CHAPTER NINE

TURKEY AND THE EU

“The European Council recalled its previous conclusions regarding Turkey, in which, at Helsinki, it agreed that Turkey was a candidate state destined to join the Union on the basis of the same criteria as applied to the other candidate states and, subsequently, concluded that, if it were to decide at its December 2004 meeting, on the basis of a report and recommendation from the Commission, that Turkey fulfills the Copenhagen political criteria, the European Union will open accession negotiations with Turkey without delay.” The 16–17 December 2004 Brussels European Presidency Conclusions then continues with the anxiously awaited recommendation, “It invited the Commission to present to the Council a proposal for a framework for negotiations with Turkey, on the basis set out in paragraph 23. It requested the Council to agree on that framework with a view to opening negotiations on 3 October 2005.”

This was a historic decision irreversibly reconfirming Turkey’s long-standing bid for full membership in the European Union. As an official candidate since 1999, Turkey has been rigorously reforming and restructuring its economy in compliance with the Copenhagen criteria for starting the accession talks. The reform process intensified during the months before the 2004 Brussels Summit, and after intense negotiations and last-minute bargaining Turkey was finally able to get a firm date for the talks. The main question now is whether Turkey will be able to successfully complete the negotiation process, and beyond that, if doing so will be possible in the foreseeable future. The EU, hesitant of a full-membership commitment, is still hoping for a prospect short of that, leaning toward some form of special status as an alternative. At issue are not only the alleged cultural differences and size but also the future of the European Union, which could become uncertain and lead to instability, as argued by those opposing eventual Turkish membership. Will Turkey ultimately join this elite club of Western democracies? The response is unnecessarily ambiguous and not very encouraging despite the 2004 Brussels European Presidency decision to open the talks. As far as the EU treaties dating back to 1963 and the Union’s decision-making bodies are concerned, the answer is clearly affirmative. But
oddly enough, an overwhelming majority of EU citizens, unaware of the binding treaties that had allowed for the prospect of full membership, are skeptical, and predictably, their political leaders wonder. The majority in Europe questions whether Turkey is European and above all if it is fit for membership because of perceived economic, political, and cultural differences. And this perception exists despite the fact that for over half a century Turkey has been institutionally and politically part of Europe.

This chapter provides a few observations and some qualified generalizations based on major events that have been redefining Turkey’s EU membership prospects since the 1963 Ankara Treaty. It begins with a narrative of the European enlargement and a brief history of Turkish-EU relations, followed by a discussion of developments since Turkey’s application for full membership in 1987. Highlighting principal aspects of the customs union since 1996, the chapter ends with a summary of the events before the 2004 Brussels Summit and an analysis of its outcomes.

THE EUROPEAN ENLARGEMENT

In a speech at Zurich University on September 19, 1946, when Winston Churchill alerted his audience about what he was going to say, probably very few imagined they would hear the words that eventually led to the evolution of a radical project on the future European integration.1 “I am now going to say something that will astonish you,” Churchill said. “The first step in the re-creation of the European family must be a partnership between France and Germany. In this way only can France recover the moral leadership of Europe. There can be no revival of Europe without a spiritually great France and a spiritually great Germany.” At that point in history, very few ever imagined that this grand project that had evolved through the contributions of French visionaries Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet would lead to today’s elite club of democracies that many European nations have aspired to join.2 It was also unimaginable that

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1 For Churchill’s complete speech and the summary of the efforts of early visionaries of a united Europe, see Nelsen and Stubb (1998).
2 Robert Schuman (1886–1963), France’s foreign minister, and Jean Monnet (1888–1979), French civil servant and diplomat, were instrumental in the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community that led to the formation of the European Economic Community. See Nelsen and Stubb (1998).