

European Union agrees on terms for membership negotiations with Turkey

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On December 17, the leaders of the governments and states of the European Union agreed on terms for negotiations with Turkey to begin in October 2005 aimed at full EU membership for the country.

The final decision, which was violently disputed up to the last minute, will firmly anchor Turkey in the camp of American and European imperialism and transform the country into a bridgehead for economic and military control in the Middle East, the Caucasus and central Asia. To this extent, the interests of American and European governments coincide. But at the same time, under the surface, an embittered conflict is brewing over the future role of Turkey as a bastion for the control of oil, gas and water in the region—i.e., whether it is to strengthen American influence at the expense of Europe or Europe at the expense of the US.

The proponents of Turkish admittance to the EU made no secret of the economic and strategic goals at stake. Last Wednesday, the French President Jacques Chirac explained on TF1 news that it is “in our interest that Turkey turns to Europe and not Asia.” Otherwise, the danger arises “of the risk of instability and uncertainty at our borders.”

These economic and strategic goals are shared by the opponents of full EU membership for Turkey. For a number of different reasons, however, they argue that Turkish membership would weaken the European Union.

The historian Heinrich August Winkler, for example, accused the German Minister of Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer of confusing “size and strength” when the latter declared, “Europe still does not have the correct order of magnitude, it must assimilate Turkey, in order to keep pace in terms of geographical expansion with America, Russia, China and India.” Winkler responded, “If Europe wants to play a role in the world, then it must be able to speak with one voice. That presumes a certain degree of unity and common-mindedness. A Europe which extends to the Euphrates could no longer fall back on such resources.”

German conservative opponents of Turkish entry, such as Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) and Edmund Stoiber (Christian Social Union—CSU), argue in similar manner, and assuming the mantle of defenders of “Christian Western civilisation” have gone so far as to employ openly chauvinistic tones in their polemic. In France, 90 delegates from the government UMP (Union pour un mouvement populaire—Union for a Popular Movement)—approximately a quarter of the parliamentary group—backed the delegate Philippe Pémézec, who rejects Turkish membership in the name of the “Jewish-Christian legacy.”

The perspective of entry by Turkey into the European Union was originally a product of the Cold War. At the beginning of the 1950s, Turkey sided with the US during the Korea War and became a member of the NATO alliance as an anticommunist bulwark for the West situated on the southwest periphery of the Soviet Union. In 1963, only three years after a military putsch, the country was awarded associated membership in the EEC (European Economic Community—forerunner of the EU), with the vague prospect of a later membership that would serve to facilitate Turkey’s political integration into the Western camp.

At the same time, the Turkish military was systematically provided with

armaments by the US and Western Europe. Western powers supported or tacitly approved of the brutal suppression of the left-wing workers and student movement and later the Kurdish nationalist movement carried out by the Turkish army, police, secret service and fascist death squads. They also adopted a similar stance to the terror that the military regime exercised following putsches in 1971 and 1980, and the war of extermination and expulsion carried out by the army and security forces in the first half of the 1990s in the Kurdish-occupied region in the southeast of Turkey.

It was only when Ankara pushed for the redemption of the promise for full membership, as was the case in 1987, that Brussels and other European capitals remembered and suddenly raised the issue of “violations of human rights” in Turkey. The situation changed in 1999 when the European Council, meeting in Helsinki, determined that “Turkey is a country willing to join the Union, on the basis of the same criteria which apply to other member countries.”

In 2002, the European Union finally declared that Turkey could be regarded practically as a candidate for membership and announced negotiations for accession to begin December 2004 if a number of political criteria were fulfilled.

The US in particular has pushed intensively since 1991 for Turkish membership in the European Union, after the Turkish president Turgut Özal (since deceased) supported the US in its first war against Iraq—despite considerable domestic resistance. Turkey at that time proved its geostrategic significance for imperialism following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the following years, a customs union with the European Union was prepared and implemented in 1996. In the same year, Turkey concluded a military pact with Israel. In addition, the Clinton administration advanced the Baku Ceyan project, facilitating the transport of oil from the Caspian Sea by a pipeline stretching from Azerbaijan via Georgia and eastern Turkey to the Turkish Mediterranean coast—bypassing Russia, Iran and the Arab countries. It is to go into operation in 2005, practically at the same time as the beginning of the negotiations for accession.

Despite intensive lobbying by the American government throughout the 1990s, the European Union refrained from making Turkey any serious promise regarding full membership. The change of tack on the part of the European Union took place in 1999, in reaction to the increasingly aggressive international policies of American imperialism. Following air raids against targets in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Sudan, and the Kosovo War in 1999, US President Bush then proceeded to conquer and occupy Afghanistan and Iraq, and set up military bases throughout central Asia.

In response, the most powerful and dominant European powers, France and Germany, changed their policy. In Germany, a new SPD (German Social Democratic Party)-Green Party coalition, led by Gerhard Schröder, took power in September 1998, and the following year began to agitate for full European Union membership for Turkey. As was pointed out by Germany’s conservative opposition in a debate in the Bundestag in

October, the German government's advances on the Turkish issue were initially hesitant and sceptical, but the tone changed after the Iraq war.

When asked in an interview what would happen in the case of an EU refusal to accession negotiations for Turkey, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer explained: "It would feel insecure between the options of a Western orientation, its Islamic tradition and would in addition be isolated in a difficult environment. Reforms would stagnate. The situation for people in Turkey would not improve, and we would have lost the unique chance of firmly anchoring this biggest of all Muslim countries, Turkey, in Europe at the hub between Europe and the Middle East and to unite democracy and Islam in an open and strong civil society on the basis of Islamic tradition."

Fischer's stress on the model effect of Turkey for the unification of democracy and Islam is not only directed against anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism, as the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on December 15 pointed out: "It was also no coincidence that the German position solidified itself parallel to the dispute over Iraq. In Berlin one regards a modernisation of Turkey on the basis of a European perspective as an alternative to the military interventionism of the US."

The *taz* newspaper, which is close to the Green movement, noted that the "no" vote, with which the Turkish parliament had prevented the stationing of American troops on Turkish soil in the spring of 2003 for intervention against Iraq, was greeted with "admiration" by all those Arab countries whose dictatorial regimes had universally succumbed to the US. In any event, for the first time ever, a Turk was elected this year to the post of chairman of the "Organisation of the Islamic Countries."

Wulf Schönbohm, who heads the foreign office of the Konrad Adenauer Institute (which has close links to Germany's conservative CDU) in the Turkish capital Ankara, is not restricted to the diplomatic and political niceties that characterise the statements of Fischer. Schönbohm declared: "Turkey has a positive economic perspective. In my opinion Turkey would be an enrichment for the European Union and turn it into a global player and equal partner to the US in world politics."

In its recommendation, the geostrategic core of the argument put forward by the European Union Commission is formulated as follows: "Due to the effects of factors such as total population, the size of the country, its geographical situation and its economic, security and military potential, Turkish membership would differ from earlier extensions (of the EU). Due to these factors Turkey is in a position to make a contribution to regional and international stability.... Much will depend on how the European Union undertakes in the medium-term the task of becoming a full participant with regard to foreign policy in regions such as the Middle East and the Caucasus, which are traditionally characterised by instability and tension."

The Commission also highlighted the significance of Turkey for the control of strategic raw materials: "The entry of Turkey will contribute to the security of energy supply channels for Europe. It would probably require the further development of EU policies regarding the cultivation of water resources and its connected infrastructure."

Clearer still was a report in September by the Independent Commission on Turkey. This commission consists of scores of former, high-ranking European politicians and is supported by the Soros Foundation and the British Council. Its report states: "Turkey, with its pivotal position at the heart of the Eurasian region and as a Western pillar of the wider Middle East, can be of indisputable benefit to European action in this area. For the emerging European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), Turkey's considerable military capabilities and the country's potential as a forward base would be important and much-needed assets...."

"As one of the strongest NATO partners, with a clear orientation toward ESDP, Turkey would be of great value for the European defence system. Meanwhile, with regard to new threats to security and stability like international terrorism, organised crime, trade in human beings and illegal

migration, Turkey's EU membership would result in closer and mutually beneficial cooperation in Justice and Home Affairs."

In other words: the highly armed Turkish army, whose "strength" the Kurds have so painfully felt over the last decades, is now seen, in connection with Turkey's geographic location, as its biggest advantage.

The former EU expansion commissioner, Günter Verheugen, also noted in an essay that appeared in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* on October 7 that "with the entry of Turkey the EU will become an international political player."

The EU accounts for around 50 percent of Turkey's imports and exports and two thirds of its foreign direct investment. Half of all firms with foreign capital operating in the country stem from Europe.

In particular, German industry is vehemently supporting Turkey's EU membership bid, as Michael Rogowski, head of the Federation of German Industry (BDI), explained: "Germany is far and away the most important economic partner. Further potential, like the opening up of energy sources and the development of infrastructure, promises advantages for both sides. Turkey will become more and more an important strategic partner for the access to new markets and sources of raw materials in the Middle East and Central Asia. Therefore, it is in the interests of both German and Turkish companies to create, if possible in the near term, a common economic environment between the EU and Turkey in which the internal market can be fully developed."

The report cited above by the Independent Commission on Turkey continues: "The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline following the emergence of the Caspian basin as one of the world's largest sources of oil and natural gas highlights Turkey's role as a key transit country for energy supplies. Moreover, Turkey's geopolitical position and close links with tens of millions of Turkic people in neighbouring countries could help secure European access to the enormous wealth of resources in Central Asia and regions of Siberia."

The opponents of Turkish EU membership point out the enormous costs involved, through EU financial assistance to Turkey in the form of agriculture and regional balancing programmes, amounting to billions of euros.

In Turkey, the proportion of agricultural workers to the entire labour force is 33 percent, lying between Poland (20 percent) and Romania (40 percent). However, the size of Turkey's population, close to 70 million, is comparable to that of France or Germany. Half of the country's agricultural workers are unpaid family members; a quarter are illiterate or have had no schooling. At 4 percent of GDP, subsidies to the agricultural sector are double the average of those in OECD countries. And while western Turkey is a modern industrial region, the east of the country is marked by bitter poverty and a backward level of industrial development. Those living in and around Istanbul have an average income equal to 41 percent of those in the 15 richest EU countries; in eastern Anatolia, the figure is 7 percent.

In contrast to earlier phases of expansion, the EU will not be handing out huge amounts of money to alleviate some of the worst social problems in Turkey. This has been made clear for some time by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. He declared: "In contrast to the previous expansion of the EU, Turkey is, with its population size, its state of economic development, its Islamic culture, a special case. Not only must Turkey be prepared for entry into the European Union, the European Union must also be prepared for the admission of Turkey. Net [financial] contributors must not be overtaxed and financial regulations must not simply be continued."

Correspondingly, the entry of Turkey is not planned until 2014 at the earliest, after the new finance plan for an expanded EU, to include Romania and Bulgaria, has been determined. A long transition period for financial assistance is then planned, during which Turkey will receive less than previous EU provisions, if anything.

Ex-EU Commissioner Verheugen also indicated in his essay that Turkey can act as a lever against previous forms of financial assistance: “The road of Turkey to the EU will be long and difficult. If it succeeds, Europe will emerge politically stronger and advance economically. Europe will then also have to question its own ability to reform itself, especially with regard to agricultural and structural policies, the source of so many costs and budget problems.”

Like Turkey’s advocates, critics of its entry into the EU come from various political groupings.

Ralf Fücks, who sits on the board of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which is affiliated to the German Greens, wrote on October 10 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Sonntagszeitung* newspaper: “The irony of history: the integration of Turkey, which is expected to increase Europe’s weight against the US, will accelerate the Americanisation of the EU: a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community, with a dynamic internal market and large regional, social and cultural discrepancies. However, in contrast to the US, the EU is still not a political federation which, through common narratives, experiences and institutions, is capable of producing a sense of togetherness.”

The CDU foreign affairs representative, Wolfgang Schäuble, continuously declares that the borders of the EU should not be extended too far. He characterises Turkish membership as a “catastrophic mistake” and accuses Schröder of giving in to “pressure from Washington.”

Conservative opponents, especially in Germany and France, promote the concept of the “Christian occident.” They argue that Turkey does not fit into Europe because it does not share “European values and culture” that have arisen from the “Christian-Jewish” tradition, and represents therefore a danger to a “common identity.” These arguments serve above all domestic political interests. With society being torn apart by their neo-liberal policies, these forces are looking for a new ideological cement, and following the lead of Bush in the US, have found it in the reactionary arsenal of religion and chauvinism.

The WSWS rejects the EU and its institutions. They are the project of the most powerful sections of capital and their imperialist governments. They will bring just as little democracy and prosperity to the working population of Turkey as they have to workers and peasants in Poland, Romania and other countries. Prosperity and democracy will only come about through the abolition of the EU through a common struggle of the international working class and the building of the United Socialist States of Europe, to which Turkey must belong.



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