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# FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

## Ireland

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## 1. History of EU-Turkey Relations<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Position of Ireland on the accession of Turkey

Ireland is in favour of the enlargement of the European Union (EU), including Turkey's accession in principle. However, there are certain criteria and requirements that are a priority for Ireland and that Turkey needs to meet.

Several aspects were raised in Irish political debates. Turkey's commitment to the EU's shared values was often debated as an important requirement at the Assembly of Ireland (Dail Eireann) by the party representatives and the Government of Ireland. In 2005 it was stressed that Turkey represented a strategically important actor for the EU. Turkey's commitment to reforms in areas such as freedom of expression, independent judiciary, the use of torture, religious freedom, women's rights, international labour standards (including trade union rights) and minority rights would be central to the outcome of the accession negotiations. The Cyprus issue was also often raised. For example in 2005 the Prime Minister (Taoiseach) of Ireland stated that a meaningful act by Turkey was necessary in order to start a process of normalization of its relations with Cyprus.

Economic issues represent a second major topic discussed by the political parties and also by the government representatives in Ireland regarding Turkey's accession to the EU. Turkey is regarded as an important economic partner for Ireland. Trade has been expanding gradually – for example already in 2003 the combined total trade flows exceeded EUR 550 million. Turkish companies have got active in the Irish market, especially in the construction sector where they compete for contracts actively and successfully. It was often stated that once Turkey accomplished successful economic reforms there would be important future business opportunities also for Irish companies in Turkey.

A positive shift in the position of Ireland regarding democratic values was especially visible in 2005. The Government of Ireland has often expressed its concern towards the human rights situation in Turkey. Due to reforms put in place by the Turkish Government, Ireland recognized that Turkey had made significant progress by introducing legislative and constitutional reforms, including measures to enforce human rights and enhance the cultural rights of all citizens, including of Kurdish origin, allowing radio and television broadcasts and also teaching in languages and dialects other than Turkish.

The EU enlargement was prioritized by Ireland during its Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2013. A new chapter in accession negotiations with Turkey was opened exactly at that time. The Presidency worked to reinvigorate the accession process with Turkey and secured agreement in

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<sup>1</sup> The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

June 2013 on opening the chapter on regional policy with Turkey, the first to be opened after three years.

In principle, Ireland welcomes Turkey's accession to the EU, recognizing its economic and strategic importance. At the same time, value-based narratives – especially political reforms and the peaceful resolution of conflicts – are one of the dominating aspects in the debates of the Irish political parties.

## **1.2. Democratic principles a key factor for Ireland**

Irish-Turkish relations became stronger at the end of the 1990s. Although Ireland had an Embassy accredited in Turkey residing in Rome, the diplomatic relations reached a higher level in 1998, when the new Embassy of Ireland was opened in Ankara. Moving the accredited embassy to Ankara showed that Turkey started to play a more important role for Ireland. Since then, the relations have grown on various ministerial levels. The first official presidential visit by Ireland to Turkey took place in March 2010. President McAleese said on the second day of her official visit to the country that Ireland remained a strong supporter of Turkey's accession to the EU and that Ireland strongly supported every effort of Turkey to meet the accession requirements. The enlargement narrative was thus one of the dominating areas in Irish politics, as Ireland generally supports the EU's enlargement process.

The economic narrative is also visible in the Irish debates, showing that Turkey is an important trade partner. Irish authorities perceive the Turkish market as an opportunity both for the EU and Ireland. Turkey is also regarded by Ireland as an economic player in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. This mainly means that Turkey could serve as a bridge between the EU and the East. It is noteworthy that, in addition to the trade interests, a value-based narrative has remained at the core of the Irish debate on EU-Turkey relations. Irish political parties have often stressed that Turkey needs to undertake political and economic reforms, including in the field of human rights standards and practices, respect for and protection of minorities, the establishment of satisfactory relations with Greece, the settlement of disputes by legal process, including the International Court of Justice, and support for negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) on a political settlement in Cyprus.

Although the positions of political parties in Ireland differ according to the issues, there is only very little difference in their positions on Turkey and its accession to the EU. All the parties state that democratic principles such as freedom of expression and respect for human rights should be met in Turkey. For example, liberal Fine Gael party has been among the strongest advocates of reform in Turkey and raised the importance of internet freedom and the ability to communicate through any media, including digital media. The Labour Party also announced that it supports the ongoing negotiations with Turkey and other European states eventually leading to EU membership and noted that negotiations must take place in the context of implementation of economic, legal, and human rights obligations. Social democrat Sinn Féin also supports EU

enlargement but believes that accession to the EU must be subject to Turkey's adherence to democracy and respect for human rights.

At the same time, despite the value-based discussion, Irish authorities have always stressed the importance of the EU's enlargement as such. The enlargement narrative was once again reiterated during the Irish presidency in the EU. Ireland perceives the accession of new member states to the EU as a win-win game and an opportunity. This was announced by the Irish Minister of State for European Affairs Lucinda Creighton ahead of the Irish Presidency in 2013.

### **1.3. Trade, reforms and stability as key policy areas**

Ireland regards Turkey's aspiration to join the EU as a positive step for various reasons: as a trigger for reforms within Turkey through the accession process; for the potential gains that a larger internal market could provide for a small, open economy like Ireland, including an increase in trade, and because of the positive impact for Ireland of a stronger EU, with Turkey bringing closer ties to countries in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Despite an alleged "accession fatigue" within the EU, the enlargement narrative has always dominated the Irish debate, and Ireland considers that the EU needs to maintain its commitment to Turkey or it risks losing a strategic partner, as well as a very significant political and economic player in the wider region.

## **2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations**

### **2.1. Lower trust due to human rights violations**

The attitudes towards EU-Turkey relations and Turkey's EU accession have been changing in Ireland in the last two to three years. The human rights situation in Turkey has worsened, Turkish authorities have imprisoned opposition representatives and journalists and suppressed ethnic and religious minorities. Ireland continues to be in favor of EU enlargement, however it is very important for Ireland that Turkey meets the accession criteria which in the current situation is far from fulfilling.

It is noteworthy that also the Irish public opinion prioritizes a value-based narrative. According to the Eurobarometer 63.4 Public Opinion conducted in 2005, 40 percent of people in Ireland favoured Turkey joining the EU. Both respondents who were in favour and those who were against Turkey's membership stressed that Turkey needed to meet the required political criteria for joining the EU, first and foremost the respect for human rights. The second point highlighted was the fact that Turkey needed to improve the state of its economy. 90 percent of respondents who favoured Turkey's membership in the EU agreed that Turkey is part of Europe because of its geography and history. Furthermore, respondents noted that Turkey's accession will foster understanding between European and Muslim values, strengthen security and help rejuvenate

an aging European population. Those who were against Turkey's accession to the EU claimed that cultural differences are too significant.

However, it should be noted that this opinion might have changed in Ireland during the past two years. With the increasing human rights violations in Turkey, the percentage of supporters of Turkish accession is falling. Even several years ago, those who were in favour of Turkey's accession noted that meeting the EU requirements was a priority. With the unstable situation in Turkey and violations of human rights, trust towards the Turkish authorities has lowered both on the political and societal levels.

## **2.2. Ireland in favour of EU enlargement**

The concepts of "privileged partnership" and "strategic partnership" do not feature prominently in the Irish debate on the future of EU-Turkey relations. However, in 2010 at the Dáil Debates on EU enlargement the Irish government referred to the concept of "privileged partnership" when reiterating that the EU could not keep its doors closed. It was argued that Ireland strove to have a constructive input in the EU-Turkey negotiation process. As a beneficiary of a past enlargement, and building on the experience of more recent accessions, Ireland is generally supportive of the EU's enlargement. It is argued that the prospect of enlargement leads to economic and political reforms, and to stability, security and prosperity in Europe. At the same time however, it is emphasized that the process includes rigorous conditionality. These factors shape Ireland's supportive approach to Turkey's candidacy. Additionally, there are potential gains to the Single Market and trade through the accession of a country of Turkey's size. It is underlined that the EU's reach and influence in the Middle East and Central Asia could be enhanced through Turkish accession.

Due to its strong support to EU enlargement, Ireland does not give priority to other forms of cooperation such as the concept of "privileged partnership". In short, Ireland's position is that it will support the new candidates if the political and economic reforms are met.

## **2.3. The refugee crisis and the attempted coup**

2015-2016 was unprecedented for the world and the EU. The refugee crisis became one of the main challenges on the EU agenda. On 29 November 2015 the EU and Turkey signed a Joint Action Plan aimed at managing the refugee and migration crisis. Turkey committed to preventing the uncontrolled migratory flows from Turkey to the EU. As part of this, the EU provided support, with the establishment of a "Refugee Facility for Turkey". In addition, the EU has agreed to re-energize Turkey's accession process, and the Foreign Minister of Ireland welcomed the opening of Chapter 17 of the accession negotiations, covering economic and monetary policies. The relationship between the EU and Turkey is important in the context of the migration crisis and because of Turkey's status as an EU candidate country. Still, Ireland continues reiterating a value-based narrative, i.e. the core requirements for accession, being concerned about the troubling situation in the area of the rule of law and human rights. The Irish Government was

also concerned about reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International on the situation in Turkey, including testimonies from migrants and witnesses that some Turkish border guards had used violence against Syrians. The Irish authorities recognized that these reports were very worrying and would require a full investigation by the Turkish authorities. At the Foreign Affairs Council on 23 May 2015 Ireland reiterated its concerns with respect to the rule of law, human rights and freedom of the media in Turkey and the need to hold Turkey accountable in light of the core European values inherent in the accession process.

The second event that shook the debate in Ireland was the attempted coup of 15 July 2016 in Turkey. The failed coup was condemned by both the government and political parties in Ireland and was regarded as a criminal act and an attack on democracy. Ireland was also highly concerned about the human rights situation in the post-coup environment in Turkey. It is critical for Ireland that legal due process is a cornerstone of the Turkish authorities' response and in that context the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial is essential.

### **3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene**

#### **3.1. Syrian conflict as a major cause**

The Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis are the main global events that affected the Irish debates. Turkey also played a role in the Syrian conflict, since the Turkish authorities were not a mere observer but were active in terms of running military operations in Syria and actions against the Kurdish people in Syria. This led to criticism by the Irish political parties, which highlighted that Turkey undertook military actions in northern Syria.

Irish political parties raised concerns that the EU-Turkey statement on migration could result in undermining the rights of refugees and migrants. In parallel, more than 90 journalists have been arrested, 2 500 civil servants have been dismissed, and opposition parliament members have been imprisoned in Turkey. Some Irish political party representatives therefore considered it paradoxical to support the EU-Turkey statement on migration when there were massive domestic violations in Turkey.

However, the Irish authorities consider that a unilateral withdrawal from the EU-Turkey deal would not be in migrants' best interests. Nonetheless, the Irish government highlighted the negative trends that undermine democratic values in Turkey and assured that Ireland would continue to play an important role in the debate on Turkey, its relationship with the European Union and its possible status as an accession state.

Internal violations in Turkey have been acknowledged by the Irish government and highly criticized by political parties. Furthermore, the Irish government criticized the Turkish interference in Syria. At the same time, Ireland believes that it is important to keep channels of communication with Turkey open in order to solve the Syrian crisis. From Ireland's point of view, rejecting cooperation with Turkey is not a solution. Ireland, therefore, strives for cooperating

with Turkey in order to bring the country back on track towards reforms and democratic principles.

Developments related to other neighbouring regions of the EU, such as Ukraine, the Caucasus and North Africa, do not feature prominently in the Irish debate in the context of Turkey and its relations with the EU.

### **3.2. Potential areas of cooperation**

Tackling radicalization and terrorism is one of the potential areas of cooperation with Turkey in the neighbourhood that was raised during the Dail Debates. In June 2016 the Prime Minister Enda Kenny said that a comprehensive counter-terrorism plan has been developed with Turkey under the European Neighbourhood Instrument Programme in light of terrorism in the neighbourhood of the EU.

Support to refugees from Syria is yet another important topic of cooperation raised in Ireland. In April 2016 the Minister of Justice and Equality announced that Ireland contributed EUR 22.9 million to the EU fund of EUR 3 billion for facility for refugees in the framework of the EU-Turkey agreement. The allocation of additional funding of up to EUR 3 billion to the facility for refugees is planned by the EU if the provided EU fund is fully spent and all commitments under the agreement with Turkey are met.

In 2015, Irish political representatives also raised the issue between Armenia and Turkey, suggesting that Ireland could take constructive steps towards reconciliation and normalization between Turkey and Armenia.

It can be argued that reforms and the establishment of democratic principles in Turkey could be a positive example for the South Caucasus region. Turkey's strong ties with – or even membership in – the EU would lead to the opening of the closed Armenian-Turkish border. The Armenian-Turkish border has remained closed since the 1990s. Armenia and Turkey have no diplomatic relations and relations in the region are based on a zero-sum game rather than a win-win game. Normalization of relations between the two countries and opening the border would boost economic relations in the region, as well as exchanges of goods and capital. That would change the situation in the South Caucasus region, leading to a relative stability and cooperation in the EU neighbourhood.

On the one hand, it should be noted that Turkey is a NATO member state and has a major contingent input in NATO. On the other hand, Ireland, although not being a NATO member, contributes to a significant extent to NATO peace keeping operations. With the aim of keeping the Turkish army transparent and advanced, joint Irish-Turkish peace keeping missions could be a potential field for cooperation.

### **3.3. Destabilization of Turkey as a major global problem**

The destabilization of Turkey and of the wider region is one of the main issues affecting the Irish debate on EU-Turkey relations. Turkey has intervened in the conflict in Syria and hit the Kurdish

population there. At the same time, the treatment of the Kurdish population within Turkey raised the concerns of several observers in Ireland. For example, the Labour Party expressed its concern at reports of detention by the Turkish government of opposition politicians from the People's Democratic Party (HDP).

Fine Gael was concerned about the Kurds in the South of Turkey who were under threat. Moreover, the party was concerned that atrocities committed by ISIS in North Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq, where Kurdish communities live, would affect Kurds in Turkey as well.

Another factor of destabilization for Turkey and the wider region has been the migration flow that mostly went through Turkey and Greece. Turkey has managed to decrease the large scale flow of refugees and to handle the migration crisis to some extent.

Last but not least, human rights violations have transformed into mass suppressions in Turkey. Journalists and opposition representatives are imprisoned, thousands of academics fired, and thousands of military representatives kept in jail and being tortured after the attempted coup. These three factors are global problems that were most frequently used in the Irish debate on Turkey and its neighborhood, as well as on EU-Turkey relations.

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