

Despite the eurozone crisis, and the ambivalent attitudes of the Turkish public, Turkey still stands to benefit from EU accession.

by Blog Admin

While the EU continues to work toward a solution to the eurozone crisis, Turkey has experienced a period of strong economic growth. **Soli Özel** argues that although Turkey's interest in EU membership has declined in the wake of the crisis, the country could still gain substantial benefits from European integration. The crisis may also have a positive effect for Turkey if it produces a more flexible arrangement in the EU's structure, potentially opening the door for the country's accession.



During a recent TV interview, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan jokingly referred to a conversation he had with Russian President Vladimir Putin: following questions from Putin regarding Turkey's desire to enter the EU, Erdogan replied, "Include us in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization then we might give up on the EU". A quip is a quip, but in the context of the EU's declining appeal for and influence over Turkey it is worth taking note of.

Officially Turkey's quest for EU membership continues. The Minister for EU Affairs, Egemen Bağış, spends a lot of time and energy to keep the flame alive even if, at times, he cannot conceal his exasperation with his European counterparts. The Minister also has a hard time, like the rest of his cabinet colleagues, defending Turkey's recent record on freedom of expression and freedom of the press as well as many of the outlandish, if not outrageous, court decisions that make a mockery of the concept of the "rule of law". Rare are the moments these days when the possibility of EU membership provides the framework for debate on any big political issue. Apart from the die-hard integrationists, who have a difficult time finding an audience for the EU process, membership related issues are of [little if any interest](#) to the Turkish public.



Undoubtedly the deep political crisis of the EU, going beyond the eurozone crisis, accounts for much of the sagging interest in becoming a member of a not-so-attractive club. However, the disenchantment of the Turkish public with the EU preceded the severe economic crisis that shook the Union at its core. In Turkey's view, the EU's handling of Cyprus and the French determination to block the process at all costs, was widely seen as not giving the Turkish candidacy a fair shake. As the Turkish economy performed beyond expectations and the country prospered while new markets were being explored, the importance of the EU in Turkey's economic growth seemed to recede.

On political matters, Turkey moved on some of its most pressing issues, such as the Kurdish problem, mainly independently of the accession process. In the meantime, with the EU's complacency, Turkish democracy began to suffer setbacks although the process of demilitarization/civilianization went forcefully ahead. Furthermore, the developments in the Middle East that culminated in the profound transformative turbulence of the Arab Spring greatly elevated Turkey's profile as a consequential actor in the

developments in the region. As geopolitical considerations moved to the fore and Turkey had to rejuvenate its alliance relations following the failure of its high profile engagement with Iran, Turkish-American relations became closer.

Most everything that happens in the European Union affects Turkey. The current cooling of relations does not change this essential fact. It is also true that the lure of the European Union today is much weaker given its economic predicament. Turkey by itself created more private sector jobs in the past five years than all the EU states put together. The Turkish public undoubtedly has a strong feeling of Schadenfraude but still it is remarkable that support for EU membership does not fall below 40 per cent. Particularly in light of the fact that the EU reneged on promises given to the Turkish part of Cyprus, and that some EU members have been crass and behaved improperly towards Turkey.

The EU's crisis arguably stemmed from the paradox of "economic integration/political fragmentation". If and when it manages to finally overcome the crisis, the nature of the Union and its structure will be different and possibly will reflect a more flexible arrangement. Despite enviable economic performances and a rising geopolitical profile, the benefits that Turkey would draw from continuing integration with the EU are not exhausted. In particular, the developments of the past five years have shown that the aspirational force of EU membership, as well as the disciplining framework of the [Copenhagen criteria](#) (Hungary's current politics notwithstanding) is essential for the deepening and further institutionalization of Turkish democracy.

Similarly, if the current crisis leads to a more flexible arrangement in the Union's structure, absorbing a country the size of Turkey might be easier, giving an opportunity for EU members to re-evaluate the Turkish file. The economic, political, and strategic benefits of further integration are there for all to see. In addition, EU-Turkey relations could easily move forward if they too reflected a more flexible arrangement, even if the member states' politics do not inspire much confidence for such farsighted and imaginative openings on the part of the Union. Ultimately, the record of European history still allows one to hope for a breakthrough.

This article is based on the German Marshall Fund paper, [Turkey and the European Sclerosis](#).

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