Turkey’s Accession to the EU: A Mutually Advantageous Future

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Abstract: For the past several decades, the prospect of Turkey’s accession to the European Union has been met with no shortage of obstacles. Turkey had formally applied for candidacy in 1987, but was not granted candidacy status approval by the European Commission until 1999. Furthermore, it has been indicated that the process of Turkey’s accession to the EU will continue until at least 2014. Despite what some describe as both a “long…and torturous” road still ahead, both the Turkey and the EU have remained on the path towards a Turkish EU membership. What are the driving forces behind the accession and what are the future challenges to be faced? Will the overall benefits overcome the acquired and perceived costs? The following paper takes a look at these questions and provides a cost-benefit analysis of Turkey’s accession to the EU from both the perspective of Turkey and the EU member states. It argues that while Turkey and the EU do in fact face many challenges ahead, there are also important advantages that can be expected for both sides from Turkey’s accession. This paper concludes that these advantages constitute the driving forces toward a mutually beneficial Turkish EU membership.

The European Union (EU) has, since its inception, taken the lead role towards greater European integration, driven largely by a desire to preserve peace in the region.¹ Over time, in order to effectively

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respond to the changing security environment, the EU undertook a process of enlargement. As such, the institution extended its membership from the original six founding members since the establishment of its predecessor, the European Coal and Steel Community on May 9, 1950, to 27 members as of mid-2009.

The relationship between enlargement and security has become increasingly relevant over the past several decades. For instance, membership was extended to Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom in 1973, and subsequently to Greece in 1981 and to Spain and Portugal in 1986. These sets of enlargements reflected the security environment of the ‘iron curtain’ divide during the Cold War, when Western Europe was pitted against the Soviet Socialist Republics and the Soviet satellite states of the Eastern Bloc.²

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent political reforms undergone by the post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe had dramatically changed the security environment for Europe in the post-Cold War era. New security issues began to emerge, such as the regional instability caused by the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.³ In response, the EU further expanded its membership to include states that were strategically located within the vicinity of these unstable regions as a means of widening Europe’s security community and securing Europe’s periphery.⁴ By 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden obtained their membership in the EU, and subsequently by 2002, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia joined the institution as well.⁵

However, the potential integration of some candidate countries into the EU can be more challenging than it is for others. Turkey, for instance, had formally applied for EU membership in 1987, but was rejected by the European Commission until 1999, when it was finally

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² Ibid., 109.
³ Ibid., 108.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
granted candidate status approval. Subsequently, it was not until October of 2005 that negotiations on the issue of approving Turkey’s accession into the EU formally began.⁶

Despite these developments, the European Commission has indicated that the negotiation process for Turkey’s ascension to the EU will be an extensive one, expected to continue until at least 2014. As stated by the EU enlargement commissioner, Olli Rehn, “Turkey will not become a member of the union today or tomorrow…It will be a long, difficult, and tortuous journey.”⁷

There are numerous challenges posed by a Turkish membership in the EU. To begin, the EU faces the cultural and religious challenge of integrating Turkey’s Islamic and largely perceived ‘non-European’ society into an institution often characterised as a ‘Christian club’ and a group of countries that share a common ‘European’ identity.⁸ The EU must also address the challenge of ensuring that a settlement will be reached between Turkey and Greece in their ongoing dispute over Cyprus prior to extending membership to Turkey.⁹ Furthermore, Turkey faces strong opposition from the majority of EU member states in terms of its potential membership and it continues to struggle to complete the prerequisites of gaining EU membership, which includes satisfying pre-conditions such as the Copenhagen criteria.¹⁰

The purpose of this paper is to explore the driving forces behind and the challenges of Turkey’s accession to the EU. In addition, it will also provide a cost-benefit analysis of this development for both sides. In light of the aforementioned challenges, it has become widely debated whether the prospect of extending EU membership to Turkey is still in the interest of either Turkey or the institution itself.

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⁷ Ibid., 234.

⁸ Ibid., 236.

⁹ Webber, Inclusion, Exclusion and the Governance of European Security, 199.

However, this paper argues that the overall benefits of Turkey's accession to the EU outweigh the current challenges and, as a result, a Turkish EU membership would be mutually beneficial for both sides.

**Cost-Benefit Analysis for the European Union**

*Turkey’s Religious and Cultural Challenge to the EU’s ‘European’ Identity*

As a predominately Muslim-populated country, Turkey’s accession into the EU directly raises two of the EU’s major concerns, one of which is the threat to its ‘European’ identity and the other is the politics of religion within the institution itself.

First, the fear that Turkey is not only ‘non-European,’ but that it further threatens the EU’s ‘European’ identity is a viewpoint that is held by both the public as well as the political elites of some EU member states. For instance, in 2002, former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing declared that Turkey was “not a European country,” and that if it were to gain membership of the EU, the result would ultimately be the “end of Europe.”

Similarly, former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt has also made statements indicating that Turkey should not be integrated into the EU because of its ‘unsuitable civilization’ and that its membership may set a precedent for extending EU membership to other Muslim countries. Schmidt’s greatest concern was that if EU enlargements were to continue to proceed as it had in the past, then the EU, as one of the most successful examples of regional integration, would eventually become little more than simply a free trade community.

These concerns were reflected in European society in the form of political decision making and political expression by the public. For instance, in 2004, an anti-headscarf law was passed in France, a

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11 Ibid., 406.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.
country that has the largest population of Muslims in Western Europe. Additionally, in 2006, several European newspapers published cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed, which sparked outrage amongst the Muslim population worldwide. Given these incidents of culture-clash within the EU at present, it is possible that the inclusion of a largely Muslim state may only further aggravate such tensions present within the institution.

What is also peculiar about Turkey is that while it has based its political and economic systems after Western models, it has pursued a modern model of Muslim society. In other words, while modernity has been generally associated with secularization in Europe, the opposite is being observed in Turkey. The more ‘modern’ Turkey becomes, or the more Turkey adopts the modern democratic values and practices of the West, the more publicly Muslim it becomes, and consequently, Turkish society grows less secular. Ultimately, this contradicts the ‘Christian’ and ‘secular’ characterizations of the ‘European’ identity.

Second, there is also a complicated relationship between Islam and the politics of religion within Europe that largely embodies the issue of immigration in the region. With the exception of the United Kingdom, the immigrant population in most European countries has been largely dominated by Muslims. Immigration and Islam have therefore become virtually synonymous in much of Europe. This results in a sense of ‘otherness’ towards Muslim immigrants in the region, which further exacerbates the feeling that Islam is incompatible with the ‘European’ identity of the EU.

There are also fears from the EU member states that there would be large waves of Muslim immigration from Turkey once it

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14 Ibid., 407.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 242-3.
19 Ibid.
has obtained EU membership.\textsuperscript{20} In particular, the events following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent global war on terror have resulted in a heightened sense of panic, which can be described as ‘Islamophobia’ in Europe.\textsuperscript{21}

However, while Turkey’s culture and religion does pose a challenge to the EU’s internal identity and politics, it should not be overstated as there are also some ways in which the concern of Turkey’s ‘non-European’ incompatibility can be addressed. For instance, Turkey has in many ways already integrated itself into both Europe and other European institutions. It joined the Council of Europe in 1949, and subsequently became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1951. Turkey has also historically oriented its foreign policy to reflect that of the Western world, committing great efforts towards adopting a ‘European’ way of life in its government and society.\textsuperscript{22}

It is important to note that the notion of a ‘European’ identity is particularly challenging to qualify or define, given that it has been associated with a number of varying characteristics such as being a Protestant, a Catholic, Orthodox, and English-speaking.\textsuperscript{23} Interestingly, the EU has also not yet provided an official definition of what qualifies as being ‘European,’ largely because it may raise the sensitive issue of identifying a racial component of the ‘European’ identity.\textsuperscript{24} In addition, while Islam has become integrated into personal life in Turkey, it has certainly not been given a place in the public life.\textsuperscript{25} As a whole, these factors undermine and weaken the argument that Turkey’s society is unsuitable for integration because it is ‘non-European.’

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Webber, \textit{Inclusion, Exclusion and the Governance of European Security}, 180.


Ultimately, the EU that must decide what should comprise its identity. On the one hand, there are those who view it as a ‘Christian club,’ but on the other hand there are those who view it as institution that represents modernisation. Holding to the latter viewpoint, Turkey has, since the existence of the Ottoman Empire, associated modernization with Westernisation.\(^{26}\) As such, so long as the EU chooses to identify itself as an institution that reflects modernity, it should not perceive that extending membership to a country where the dominant religion of its population is Islam constitutes as a threat to its identity.\(^ {27}\)

**Unresolved: Greco-Turkish Dispute over Cyprus**

One of the greatest obstacles to Turkey’s accession to the EU has been its hostile bilateral relationship with Greece, which has been a member of the EU since 1981. Tensions between the two countries have historically originated from territorial maritime and airspace claims over the Aegean Sea, a dispute that has even come close to military confrontation on two occasions, once in 1987 and again in 1996.\(^ {28}\) However, since 1999, Greco-Turkish relations have improved dramatically upon Turkey’s understanding that its prospect of entering the EU is tied to its commitment to develop good relations with Greece and resolve any remaining bilateral disputes. \(^ {29}\) Despite this cooling of hostilities, Turkey has largely remained unwavering over the issue of Cyprus, and this dispute between the two countries continues to remain unresolved. As a result, it has become one of the greatest stumbling blocks against Turkey’s accession to the EU.\(^ {30}\)

The Cyprus issue revolves around a local dispute between the majority Greek-speaking population and the Turkish-speaking

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\(^ {26}\) Ibid., 237.

\(^ {27}\) Ibid.


\(^ {29}\) Ibid.

\(^ {30}\) Ibid.
minority after the country’s independence in 1960. On the basis of defending the discriminatory treatment of Turkish Cypriots, Turkey sent its military forces into northern Cyprus, dividing the island into two administrative zones. Two-thirds of the island in the south consequently came under the authority of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). Today, with the exception of Turkey, the RoC is universally recognized. Alternatively, the remaining one-third of the island in the north is being governed by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which is currently recognised only by Turkey.

With Greece and Cyprus as current members of the EU, and Turkey as a candidate member, the EU finds itself in a complicated situation where it can no longer remain neutral between any of these allies. Instead, the EU must ensure that the Cyprus issue is resolved prior to granting Turkey its membership.

Although this issue has raised concerns for the EU, it should be noted that there have been improvements towards resolving this situation. For instance, due to Turkey’s acknowledgement that its entry into the EU is directly linked to reaching an agreement with Greece over the Cyprus issue, it has become more actively involved in international cooperation towards an effective and sustainable resolution to this issue. For instance, Turkey participated in developing the Annan Plan, a proposal put forth by the United Nations with the aim of reunifying Cyprus as a bizonal federation. The negotiation process, which also involved the United Kingdom, Greece, and the EU, was a significant step towards the resolution of this issue.

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31 Ibid., 199-201.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Webber, Inclusion Exclusion and the Governance of European Security, 200.
It is also important to note that Greece and Turkey are members of NATO, both having gained entry in 1952. Similar to the EU, NATO is a security community based on peaceful relations amongst its members. As a result, NATO also considers the Greco-Turkish dispute over Cyprus an unsettling threat to its institutional basis and the stability of the Eastern Mediterranean, which further pressures Turkey towards finding a resolution.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{Turkey as a Geopolitical Strategic Partner}

One of the major driving forces of Turkey's EU membership is the geopolitical strategic advantages that Turkey would bring to the European security architecture. In fact, Turkey's relationship with the West has historically been based on geopolitical interests. Since the Cold War, this strategic relationship has continued to grow.\textsuperscript{38}

For instance, Turkey has played a significant role in conflict resolution by partaking in the UN peacekeeping missions in the Balkans and making contributions towards resolving the First Gulf War. In addition, it has also contributed a leadership role in regional initiatives taking place in the Black Sea, the Caspian Basin, as well as Central Asia.\textsuperscript{39}

These initiatives have allowed Turkey to become an important strategic partner to the West. Furthermore, Turkey has also been effective in acting as a barrier to threats from the Middle East that target regional and international security.\textsuperscript{40} Unlike the West, Turkey maintains good neighbourly relations with the Middle East. As such, while Turkey delivers similar messages to the Middle East as their Western allies, it is perceived as being less hostile.\textsuperscript{41} Much to the interest of Europe, Turkey is also symbolically significant in the Islamic World in that it represents a successful model that combines

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 179-80.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 177.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 179-80.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\end{itemize}

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both secular and democratic governance in a predominately Muslim society.\textsuperscript{42}

Europe’s security community is increasingly linked to that of NATO.\textsuperscript{43} As such, an analysis of NATO’s relationship with Turkey is also important in speculating the importance of Turkey’s EU membership to Europe’s security community. In the events following September 11, 2001, Turkey supported the United States-led campaign in Afghanistan against the Taliban regime, making strategic contributions with its political, economic, and intelligence ties to regions spanning from the Middle East to Central Asia.\textsuperscript{44} In addition, Turkey has been an important strategic asset to NATO’s security commitments because it has developed a large and efficient army.\textsuperscript{45}

Turkey’s membership in NATO has furthermore enabled the country to develop important strategic advantages. For instance, as a member of NATO, Turkey has gained significant expertise in activities such as peacekeeping, counter-proliferation, as well as counterterrorism.\textsuperscript{46} In brief, Turkey’s importance to security communities in the West is reflected in the following statement made by former NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson:

[Turkey, with] strong historical, cultural and economic links to Central Asia and the Middle East...is a vital bridge to project security in these areas. As a secular and democratic country, it is a unique model for the Muslim World. And as a European country integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures all along, it is uniquely placed to play a mentor’s role for those countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus and others who want to draw closer to us.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{42} Redmond, “Turkey and the European Union,” 313.

\textsuperscript{43} Webber, \textit{Inclusion Exclusion and the Governance of European Security}, 181-2.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 182.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 183.
Another way to analyse the importance of Turkey's strategic importance to the EU is to recall the events that had occurred during the temporary deterioration of EU-Turkish relations in the late 1990s. This incident, which took place after the union’s refusal to grant candidate status to Turkey in 1997, can be used to illustrate the extent of Turkey’s significance to EU’s security community.

As a result of the violence and human rights violations that had erupted in the southeast of Turkey at the end of the Cold War, the European Council did not include Turkey amongst the list of candidate countries for enlargement in 1997. In response to the EU’s actions, Turkey subsequently broke off all political dialogue with the EU.\(^48\)

Additionally, Turkey refused to recognise the EU as a third-party mediator in the Cyprus issue, which further exacerbated tensions with Greece.\(^49\) As a member of NATO, Turkey also began to consistently block the EU’s agenda in the organization, such as its proposal of the European Security and Defence Identity.\(^50\) Additionally, during this time, Turkey halted its purchase of military hardware from all EU member states.\(^51\) These incidences suggest that Turkey’s strategic importance to the EU should not be underestimated.

**Cost-Benefit Analysis for Turkey:**

*Resistance from within the EU and the Enduring Process of Negotiations*

Turkey has had a long and unwavering desire to enter the EU, as it considers accession to be a significant step towards Turkey's self-definition as a ‘European’ state. Indeed, Turkey continues to consider its EU membership to be one of the most important aspirations in


\(^{49}\) Hurd, “Negotiating Europe,” 403.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 403-4.
the country’s history today. As stated by Turkey’s Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, “we will continue on our path. For us the important thing is that negotiation process with Europe remains on track.”

However, despite this ambition, Turkey faces two great challenges against its accession to the EU: the widespread opposition by member states of the EU and the negotiation process towards the integration of Turkish society into the institution. First, out of all EU member states, only Britain has been consistently in favour of a Turkish EU membership, largely due to security considerations such as threats of terrorism, regional conflicts, and weapons of mass destruction from rogue states. As discussed earlier, given Turkey’s geostrategic position, the country is considered an asset in terms of combating these concerns.

Germany, which is at present home to the largest community of Turkish immigrants compared with the other member states of the EU, had historically supported Turkey’s accession to the institution. However, new leadership has since reversed this position and opted instead to be representative to the views expressed by the German public, which is relatively unsupportive of Turkey’s potential accession to the EU. In this, Germany has joined the ranks of other EU states, such as France and Austria, where public support for Turkish membership has typically remained low. Indeed, in a report released in 2005, opinion polling conducted through the Eurobarometer found that public support for Turkey’s accession to

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56 Ibid.

the EU was over 50 percent in only three member states: Slovenia (54 percent), Hungary (51 percent), and Poland (54 percent).58 Within the past few years, the level of European resistance has only seemed to stiffen. For instance, a Financial Times/Harris poll conducted in 2007 revealed that only 16 percent of French voters were in support of a Turkish EU membership.59

In contrast, Greece, which was initially strongly opposed to Turkey’s EU membership due to hostile bilateral relations and various territorial disputes, has now reversed this position.60 Today, it considers Turkey’s ambition to obtain an EU membership as an opportunity for both countries to make significant efforts towards resolving their longstanding disputes and ultimately improving their overall relationship.61

Several of the smaller EU member states, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic countries, remain divided on this issue. Poland, Romania, Italy, Spain and Portugal are generally supportive on the basis that they believe Turkey’s EU membership can help balance the power politics within the EU between the member states in the Mediterranean and those of northern Europe.62 However, these member states are also concerned with what a Turkish EU membership may entail, largely as a result of the country’s human rights standards, the current state of its economy, and the cultural differences between Turkey and the EU member states.63 In summary, after taking into account the general pulse of European opinion, it appears that Turkey does not have particularly strong support within the EU for its membership bid.


60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.


For candidate states, the process leading up to their integration into the EU is a very drawn-out experience, and it has certainly been so for Turkey. The country has had to meet a number of conditions under the ‘Copenhagen criteria,’ which was established in 1993 at the Copenhagen European Council. In brief, there are three general categories under the Copenhagen criteria that Turkey must satisfy. The first is on the political front, requiring Turkey to develop a stable democracy that incorporates Western democratic values and practices such as the rule of law, and respect for human, cultural and minority rights. The second is on the economic front, requiring Turkey to achieve an efficient economy that is able to compete with the market forces within the EU. The third requires Turkey to accept and adopt the *acquis communautaire*, which are the common laws, standards, and policies of the EU.

It is also important to note that the EU functions as an intergovernmental and supranational institution. In other words, members of the EU are required to give up some of their sovereignty and direct it to the EU. Turkey must therefore be certain that the benefits of joining the EU outweigh the costs, especially when Turkey has found itself in an extensive wait for membership approval. In spite of this, public opposition in Turkey for accession to the EU has halted since 2004 and stabilized at around 49 percent, according to a Eurobarometer report released in 2008. More importantly, this report also found that 82 percent of the Turkish public in 2007 perceived that Turkey would benefit from its accession into the EU.

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64 Redmond, "Turkey and the European Union," 310.
65 Hurd, "Negotiating Europe," 404.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Carkoglu et al., *Turkey and the European Union*, 10-1.
Meeting the ‘Copenhagen criteria’ and Transforming Turkey’s Society

While “long, difficult, and tortuous,” Turkey’s journey to gain EU membership has also driven Turkey to become increasingly democratic, economically stable, and modernized. The Copenhagen criteria forced Turkey to undergo a painful process of implementing various political and economic reforms. However, this process has also resulted in many positive developments in Turkey.

In general, the EU has put great emphasis on the candidate countries to meet sufficient human rights and democratization standards, especially after the 1980s and 1990s. As such, the EU has generally been seen to have played a positive role in consolidating the democracies in member states such as Spain, Greece and Portugal.71 Furthermore, these positive signs of stable democracies have subsequently helped attract a significant amount of foreign direct investments, which in turn contributes to developing stable economies and strong economic growth, as the two are mutually reinforcing. Upon their entry into the EU, member states such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic are also generally seen to have undergone this process.72

While Turkey has historically been committed to westernization, its politics and laws have at times fallen short of the values and practices of a Western liberal democracy. In particular, under Turkey’s former leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey underwent reforms on the basis of the state doctrine of ‘Kemalism.’73 This policy was developed by Kemal as a means of transforming Turkey into a more modern, democratic and secular state. By 1936, thirteen years after becoming an independent republic, Turkey had successfully implemented a multi-party political system. In the subsequent year, it introduced a market-oriented development plan, which was a departure from the state-led economic development of

71 Carkoglu et al., Turkey and the European Union, 10-1

72 Ibid.

the 1930s.\footnote{Ibid.} Yet in spite of this, some of these early reforms had contradicted the EU’s notions of democratic practices.\footnote{Schimmelfenning et al., \textit{International Socialization in Europe}, 97.} One example includes the discrimination of minorities, of which includes the Kurdish population.\footnote{Ibid.} For instance, under Kemalism, ethnic cultures were set to be eliminated as minorities were forced to become homogenized and assimilated, by force if necessary, into the Turkish culture.\footnote{Ibid., 98.}

In an effort to meet the preconditions for joining the EU, as outlined by the Copenhagen criteria, Turkey has undergone several additional significant reforms. The country has strived to tackle the myriad of challenges facing its economy, such as corruption and fiscal instability, through implementing effective regulatory policies that should, in turn, facilitate sustained economic growth.\footnote{Carkoglu et al., \textit{Turkey and the European Union}, 13.} Major developments have also been achieved on the political front. These include the abolition of the death penalty; the elimination of laws that had previously placed restrictions on the freedom of speech and association; the creation of broadcasting and education in minority languages; and the extension of additional cultural rights to various minority groups.\footnote{Ibid., 14.}

Potential EU membership has generally been seen to play a very strong driving force for democratic and economic change. Since Turkey was approved for candidate status in 1999, it has undergone significant transformations towards improving human rights, minority rights, judicial procedure, and economic policies. Certainly, such changes have been for the better.\footnote{Carkoglu et al., \textit{Turkey and the European Union}, 10-2.}
Conclusions

This paper asserts that while negotiations of Turkey’s accession to the EU continue, the challenges facing a Turkish EU membership remain unresolved. Although these challenges are crucial and have been a burden to the EU as well as Turkey, the driving forces pushing both sides towards establishing a Turkish EU membership have provided great impetus towards overcoming the present stumbling blocks.

For the EU, having a prosperous and democratic Turkey as part of its security architecture would significantly contribute to its desire to maintain a peaceful and stable Europe. For Turkey, gaining an EU membership would allow Turkey to ultimately achieve its self-definition as a ‘European’ state and secure its place in the world today with Europe as one of its closest allies.81

The future prospect of Turkey’s accession to the EU may be perceived to be fraught with a number of challenges, which make the country one of the most unique candidate cases. However, what is clear are the mutual advantages that both Turkey and the EU expect to gain from this development, and this is very evidently reflected from the driving forces that have encouraged both sides to continue to pursue a Turkish EU membership.

Bibliography


81 Schimmelfenning et al., International Socialization in Europe, 100.


