.g. by upgrading the customs union with the free movement of goods, capital and services and by liberalising the rigid visa requirements for Turkish businesspeople. They could also involve the Common Foreign and Security Policy (e.g. granting Turkey a status beyond what Ankara had as a [WEU member](#)) and the field of Justice and Home Affairs (e.g. combating international crime, illegal immigration and international terrorism).

The model of gradual integration/membership suggests – in accordance with current EU law – the dispatching of (Turkish) 'observers' to the EU institutions. Furthermore, it proposes the establishment of an 'extended Council'. In this 'extended Council', Ankara would receive sectoral decision-making rights for the integrated areas, but without a

veto right. Should this idea be met with opposition within the EU, the suggestion instead would be to upgrade the institutions already in existence under the EU-Turkey Association Agreement, in which Turkey would receive decision-making rights rather than merely consultation rights.

This model offers comparative cost advantages over full membership, both for the EU and for Turkey. The acceptance and implementation of the *acquis* by Turkey would take place in a tailor-made fashion and only for the integrated areas – this was also the case in the customs union. On the other hand, financial transfer payments from EU regional and agricultural funds to Turkey would be limited, with the EU member states retaining full control over the free movement of Turkish citizens.

Gradual integration/membership could also be available to other EU accession candidates, or member states like the United Kingdom which seriously think about leaving the EU or downgrading their full membership status.

The future of EU-Turkey relations

The discussion surrounding accession alternatives has an ambivalent character, since it has grown primarily out of discrimination against Turkey, and it raises questions about the credibility of the EU. The religious-cultural motivated resentment in a number of EU member states and the possibility of popular referendums mean that the prospect of full membership is not impossible *per se*, but rather unrealistic.

In this context, the gradual integration/membership dynamic could be a promising accession alternative. It envisages a new temporal, spatial and thematic multi-level integration including sectoral decision rights – from it, a new form of gaining membership could develop. The concept of gradual integration/membership has been met by the Turkish public with widespread acceptance and is supported, for example, by former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard. Such a tailor-made membership may rescue the EU-Turkey relationship from its present stalemate and could also be an interesting integration option for other accession countries or countries like the United Kingdom.

In the long term, the depreciation of full membership could lead to a structural disintegration within the EU. On the other hand, the political reality shows that the use of ‘differentiated integration’ is expressly favoured by member states and candidates, and that this does not necessarily mean the end of European integration or of EU-Turkey relations.

For a longer discussion of this topic see the author’s recent article in the [Journal of Common Market Studies](#)

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/18jZB35>

About the author

Cemal Karakas – *Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)*

Cemal Karakas is Research Associate in the Governance and Societal Peace Department of the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt. His research has included work on Turkey, democratisation, political Islam and European integration. He previously worked in the European Parliament and was Research Associate in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Goethe University Frankfurt.



