

How Retrenchment in Kemalism is Preventing the Accession of Turkey into the European Union

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ABSTRACT

Turkey’s accession to the European Union has been a key topic of debate in the past few years. This paper aims to explain how current policies under the Erdoğan administration are causing a retrenchment in Atatürk’s efforts of westernizing the Turkish state and further hindering Turkey from joining the European Union. Research on this topic tends to discuss contemporary Turkish and European politics but fails to include its roots going back to the establishment of the nation itself. To tackle why Turkey has faced difficulty joining the EU, I address how both Atatürk and Erdoğan dealt with the same struggles from differing perspectives, leading to opposite results. I tie together discourse on Turkish history as well as contemporary politics using analysis by authors like Darden and Skocpol. This approach explains current trends and sheds light on how Turkey’s history affects contemporary outcomes.

Keywords: Turkey, European Union, Atatürk, westernization, backsliding

Introduction

Due to its geographical location, Turkey acts as a bridge connecting Europe and Asia. Even though a majority of its landmass is in Asia, the Green Card lottery system, as well as the European Commission both, consider Turkey a European country. Whether the country belongs in Asia or Europe is often a matter of ideology and politics rather than geography. However, despite its established Europeanness in many aspects, Turkey’s accession to a formal institution like the European Union has been a controversy for decades.

What is preventing Turkey from joining the European Union after its numerous attempts? The 1999 Helsinki Council agreed that Turkey was eligible to join as long as it adhered to the Copenhagen Criteria, however, the internal shift in ideology via the retrenchment in Kemalism by the Erdoğan administration has prevented the nation from doing so.

In this paper, I analyze how the religious and cultural shift back to its Ottoman roots has prevented Turkey from joining the European Union. In forming the nation-state, Atatürk reformed cultural and religious aspects remnant from the empire to fit a more western model. These spheres have a large impact on the politics of the country, which made Turkey eligible to join the Union. However, Erdoğan reversed many of the reforms brought by Atatürk and took a different stance on international politics. The current backsliding in Turkey, therefore, is making future accession efforts very difficult to achieve.

The rest of this paper is divided into five sections. In the first section, I outline a brief history of the nation, which is imperative for the reader to contextualize both Atatürk and Erdoğan’s actions and beliefs. In the second section, I categorize the difficulties Atatürk faced in forming contemporary Turkey and his controversial methods in doing so. In the third section, I explain Turkey’s struggle in joining the EU and elaborate on the grounds for accession. In the

fourth section, I elaborate on the Erdoğan administration and his impact on the religious, cultural, and political spheres. In the fifth and final section, I discuss the possibility of future accession.

To support my argument, I cite peer-reviewed articles on Turkish politics as well as Turkey-EU relations. Additionally, I support established theories by well-known political scientists to illustrate the textbook example of backsliding occurring in contemporary Turkey.

History of Turkey-From an Empire to a Republic

When the Ottoman Empire was in the process of transitioning to modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) played a prominent role in shaping the country into the nation-state that it is today. He faced religious and cultural difficulties but was able to overcome them.

Atatürk was the first president of the Republic of Turkey following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. His origins were from the Ottoman ruling class, since his father served in the military during the Russo-Turkish war (Itzkowitz 2022). His early secular education coupled with his father’s influence formed the foundation of the ideas he wished to implement in order to form a nation-state in the future. This supports the impact of education and upbringing in forming national identities, as Darden (forthcoming) argued in his work. As time passed, the Ottoman Empire started to lose its legitimacy due to outside pressures from other European countries following the industrial revolution (Editors 2017). Mustafa formed a secret group with his friends in school and conducted anti-government activities rooted in secularism and a sovereign Turkish state. They called themselves the Young Turks and started a revolution that weakened the Ottoman Empire from within (Itzkowitz 2022). Skocpol’s theory of why revolutions occur (Skocpol 1979) highlights the build-up to the insurrection that pushed the empire to its limits. Mustafa observed that the Ottoman empire was on the verge of collapse, and went to Ankara in order to establish a Turkish nation (Itzkowitz 2022). He persevered in forming the nation, regardless of the orders coming from the sultan in Istanbul demanding him to cease.

Difficulties in Forming the Nation-State

After coming to power, Atatürk faced several difficulties when forming the nation-state. To overcome these struggles, he set a number of principles, known as Kemalism, which constituted the foundation of Turkish republican statehood and consisted of “republicanism, populism, nationalism, etatism, laicism, and revolutionism.” (Makaradze, 2020: 154). Even though these principles are built upon Western ideals, specific conditions had to arise in Turkey for their implementation (Makaradze, 2020: 155). We can identify said conditions when looking at Anderson’s (1983) perspective on nationalism as a modern phenomenon. He states that there arises a need to replace previous connections to the past (in our case, religion and language), a need to create harmony and cohesion after state creation since the process of state building is violent in and of itself.

In the Ottoman empire, there was respect and inclusion of other religions, however, most governmental affairs were structured around Islam. Atatürk disagreed with the heavy integration of religion in everyday life and thought it led to a division among the people of the country.

After coming to power, he abolished both the sultanate and caliphate, thereby removing expressions of “the religion of the state” from the constitution (Saygin, 2008: 38) and founding a

new state around Western ideals (Makaradze, 2020: 156). By rejecting the Ottoman-Islamic aspects of the country as well as its Islamic identity, Turkey was able to adopt a secular identity that was based on the pre-Islamic glory of the Turks (Aytürk, 2004: 2).

Language was another important aspect in the republican project of identity building (Aytürk, 2004: 2). Because the Ottoman Empire consisted of many ethnic groups, Ottoman Turkish incorporated aspects of Turkish, Arabic and Persian with some Italian, Greek, Armenian and other European elements, and was written using Arabic characters (Aytürk, 2004: 1). The inflectional superiority thesis, founded by F. Max Müller, states that even though “capacity for language and articulation is universal, creativity in articulation is not equally distributed among human beings” (Aytürk, 2004: 3), which allowed Müller to make sweeping and biased generalizations concerning the language and the history of the Turks (Aytürk, 2004). According to this claim, “Ottoman Turkish was not... palatable for the westernizing, nationalist elite, who wanted to create a nation state for the Turks and to burn the bridges connecting the nascent republic to its Islamic, oriental predecessor.” (Aytürk, 2004: 1). In addition to false claims that connected capability to language, the Arabic alphabet made it difficult to disperse information to illiterate peasants that experienced difficulty reading it (Saraçgil, 2013: 198). In order to establish Turkish as an Indo-European language (Aytürk, 2004: 7), Atatürk established Türk Dil Kurumu (Turkish Language Institute) in order to “‘purify’ the language by ridding it of its non-Turkish components and to coin new, ‘authentic’ words to replace them.” (Aytürk, 2004:1). Atatürk not only deemed the alphabet underdeveloped, but also most cultural aspects of the Turkish identity. The previous “alphabet, calendar and traditional clothing” were eliminated by the current regime to proclaim the secular nation (Saraçgil, 2013: 211) as well as to address the problem of accessibility when using a Semitic alphabet to communicate a now agglutinative language (Aytürk, 2004:1).

In contemporary Turkey, Atatürk is a savior for the people and schools teach his successes in creating Turkey as a nation-state. However, he was violent and abrupt in his efforts and acted against democratic ideals to accomplish his goals. In addition to acting as the autonomous ruler of Turkey, he also perpetuated white supremacy and false ideas of cultural development in doing so. Even though he himself was a radical abolitionist in the process of forming Turkey, he banned organized opposition to his regime through a violent military response, which prevented democratic and pluralist possibilities. (Saraçgil, 2013: 199). He was “...constructed in the image of a single, brilliant and ruthless general, over-anxious to modernize from above and with little time for parliamentary procedures or a free press.” (Saraçgil, 2013: 214). Mustafa himself explained later that voters did not have the capacity to make informed decisions, and that he was “the only person qualified to decide who was to be a candidate and who was to be elected to parliament.”(Saraçgil, 2013: 215). In addition to corrupt policymaking, he established the view that religion and tradition could not coexist with modernization and development. This and the abrupt reaction to Müller’s racially motivated theory set the stage for white supremacy and seeing the Turkish people and their cultures as undesirable.

Struggle of Contemporary Turkey

Even though the foundations of Turkey were built in a seemingly radical fashion, they still provided the building blocks for politics in contemporary Turkey. It is likely that if Turkey were to continue on the path of westernization Atatürk set, its accession into the European Union would be more plausible compared to the current state of the country. The 1999 Helsinki European

Council declared Turkey could join if it adhered to the Copenhagen Political Criteria (Cámara, 2021). These criteria are set to ensure that the accession process is universal for all candidates and that the legal procedures set in place in candidate countries align with the overall aim of the European Union. The Copenhagen Political Criteria are as follows: “Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved:

- Stability of institutions guaranteeing
 - Democracy,
 - Rule of law,
 - Human rights and
 - Respect for and protection of minorities
- The existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union.
- Membership presupposes the candidate’s ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.” (Emerson, 2004).

Turkey was on track to improve its democracy and meet the stated criteria. An example of this would be that “Article 28 of the Constitution would be amended to guarantee constitutionally the right to express opinions without censorship, the freedom of the press and the right of individuals to obtain information.” (Emerson, 2004: 3). If Turkey were to follow through, member states could not say their efforts weren’t enough for a positive reaction from the European Council (Emerson, 2004: 3). As expected, the EU Commission soon stated that Turkey fulfilled conditions to accede in 2005. However, in December 2006, the EU suspended negotiations on eight of the 35 chapters due to “the refusal by the Turkish government to apply the 1995 Customs Union agreement to all new member states, in particular, Cyprus” (Cámara, 2021). In addition, societal and religious policies under the Erdoğan administration raised concern in both Europe and the USA.

Erdoğan’s Rise to Power

The 2001 economic crisis led to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to come to power. The leader of AKP was Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was previously Istanbul’s mayor. Contrary to Atatürk’s beliefs on secularism, Erdoğan believed in Islam as a political force (Cámara, 2021). The most glaring difference between Atatürk and Erdoğan is that whereas Atatürk’s effort provided for a more westernized Turkey, Erdoğan reversed this process and decreased Turkey’s chances of being admitted to the EU as a result. One of the earliest examples of this would be their differing outlooks on foreign affairs. Atatürk was more conservative when it came to Turkey’s foreign stance, however, Erdoğan used foreign policy to consolidate power among other countries. After the atrocities of World War I, Atatürk decided it was best to not get involved in foreign entanglements (Cámara, 2021). In contrast, AKP saw Arab uprisings as an opportunity to demonstrate influence in the region through a “neo-Ottoman foreign policy” that strayed away from Atatürk’s ambitions (Cámara, 2021). Since Turkey’s establishment, Europe and westernization have been the main goal, but the AKP used reforms to reduce the impacts of Kemalist regime and push a more Islamist agenda (Cámara, 2021).

Some religious concerns Erdoğan faced were the lack of the place of Islam in everyday life. Some of the reforms he brought about, as a result, were access to more Islamist graduate schools, an increasing number of imams in mosques, and a mandatory hijab policy for women on university campuses at a certain point (Cámara, 2021). This, however, was not well received by Kemalists who wished to continue Atatürk’s secular regime. AKP then introduced constitutional amendments via the September 2010 referendum, which aimed to curb the tutelary powers of the military and the judiciary (Cámara, 2021).

Referring back to the reforms outlined for Turkey’s accession, Erdoğan failed to carry out the statement on amending Article 28 of the constitution aiming to allow freedom of speech. After a planned coup, the AKP put pressure on the independent press and consolidated its power over social institutions like schools and the police, as well as legal institutions like the constitutional court and judges (Cámara, 2021). There was pressure against freedom of speech and efforts to centralize all power in a single figure, which strays further away from democracy.

After winning the presidential election in 2014, Erdoğan immediately moved to change the constitution with the goal of concentrating power in the figure of the President (Cámara, 2021). Even though the Copenhagen Criteria includes respect towards minority groups, this was loosely enforced and even acted against. There were military operations in eastern Syria against Syrian Kurds which led to strong reactions from other countries in the EU such as Germany and France, which supported an arms embargo on Turkey (Cámara, 2021). There also existed a lack of attention to women’s rights issues since Turkey withdrew from the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women, signed in Istanbul in 2011 (Cámara, 2021). In general, “The wide purges in military ranks, the civil service, the courts, and the academia and further suppression of the press that followed, raised concern in Europe and in the US.” (Cámara, 2021). The continued trend of suppression led to Turkey being considered an illiberal democracy (Cámara, 2021) according to the Copenhagen Criteria.

Future Prospects

The current state of the country is one that is far from Atatürk’s vision. “The failed coup in 2016 gave Erdoğan the opportunity to stage a ‘final blow’ to the Kemalist establishment...In fact, the President was the main beneficiary of the botched coup, as he quickly moved to eliminate all opposition.” (Cámara, 2021). The European Commission stated that, even though Turkey is a strategic partner in many issues such as security, counter-terrorism, and migration, it has been backsliding in areas of democracy and fundamental rights. (Cámara, 2021). That same year, due to an autocratic drift in the overall state of the country, “the EU Council decided that no new areas would be opened in the accession talks...Turkey has been moving further away from the EU, and accession negotiations have, therefore, effectively come to a standstill.” (Cámara, 2021). However, improvements have been implemented throughout Erdoğan’s presidency, and might reverse Turkey’s path in the near future. “Poverty incidence more than halved from 2002 to 2015. In just over a decade, Turkey has increased the share of renewables-such as hydropower, solar, wind, and geothermal-in electricity production from 17% to 46%” (Cámara, 2021). These improvements go hand in hand with the European Union’s interests as it directly impacts overall stability and economic relations highlighted in the Copenhagen Criteria. Additionally, joining the EU has been an interest of the citizens as well: “With economic difficulties fueled by COVID-19 increasing, and clear symptoms of dissatisfaction among many Turkish citizens, Erdoğan seems ready to put

some limits on his assertive foreign policy...he said that his government wanted ‘to build Turkey’s future together with Europe’.”

Even though Turkey still has many aspects to improve upon, accession isn’t implausible. “If the EU strictly followed its prior doctrine, the conclusion would have to be that Turkey does not yet fulfill the Copenhagen criteria” or they could take “not an absolutist position, but one in which it might decide that ‘sufficient progress’ towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria had been made to warrant the opening of negotiations.” (Emerson, 2004: 2). There has been debate on Turkey’s accession on the European end of the spectrum as former president Giscard d’Estaing raised concern and stated Turkey joining would mean the end of the EU due to public opinion over the place of Islam in Europe as well as the impacts of September 11th and March 11th. (Emerson, 2004: 5). However, d’Estaing fails to consider the fact that “Turkey could play a significant role in the connection between the Muslim world and the West.” due to its geographical function as a bridge between the two (Cámara, 2021). It is best to consider the possible accession as an asset rather than a threat to foster an environment for multiple cultures to coexist within Europe as well as among the wider Arab-Muslim neighborhood surrounding it. (Emerson, 2004: 5).

Conclusion

The shift away from Kemalism has negatively impacted Turkey’s probability of joining the European Union. Erdoğan’s policies have undone most of the social and religious reforms Atatürk implemented. As demonstrated above, Atatürk’s reforms were to escape the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, whereas Erdoğan’s reforms shifted back to the Ottoman ways. Both reforms were controversial in their times, and the back and forth between secularism and theocracy hinders Turkey’s ability to join the EU. Even though Turkey has advanced in some fields, it will take more to be considered for accession in the future.

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