

Introduction

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Turkey is about to start accession negotiations with the European Union. The question of whether Turkey qualified as a European country in terms of history and culture, was put on the European agenda by conservative European politicians in the mid-1990s and seemed to have been solved in Turkey's favour at the Helsinki summit of 1999, but it was hotly debated again throughout 2004. At the same time, a parallel debate developed among those who accepted Turkey's European credentials in principle (or felt they had to accept them). This was the debate about Turkey's state of preparedness and the degree to which the country fulfilled the so-called 'Copenhagen Criteria', which stipulated that candidates for membership of the EU should have a stable democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and a functioning market economy. In the end, as we know, the attempts of the 'fundamentalist' opposition to Turkey's candidature on the part of people like former Eurocommissioner Bolkestein, German CDU/CSU leaders Merkel and Stoiber or ex-president Giscard d'Estaing failed. Turkey's progress towards fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria was deemed sufficient by the European Commission, and on 17 December 2004 the momentous decision to start the accession process was taken unanimously at the summit in The Hague.

Interest in the question of Turkey's candidature has meant that an extraordinary number of studies, reports, papers have appeared, analysing the current situation and drawing scenarios for the future. The authors of this Focus have not intended to add to this, or to investigate the chequered history of Turkish–European relations since the signing of the accession treaty in 1963. What we have intended to do here, is to show that the European impact on Turkey and the intensification of links between Europe and Turkey have a much older history than is generally recognized. The growth of a European influence in the spheres of finance, politics, diplomacy, education and culture predates the 1963 treaty and even the presidency of Atatürk (1923–1938). It can in fact be traced to the early Nineteenth Century.

This Focus has been created by historians aiming to add a certain historical depth as a frame of reference for the current debate on Turkish–European relations.

Turkey's full membership is still at least a decade away. By that time both Turkey and the EU will have changed and some of the widespread anxiety about, if not hostility to, Turkey's accession may have melted away, but an increased awareness of a shared history is a precondition for this to happen.