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The EU should not offer Turkey full membership

Recommendation to the
Governments of the Member
States of the European Union

by André Nilsen

The European Commission on October 6 published a long-awaited report on Turkey's eligibility to join the European Union. As widely expected, the Commission made an overall positive recommendation in favour of starting accession negotiations with Turkey, albeit with a number of qualifications and conditions attached.

The next step is the European Council meeting in December, where the 25 heads of government of the member states are going to decide whether to follow the advice of the Commission. If they have any sense of responsibility for the European common good, they will reject the Commission's support for Turkish membership and rather offer our neighbour in the southeast a special partnership.

MAIN POINTS

The European Council should offer Turkey a special partnership instead of full membership. Much of the debate has been misguided. There are strong economic, security, and political arguments against Turkish entry. The EU should rather consolidate after the last enlargement and the new constitution.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André Nilsen is the Chairman and Managing Director of the OCGG and a DPhil candidate in political economy at Oxford. He has an MPhil from Oxford and did his undergraduate studies at Oslo, Washington, Heidelberg, and Harvard. He can be contacted at andre.nilsen@oxfordgovernance.org

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Much of the ‘politically correct’ debate over Turkey’s bid to join the EU is fundamentally misguided. Some politicians and commentators speak as if Turkey has some inherent ‘right’ to accede to the Union. This is obviously not the case. It is natural for anyone who wants something to attempt to construe some kind of ‘right’ to it. But the EU is not a club that anyone who fulfil some abstract criteria can demand to join. It is a thoroughly political project.

Others speak as if the consideration for what is best for Turkey should be the decisive factor in the EU’s decision. This is a deeply flawed approach. Pretty much any country in the world would probably benefit from EU membership. But EU membership is not a tool of charity. It is about the extension of a community based on a shared vision of where we come from, who we are, and where we are going.

The decision of the European Council should therefore be squarely based on what is good for the European Union as a political community, a question only the current member states of the EU and the current members of the European Parliament have a right to determine.

From this point of view, there can be little doubt that Turkish membership would bring the EU few benefits and opportunities compared to the substantial costs and risks it would entail.

In terms of the economy, we would add a predominantly rural economy without a developed welfare state, thus damaging both the likelihood of achieving the goals set out in the Lisbon agenda and the prospect of greater social justice on the European level.

In terms of security, we would get Nato’s second largest army, but we would also get new neighbour countries like Syria, Iraq, and Iran, so that at best balances out, at worst increases the likelihood of another Madrid-style terrorist attack on European citizens.

The biggest concern, however, is political in nature. Given Turkey’s traditional loyalties, we might very well end up with an American trojan horse inside our governing institutions – in this regard it is interesting to note that the United States at times seems more eager than even Turkey in advocating Turkish membership. This is particularly worrying given that Turkey by the time of accession most likely would be the largest member state and therefore dominate the Council

of the European Union in terms of voting weight, the European Parliament in terms of MEP seats, and the Commission in terms of policy-makers.

Whatever advantages might accrue from Turkish membership will most certainly not outweigh these economic, security, and political hazards.

Even if by some magical stroke it could be shown that Turkish membership would be good for the EU, this surely is not the right time to do it. After the completion of the last enlargement and the agreement on the new constitution this summer, it is now time for consolidation. Otherwise the EU runs the risk of imperial overstretch.

First of all, going straight from the ten course meal of the May 1 enlargement to take in Turkey will cause severe digestive problems. The focus should rather be on facilitating a smooth integration of the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe.

Moreover, placing the highly controversial issue of Turkish membership on the public agenda at the same time as the equally divisive issue of the new constitution is a tactical mistake of historical proportions likely to kill off both issues

in one go. The priority should be on explaining to the peoples of Europe why they ought to vote yes in the referenda on the ratification of the new constitution – it would be arrogant and foolish to assume that getting it approved is a foregone conclusion.

Even supporters of eventual Turkish membership should be realistic enough to concede that this simply is not the right time.

The real case against Turkish membership has nothing to do with religion or the artificial question of ‘where does Europe end’. It has all to do with proper statesmanship and democratic accountability of our leaders to the people who elected them.

If the case for Turkish membership is so weak, at least at this point of time, how come the Commission made an overall positive recommendation in favour of starting accession negotiations?

First of all, as anyone who has studied or worked with public administration knows, bureaucracies are as a general rule eager to expand their jurisdictions, budgets, and staffs. If Turkey joins, with its rudimentary public administration, the Commission would expect to see its



powers boosted since it would most likely be called upon to sort out everything from the fragile market economy to the flimsy justice system of the country.

Moreover, we know that in any principal-agent relationship, the greater number and the more diverse the principals are, the more difficult it is for them to monitor and control their agent. If Turkey joins, the member states (the principals) would have a harder time reaching agreement than anything we have seen so far in the history of European integration, leaving the Commission (the agent) with a wide scope of discretion to pursue its own agenda.

Faced with the prospect of greater powers and more opportunities to use them, no wonder that the Commission is in favour of Turkish membership.

The 25 heads of government meeting in December would be well advised to reject the Commission's recommendation for starting accession negotiations. Instead, they should offer our neighbour in the southeast a special partnership. Such a solution would avoid the economic, security, and political pitfalls of membership and give the EU time for consolidation with regards to the last enlargement and the new constitution while ensuring that Turkey stays on the reform track.

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Registered Address:
141 Rampart Rd
Salisbury SP1 1JA
United Kingdom

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