

European Union Formally Opens Talks on Turkey's Joining

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[LUXEMBOURG](#), Tuesday, Oct. 4 - After days of wrenching negotiations, [Turkey](#) and the European Union held a brief ceremony here early Tuesday that formally opened talks on Turkey's bid to join the union.

The ceremony, which began just past midnight after an agreement was reached late Monday, set in motion a process that would probably take a decade or more but could end with the European Union's extending its borders eastward into Asia to embrace a predominantly Muslim country.

"This is a truly historic day for Europe and for the whole of the international community," said Jack Straw, [Britain's](#) foreign secretary, who was chairman of the negotiations. He said Turkey's entry "will bring a strong, secular state that happens to have a Muslim majority into the E.U. - proof that we can live, work and prosper together."

Turkey has worked for more than four decades to join, restructuring its legal system and economy to meet European standards even as Europe added demands and refused to start formal negotiations.

The agreement on Monday to open the talks was a hard-won victory for the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, who has staked his political credibility on getting them under way. He hailed the beginning of talks, saying, "Turkey has taken a giant step forward on its historic march."

But the bitter struggle over the terms of the talks reflects Europe's deep ambivalence toward Turkey's membership.

The talks come at a difficult time for the European Union, which is mired in an identity crisis and whose consensus-based decision-making process is already bogged down by the addition last year of 10 members.

Many Europeans - more than half according to some polls - oppose Turkey's membership, arguing that while the country has a toehold in Europe, it is not European at its core. Critics say the union would have difficulty absorbing such a large, poor country and complain that Turkey's membership would open the doors for a potentially huge wave of Muslim immigrants.

By the time it could be expected to join, Turkey's current population of 70 million people would probably have grown to outnumber that of [Germany](#), now the largest European

state. Under current rules, that would give it the most seats in the European Parliament, skewing an already complex European agenda.

The agreement to start the talks was held up until late Monday as European members haggled over an Austrian demand that the talks include an alternative to full membership, giving the union a diplomatically palatable option to inviting Turkey to join.

[Austria](#) eventually dropped its demands, but an agreement was then blocked by Turkey's objections to language that it feared could force it to support an eventual bid by the Greek-dominated Republic of [Cyprus](#) to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Turkey withdrew its objections after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Mr. Erdogan in Ankara to assure him that the negotiations with Europe would not affect Turkey's voting power in NATO.

Supporters of Turkey's membership say the expansion would open up a vast potential economic market to Europe. Other advocates, including the [United States](#), say bringing Turkey into the European club would help spread democracy into the Middle East and increase regional security.

That idea was echoed by Turkey's foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, before he boarded a plane in Ankara on Monday night to fly to Luxembourg.

"Once Turkey enters in the European Union, all these circles will also see themselves, one way or another, represented within the E.U.," Mr. Gul said. He left Turkey late Monday night in order to attend the ceremony here early Tuesday.

The squabble over talks with Turkey briefly held up consideration of [Croatia's](#) European membership talks, which had been frozen since March over the country's poor cooperation in arresting a fugitive war crimes suspect. Austria had pushed for talks with Croatia to begin.

Late Monday, the chief prosecutor of the United Nations war crimes tribunal, Carla Del Ponte, told European foreign ministers that Croatia was cooperating fully - a sharp reversal of her assessment just a few days earlier during a visit to the Croatian capital, Zagreb. Membership talks with Croatia are now expected to start within days.

The last-minute diplomacy kept Mr. Gul waiting in Ankara and frayed nerves on both sides.

"Either it will show political maturity and become a global power, or it will end up a Christian club," Mr. Erdogan said of the European Union on Sunday.

It is just that question that is haunting Europe. The European project, begun as a means to ensure peace among historic enemies, has faltered since the end of the cold war, which helped define it. In the 15 years since German reunification, the union has grown but weakened as it has absorbed much of formerly Communist Central Europe.

Deep differences within the union, particularly between its incoming and longstanding members, broke into the open over the American-led invasion of [Iraq](#), which many of the new union members supported but the older members did not. "Building a consensus is difficult if you don't have common values," said Constanze Stelzenmüller, of the German Marshall Fund in Berlin. "There has been a loss of focus, a loss of the sense of commonality, a loss of common interests in Europe."

Many people worry that adding a country with such a vastly different cultural and economic heritage like Turkey's to the mix would only soften that focus further.

Meanwhile, economic malaise in much of Europe has made people wary of the heralded "ever closer union" that for many simply means lost jobs. Those fears helped defeat referendums on a proposed European constitution in [France](#) and the [Netherlands](#) earlier this year, stalling the union's already slowing momentum and leading many opinion-makers to question openly what it was that Europe wanted to become. Turkey's effort to become a member, which has continued in some form for more than 40 years, naturally became central to that debate.

Turkey became an associate member of what was then the European Economic Community in 1963 and formally applied for full membership in April 1987. It was officially recognized as a candidate only in December 1999, and it was not until last December that the union agreed to set a date for membership negotiations to begin.

As part of its campaign to meet European standards, Turkey has abolished the death penalty, improved its human rights record and allowed broader use of the Kurdish language among its large Kurdish minority. But it is criticized for refusing to explore the killing of Armenians in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire and for refusing to recognize Cyprus, which became a European Union member last year.

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting from Istanbul for this article.