

March 2017

FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

United Kingdom

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This project has received funding
from the European Union's Horizon 2020
Research and Innovation Programme
under Grant Agreement No 692976.

1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. A government supportive of Turkey's accession for geopolitical reasons

The British government has traditionally been an enthusiastic advocate of Turkish membership of the European Union (EU). This policy has been common to Labour and Conservative governments over the past twenty five years. Both Parties have stressed the geopolitical arguments in favour of Turkish membership of the European Union, reflecting in this the long-held American view that a Westernized Turkey firmly anchored in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU would be a factor for stability in the Middle East and an outpost of American and European interests in the region. An additional, if less important consideration for British policy-makers has been the hope that good relations between the EU and Turkey might facilitate a consensual solution to the continuing problems of a divided Cyprus.

1.2. A way of “diluting” the Union?

Until very recently, British governmental support for Turkish membership of the EU formed part of a more general commitment of the British government to the enlargement of the Union, initially to the former countries of the Warsaw Pact. In this context, the British government has always stressed the common benefits arising both to the Union and to new members from the consolidation of democracy and the increase in prosperity in countries on the Union borders. This analysis, initially controversial, has come to be widely shared within the Union and has driven the expansion of the Union over the past decade. Some observers however have believed that British governmental commitment to enlargement of the Union was also a mechanism whereby the British government hoped to encourage a slowing down of European integration as the Union became larger and more diverse. British support for Turkish membership of the Union was seen by these observers as being the logical conclusion of this underlying tactic for diluting the Union and retarding its political integration.

1.3. Concerns about immigration during the referendum campaign 2016

See 1.1 for the position before the British EU referendum on 23 June 2016. During and since the referendum, it became clear that many British citizens could be mobilized against the European Union by the fear of millions of Turkish workers enjoying free movement if Turkey joined the European Union.

¹ 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.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Public and elite opinion at variance on Turkey

It must be stressed that commitment to Turkish membership of the European Union or indeed to enlargement more generally was always in the United Kingdom a political and never a popular commitment. Broader British public opinion was for long indifferent to the question of expanding the European Union, and the question of Turkish membership in particular seemed until recently such a remote possibility as to merit little or no public discussion. This situation has now changed. Over the past five years, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has succeeded in presenting the free movement of workers within the European Union as being a dangerous and damaging aspect of British membership of the Union. Although the general economic impact of EU immigration has been positive in the past decade for the United Kingdom, it has in certain geographic areas and in certain economic sectors led to economic and social strains which have been exacerbated by cuts in government expenditure that might otherwise have mitigated local and sectoral dislocation. The issue of EU migration was a major issue in the recent referendum on British membership of the EU. The question of Turkish membership of the Union came to be seen during the referendum campaign as part of this controversy.

2.2. No discussion of different integration models

There is no visible debate about different models of integration in relation to Turkey. Specialists are aware that German Chancellor Angela Merkel favours a “privileged partnership” with Turkey but this is not an issue which has generated any significant discussion in the United Kingdom.

2.3. Attitudes hardened during the EU referendum

The British referendum on the European Union in June 2016 was crucial in crystallizing British public attitudes. It should have come as little surprise to the British government that its policy of encouraging enlargement of the European Union and specifically of encouraging Turkish enlargement of the Union was so controversial during the EU referendum campaign in the summer of 2016. A favoured argument of UKIP during the referendum period was that imminent Turkish membership of the Union would allow unlimited access to the British labour market to Turkish citizens in a way threatening economic and social stability in the United Kingdom and perhaps even facilitating Islamic terrorism. UKIP also found support in some sections of British public opinion for its claim that Chancellor Merkel had in effect imposed upon the European Union a bilateral agreement with Turkey that made Turkish membership of the Union more likely in return for Turkish help in restricting the flow of Middle Eastern refugees from Turkey to within the Union.

In reaction to such claims, British Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, repeatedly stressed during the referendum campaign the long-term nature of the prospect of Turkish membership of the European Union, the long transition periods that would no doubt be involved in Turkish membership and the necessity for radical changes anyway in Turkish society before Turkey could join the EU. The political effect of these declarations was immediately undermined by the attention drawn in the

British press to promises on the website of the British Embassy in Ankara that the United Kingdom favoured the quickest possible membership for Turkey in the European Union. Cameron was much criticized, even by those sympathetic to the “Remain” campaign for this ill-prepared apparent abandonment of the traditional British attitude towards Turkish membership in the Union

The largely unexpected outcome of the British EU referendum on 23rd June and the resignation of Cameron’s government have created a vacuum in all British policy towards the EU, a vacuum which inevitably has had consequential effects for British relations with Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is unpopular in the United Kingdom, being widely regarded as an authoritarian and illiberal figure, but his growing hostility to the European Union may create some potential overlap of interest between London and Ankara after Brexit. Much will depend in this context on the specific terms of Brexit and the general political atmosphere surrounding it.

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

3.1. Mixed messages and confusion from the British government

The debate in the United Kingdom on European issues, of which Turkey is a subset, is currently so entirely insular and self-absorbed that such issues as the crisis in Ukraine can play no coherent role in the discussion. An example of this intellectual confusion is that, to the surprise of many observers, the new British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson reiterated the UK’s commitment to Turkish membership of the European Union on a visit to Ankara in September 2016. Sceptical commentators doubted the real influence that a country about to leave the European Union could have on this decision, and recalled that Johnson himself had been a prominent advocate of leaving the Union during the referendum campaign. There seemed to many of these commentators a peculiar irony in Johnson’s advocating rapid membership of a Union from which he had recently done so much to extricate his own country. Johnson had moreover in the earlier part of 2016 attracted much public attention by his vigorous criticism of Erdoğan and the illiberal nature of his government.

The many ironies implicit in this visit and these comments of Foreign Secretary Johnson vividly illustrate the multiple uncertainties surrounding the United Kingdom’s broader position in the world.

3.2. Focus on NATO

It can confidently be predicted that the United Kingdom will seek outside the European Union, as an element of its global self-projection, to maintain and perhaps even increase its commitment to NATO. In this context, the UK can be expected to stress in international fora the geopolitical importance of Turkey as a NATO member more committed to Western values than most of its unstable and increasingly Islamist neighbours in the Middle East. The likelihood must be that the British desire to reinforce NATO will in short term at least outweigh any doubts about the illiberal internal nature of Erdoğan’s government. Johnson’s attempt to build diplomatic bridges to Erdoğan in September can be seen as a reflection of this underlying analysis.

3.3. Taking a lead from America

More generally, it can also be predicted that outside the European Union the United Kingdom will seek to reinforce its ties with the United States of America (USA), in a way that may have implications for its relationship with Turkey. If the Trump administration regards Turkey as a favoured partner within the Middle East, then that will predispose the British government to use whatever residual influence it may have with its European neighbours to advocate closer relations between Turkey and the European Union. It cannot be overemphasized however that every element of British foreign policy is in chaotic flux and this will inevitably have implications for its relations with such an important and difficult partner as Turkey.

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