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Turkey's EU Accession as a Factor in the 2016 Brexit Referendum

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Abstract

In June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Although many issues shaped the Brexit campaign, the question of Turkey's quest for EU membership emerged as an unexpectedly strong factor. This article examines how this happened and how the debate evolved. It shows that those who advocated leaving the EU not only distorted the prospect of Turkish membership, they also misrepresented British support for the country's accession. While the UK had indeed been a strong advocate of Turkey's EU integration in the past, support for enlargement in general had declined in recent years due to increasing voter concerns over immigration. However, the policy of supporting Turkish membership could not be wholly repudiated by the government, even in the name of campaigning to stay in the EU, as this would have damaged Britain's strategic relationship with Turkey.

Keywords: Turkey, European Union, Enlargement, Brexit, United Kingdom, immigration

Introduction

While the topic of European Union enlargement has attracted significant academic interest over the years, the way in which it has shaped the domestic political debate in member states remains under-examined.¹ This is perhaps unsurprising. EU matters have traditionally tended to rank low on voters' lists of concerns; even in countries with strong Eurosceptic tendencies, such as Britain.² However, the major enlargement of the EU in 2004, coupled with the financial collapse and then the refugee crisis, saw this change. As immigration became an increasingly important issue for voters,³ many EU member states saw a rise in populism and nationalism.⁴ In the United Kingdom, the debate over immigration became intertwined with the free movement of workers – one of the core principle of the European Union. The future expansion of the EU, which would see the addition of many more millions of new workers, necessarily meant that enlargement became inextricably linked to the immigration debate.⁵

On 23 June 2016, Britain held a referendum on its continued membership of the European Union. It was the country's largest ever exercise in direct democracy and resulted in a narrow win (52 percent) for those who wanted Britain to leave the EU – a policy that had come to be known as 'Brexit'. During the campaign, debate raged

¹ For an exception, see Balfour and Stratulat, *EU Member States and Enlargement Towards the Balkans*.

² IPSOS-MORI run regular polls identifying voter concerns on key issues. Even as late as May 2014, the EU failed to register in the top 10 on the Issues Index. In June 2014, it emerged as eighth on the list (up six places), with 12 per cent of respondents citing it as the most important issue facing Britain today. < <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3410/EconomistIpsos-MORI-June-2014-Issues-Index.aspx> > (Last accessed 27 March 2017).

³ D'Angelo and Kofman, 'UK: Large-Scale Immigration and the Challenge to EU Free Movement'.

⁴ Vieten and Poynting, 'Contemporary Far-Right Racist Populism in Europe'.

⁵ Kahanec et al. 'The Free Movement of Workers in an Enlarged European Union'.

around a variety of issues. For the Remain campaign, the primary focus was the economy. For the Leave campaign, two main themes came to dominate. The first was sovereignty. Under the claim of ‘take back control’, the EU was presented as an undemocratic body that subverted the will of the British people.⁶ The second was immigration. Freedom of movement was not only presented as a challenge to Britain’s public services and social welfare systems, it was portrayed as a threat to the country’s social cohesion and the national sense of identity.⁷ In this context, the prospect of Turkish membership of the EU emerged as a central issue. The Leave campaign repeatedly emphasised that Turkey, with strong British support, was on the cusp of joining the EU and that this would lead to millions of new migrants arriving in Britain. Although these claims were consistently challenged by the Remain campaign, the question of Turkey’s EU membership was prevalent throughout the campaign.

This article explores how and why Turkey’s candidacy for EU membership featured so prominently in the Brexit referendum campaign. It starts by examining Turkey’s relationship with the EU and that although Turkish membership remains the official policy of the European Union, there is little if any prospect that it will happen in anything other than the long term, if ever. It is certainly not on the verge of membership, as the Leave campaign claimed. Next, it analyses the United Kingdom’s attitudes towards EU enlargement and towards Turkey’s membership of the EU. Although Britain has a reputation as being a champion of enlargement, it is shown that there had been a marked change in British support for the policy since 2013. This was driven by growing concerns over immigration and freedom of movement. Consequently, while Britain continued to support Turkish membership of EU, this support was far less pronounced than once was the case. Finally, the article explores the way in which

⁶ For a critique of the sovereignty argument, see Niblett, ‘Britain, the EU and the Sovereignty Myth’.

⁷ Calhoun, ‘Brexit is a Mutiny against the Cosmopolitan Elite’. Other issues raised by the leave campaign was the size of Britain’s contribution to the EU and suggestions that the EU was planning to create a European army.

Turkey's membership featured in the Brexit referendum and how the claims made about its membership were tackled by those advocating continued British membership of EU.

European Enlargement and Turkey

Turkey has had a long and complex relationship with the European Union.⁸ Having concluded an association agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1963, it formally applied to join the European Community on April 14, 1987. Two years later, the European Commission concluded that it would be 'inappropriate' to start new accession talks at that stage due to the wider changes taking place in Europe and the economic and political situation in Turkey.⁹ Although Turkey and the European Union concluded a customs union in 1995, membership prospects remained dim, not least because of ongoing bilateral tensions with Greece.¹⁰ Following a thaw in relations with Athens, Turkey finally became a candidate for membership in December 1999.¹¹

The election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), in November 2002, saw a significant improvement in Turkey's EU accession prospects. Emphasising that its strategic priority was to pursue EU accession, the new Turkish government actively supported a UN reunification plan for Cyprus, in April 2004. In December 2004, the EU finally proposed the start of formal accession talks with Turkey.¹² These started on October 3, 2005. On June 12, 2006, Turkey opened, and provisionally closed, Chapter 25 of the *acquis communautaire*, the EU's body of laws, covering Science and Research. However, just months later, EU foreign ministers decided that eight of the

⁸ There is an extensive literature of Turkish-EU relations. For some of the more recent works see Rumford, *New Perspectives on Turkey-RU Relations*; Yesilada, *EU-Turkey Relations in the 21st Century*.

⁹ 'Commission Opinion on Turkey's Request for Accession to the Community', Commission of the European Communities, SEC(89) 2290 final/2, 20 December 1989.

¹⁰ Altunışık and Tür, *Turkey: Challenges of Continuity and Change*, p.120.

¹¹ 'Preparing for Enlargement', paragraph 12, 'Presidency Conclusions', Helsinki European Council, 10 and 11 December 1999.

¹² Presidency Conclusions, Brussels European Council, 16/17 December 2004.

EU's 35 chapters would not be opened, and no more chapters would be provisionally closed, until Turkey agreed to open its ports and airports to Cypriot flagged vessels.¹³ Notwithstanding this setback, between 2005 and 2010, 13 other chapters were opened.¹⁴ The country also made many important internal reforms needed for EU membership. The role of the military in domestic politics was steadily reduced.¹⁵ Steps were also taken to grant increased rights to the country's ethnic Kurdish community.¹⁶

Despite this, Turkey still faced many significant impediments. EU leaders remained adamant that there could be no membership without a solution to the Cyprus Problem. Meanwhile, across the EU, public opinion remained largely hostile to Turkish accession.¹⁷ Austria even announced that it would not permit Turkey to join without first holding a referendum.¹⁸ Likewise, Turkey's enthusiasm for membership began to wane. There was deep disillusionment at the way in which the EU failed to keep to its commitments to the Turkish Cypriots after their vote for reunification.¹⁹ There were also signs that Turkey's accession reforms were slowing.²⁰ However, Turkey's prospects of joining the EU began to recede dramatically after May 2012. In response to mass demonstrations against the growing authoritarianism of then Prime Minister

¹³ Council of the European Union, Press Release, 2770th Council Meeting, General Affairs and External Relations, Brussels, 11 December 2006. The chapters were: 1. Free Movement of Goods; 3. Right of Establishment for Companies and Freedom to Provide Services; 9. Financial Services; 11. Agriculture and Rural Development; 13. Fisheries; 14. Transport Policy; 29. Customs Union; 30. External Relations.

¹⁴ In order of opening: Chapter 25, Science and Research, 12 June 2006 (Provisionally closed the same day); Chapter 20, Enterprise and Industrial Policy, 29 March 2007; Chapter 18, Statistics, 25 June 2007; Chapter 32, Financial Control, 26 July 2007; Chapter 21, Trans-European Networks, 19 December 2007; Chapter 28, Consumer and Health Protection, 19 December 2007; Chapter 6, Company Law, 17 June 2008; Chapter 7, Intellectual Property Law, 17 June 2008; Chapter 4, Free Movement of Capital, 19 December 2008; Chapter 10, Information Society and Media, 19 December 2008; Chapter 16, Taxation, 30 June 2009; Chapter 27, Environment and Climate Change, 21 December 2009; Chapter 12, Food Safety, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Policy, 30 June 2010.

¹⁵ Güney, 'Europeanization of Civil-Military Relations in Turkey.'

¹⁶ Cengiz and Hoffman, 'Rethinking Conditionality'.

¹⁷ 'Europeans reject Turkey, poll shows', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2005. In France, support for Turkish membership stood at just 16 per cent. In Germany, it was 21 per cent. Barysch, 'What European Think about Turkey and Why'.

¹⁸ 'Austria signals referendum on Turkey's EU accession', *Euractiv*, August 25, 2008.

¹⁹ Akgün and Tiryaki, 'A Forgotten Promise: Ending the Isolation of the Turkish Cypriots'.

²⁰ Patton, 'AKP Reform Fatigue in Turkey'.

Erdoğan, the government cracked down on dissent. Access to social media was repeatedly blocked,²¹ and many opposition media organisations were closed.²² Efforts to end the long-standing Kurdish conflict came to an end.²³ Criticism of Turkey grew significantly within the EU. Many began to argue that under its current course Turkey simply could not hope to meet the Copenhagen criteria for political freedom that forms the cornerstone of any EU membership bid.²⁴ Even Turkey recognised that the prospect of membership appeared to be receding.²⁵ Just one new chapter was opened between 2011 and the end of 2015.²⁶

The emergence of the refugee crisis, in summer 2015, necessitated a thawing of relations between Turkey and the EU. Desperate to stem the flow of over a million refugees into Europe, EU leaders agreed to open two new chapters.²⁷ However, it was clearly a decision based on political expediency, rather than the country's suitability for membership.²⁸ Within the EU, there was no longer an appetite to see Turkey join. Similarly, in Turkey there was increasing reluctance to pursue EU membership in any meaningful way. While Erdoğan, who was now president, benefitted from being able to give the impression that Turkey's accession process remained on track, it was increasingly accepted that he saw little value in a process that would inevitably put him under closer political scrutiny and force him to step back from his authoritarianism. He

²¹ 'Turkey social media ban raises censorship fears', *BBC News*, April 7, 2015

²² 'Turkey: Freedom of the Press 2016', Freedom House < <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/turkey> > (Last accessed 20 October 2016); Ranked 151/180 in 2016 'World Press Freedom Index', Reporters without Borders < <https://rsf.org/en/turkey> > (Last accessed, 20 October 2016).

²³ Göksel, 'A New Cycle Begins in Turkey-PKK Conflict'.

²⁴ 'Erdoğan's Turkey has no place in the EU, say MEPs', *Euractiv*, June 13, 2013. Standing for the Presidency of the European Commission, in 2014, Jean Claude Juncker stated that, 'the country is clearly far away from EU membership. A government that blocks twitter is certainly not ready for accession.' 'My Foreign Policy Objectives', Jean Claude Juncker, April 23, 2014 < http://juncker.epp.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/nodes/en_03_fp.pdf > (Last accessed July 14, 2017).

²⁵ 'Turkey 'will probably never be EU member'', *The Telegraph*, September 21, 2013.

²⁶ Chapter 22, Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments, November 5, 2013.

²⁷ Chapter 17, Economic and Monetary Policy, December 14, 2015; Chapter 33, Financial and Budgetary Provision, June 30, 2016.

²⁸ Guy Verhofstadt, 'This Turkish deal is illegal and betrays Europe's values', *The Guardian*, March 10, 2016.

was increasingly happy to take a very different course when its own wishes diverged from those of the EU.²⁹ While Turkey remained a candidate for EU membership, by 2016 few believed that this would happen in anything other than the long term.³⁰

British Government support for EU enlargement and Turkish membership

Traditionally, the United Kingdom has been regarded as the strongest proponent of EU expansion.³¹ Driving this support was the underlying wish of successive British governments to shape the process of European integration. Fearful of a real or perceived desire by other EU members to create an ever-deeper political union, perhaps with the end goal of creating a federal Europe, Britain came to see enlargement as the best way to avert this process.³² To this end, Britain strongly supported the accession of ten Central and Eastern European countries in 2004, as well as the subsequent membership of Bulgaria and Romania, in 2007, and Croatia, in 2013.³³

Just as the United Kingdom had long supported EU enlargement in general terms, the British government also became an ardent supporter of Turkish membership.³⁴ In the context of the wider goal of preventing closer EU political integration, Turkey was long seen to be the most valuable prize of all. Britain believed that the accession of such a

²⁹ Yilmaz, 'From Europeanization to De-Europeanization'. As he told the EU, in May 2016, in response to calls by the EU for his government to change controversial new anti-terrorism legislation: 'we'll go our way, you go yours.' 'EU-Turkey visa deal on brink as Erdoğan refuses to change terror laws', *The Guardian*, May 6, 2016; 'Turkey's long road to EU membership just got longer', *The Guardian*, July 20, 2016.

³⁰ 'Turkey in no position to become EU member any time soon: Juncker', *Reuters*, July 25, 2016.

³¹ 'The Future of EU Enlargement', European Union Committee, House of Lords, Tenth Report of Session 2012-13.

³² Grant, *Europe's Blurred Boundaries*. This approach was perhaps most neatly captured in an episode of the classic British political comedy, *Yes Minister*. In one scene, Jim Hacker, the fictional Minister of Administrative Affairs, discusses Britain's relationship with the then European Economic Community (EEC) with his chief civil servant, Sir Humphrey Appleby. Sir Humphrey explains that for the past 500 years Britain has had one key policy objective: to create a disunited 'Europe'. Hacker then asks why, if that is the case, Britain had been pushing for more members. Sir Humphrey replies, "the more members it has, the more arguments it can stir up, the more futile and impotent it becomes." Yes Minister, 'The Devil You Know', Series 2, Episode 5, 1982.

³³ Ker-Lindsay, 'The United Kingdom', p.54

³⁴ For an overview of British attitudes towards Turkish EU membership, see 'UK-Turkey relations and Turkey's regional role', Foreign Affairs Committee, 12th Report, House of Commons, 2012.

large country, which also held strong views on national sovereignty, would necessarily halt federalist trends within the EU.³⁵ For this reason, London consistently argued in favour of maintaining a realistic accession prospect for the country.³⁶ Under the centre-left New Labour administration (1997-2010), the United Kingdom actively supported Turkish candidacy in 1999, as well as the opening of accession talks, in 2005. While French and German politicians have over the years expressed their reservations about the Turkish EU entry,³⁷ although often deciding not to upset Turkey by rejecting membership out of hand, British political figures from across the political spectrum consistently expressed their strongest support for Turkish accession.³⁸ This was also matched by closer economic and political cooperation. In October 2007, the United Kingdom and Turkey signed a major ‘strategic partnership’.³⁹

Despite strong governmental support for enlargement and Turkish membership, the British public was rather less enthusiastic. A May 2006 Eurobarometer showed that just 49 percent of British respondents thought that the enlargement of the EU was ‘something positive’, as compared to 55 percent across the EU-27. This put the UK below Sweden (66), Belgium (64), Ireland (62), Netherlands (61), Italy (59), and Germany (52).⁴⁰ On Turkish membership, a Eurobarometer published the following year showed support ran at just 30 percent, with 52 percent against. Although this was rather better than many other leading EU members – for example, the same figures were

³⁵ MacLennan, ‘The EU-Turkey Negotiations’, p.24.

³⁶ Wallace, ‘The UK: 40 Years of EU Membership’, p.542.

³⁷ Barysch, ‘What Europeans Think About Turkey and Why’.

³⁸ ‘Blair pledges to champion Turkey's entry to EU’, *The Independent*, May 17, 2004; ‘Turkey's future lies in EU, says Blair’, *The Guardian*, September 30, 2005; ‘Blair warns of sending wrong signal to Turkey on EU bid’, *International Herald Tribune*, November 29, 2006; ‘UK vows to Back Turkey’s EU Bid’, *BBC News*, September 5, 2007;

³⁹ The agreement, which can no longer be found on the British Government’s website, came in for considerable criticism as it appeared to support direct links between the United Kingdom and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which unilaterally declared independence in 1983 and which is only recognised by Turkey. This inclusion of a direct reference to the TRNC caused a major rift in UK-Cyprus relations, and was raised in the British Parliament: ‘Cyprus and the Strategic Partnership with Turkey’, Early Day Motion 93, House of Commons, November 6, 2007.

⁴⁰ Special Eurobarometer, ‘The Future of Europe’, European Commission, May 2006.

25/60 in Italy, 22/69 in France, 16/78 and 5/87 in Austria – it hardly showed strong popular support for the government’s policy in favour of Turkish membership.⁴¹

Despite the cool public attitudes towards enlargement and Turkish membership, the arrival of a Conservative-led government, in May 2010, at first seemed to herald a continuation of British support for Turkey’s EU membership. In July 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron, told an audience in Ankara that he was, ‘the strongest possible advocate’ of Turkish membership.⁴² At the same time, concerted efforts were made to expand bilateral British-Turkish relations in the context of a renewed ‘Strategic Partnership’.⁴³ In the years that followed, London continued to support Turkish accession.⁴⁴ However, such statements appeared to ring increasingly hollow. Despite Britain’s strong reputation for supporting enlargement, support for further expansion in fact waned after 2010. This was driven by a growing debate over immigration.

The immigration debate and the path to the referendum

As well as being a long-standing champion of expanding the membership of the EU, Britain was also one of the strongest proponents of freedom of movement for new member states. In 2004, it was one of the few EU15 member states that decided to waive the seven year transitional restrictions on freedom of movement for the ten new members. Originally, it was projected that the number of arrivals from the new member states would be 13,000-15,000 per year.⁴⁵ The actual numbers vastly exceeded this. According Home Office figures, 600,000 workers had registered by the summer of

⁴¹ QA33.13, Eurobarometer 66, European Commission, September 2007.

⁴² David Cameron, speech in Ankara, July 27, 2010, via Number 10 website (www.number10.gov.uk).

⁴³ ‘UK-Turkey Relations and Turkey’s Regional Role’, Twelfth Report, Foreign Affairs Committee, March 20, 2012, paras.10-15.

⁴⁴ ‘David Cameron welcomes Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan’, Cabinet Office, July 30, 2012. < <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/david-cameron-welcomes-turkish-prime-minister-recep-tayyip-erdogan> > (Last accessed July 14, 2017). ‘David Cameron: I still want Turkey to join EU, despite migrant fears’, *The Telegraph*, December 9, 2014.

⁴⁵ ‘‘Nearly 600,000’ new EU migrants’, *BBC News*, August 22, 2006.

2006.⁴⁶ As a result, when Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU, in 2007, Britain imposed seven year transitional restrictions on the freedom of movement for both countries.⁴⁷ This did little to stem the flow from the 2004 members. In the year to June 2013, the month before Croatia's accession, net migration from the EU reached 182,000.⁴⁸ Croatia therefore also faced controls when it joined the Union.⁴⁹

The arrivals of larger than expected number from the EU saw the broader question of immigration become more prominent in British political debate.⁵⁰ British public opinion – encouraged by a media that was dominated by newspapers that took a distinctly Eurosceptic line⁵¹ – became increasingly concerned about the demographic implications of further EU expansion. Support for further EU enlargement was now running at just 33 percent.⁵² Such fears were further exacerbated by the imminent end of transitional controls on Bulgarians and Romanians, on January 1, 2014. Faced with a growing threat from the hard-right, anti-immigration, Eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP),⁵³ the Conservative Party now moderated its previous support for

⁴⁶ 'European Union, Fifty-Third Report, European Union Select Committee, House of Lords, para.86.

⁴⁷ For a full outline of the restriction imposed see Melanie Gower and Oliver Hawkins, 'Ending of transitional restrictions for Bulgarian and Romanian workers', House of Commons Library, November 29, 2013.

⁴⁸ 'Net migration into UK increases - Office for National Statistics', *BBC News*, November 28, 2013.

⁴⁹ Melanie Gower, 'Croatian nationals' rights to live and work in the UK after joining the EU', House of Commons Library, July 15, 2013.

⁵⁰ Duffy and Frere-Smith, *Perception and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration*.

⁵¹ Of the mainstream British newspapers, *The Sun*, *The Mail*, *The Express*, and *The Daily Telegraph* all took a generally Eurosceptic line. (Although the *Mail on Sunday* eventually supported a vote to remain in the EU.) *The Independent* and *The Guardian* are generally seen to be pro-European. However, the degree to which they drive opposition to the European Union was contested. 'It would be a mistake to conflate the role of the press in reporting European Union affairs with wider economic, social and political developments which feed criticism and cynicism about the EU. The British media reflects rather than creates popular attitudes although it does so through the distorting prism of a massive magnifying glass.' Palmer, 'The British press and euroscepticism: mirror or magnifying glass'.

⁵² QA18.3, Eurobarometer 78, European Commission, December 2012.

⁵³ In the May 2014 European Parliamentary elections, UKIP made significant gains. 'European Parliament Elections 2014', House of Commons Library, Research Paper 14/32, June 11, 2014, p.2. For an excellent overview of the underlying reasons for the rise in Euroscepticism in Britain at the time (as well as France, Denmark and the Netherlands), see Gottfried, 'Continental Drift: Understanding the Growth of Euroscepticism'. It then gained its first seats at Westminster following the defection of two Conservative MPs. Both cited immigration as a major concern that had driven their decisions. 'It's time for change', Douglas Carswell Blog, August 28, 2014; 'Why I am leaving the Conservative party and joining UKIP', Mark Reckless, September 27, 2014 < <http://markreckless.com/2014/09/27/why-i-am-leaving-the-conservative-party-and-joining-ukip/> >. (Last accessed 3 October 2016)

enlargement. Rather than see expansion as the best way in which to stave off political union, it came to see enlargement as an immigration problem.⁵⁴ As David Cameron stated: ‘As we contemplate countries like Serbia and Albania one day joining the EU we must find a way to slow down access to each other’s labour markets until we can be sure this will not cause vast migrations...I look forward to finding a way to continue with enlargement but in a way that regains the trust and support of our peoples.’⁵⁵ While the official British position was to support enlargement,⁵⁶ the reality was that as concerns over immigration became the primary policy focus, political support for enlargement was less strong than it once was.⁵⁷

What made the growing debate over immigration and enlargement so significant was the way in which it fed into the question of Britain’s continued membership of the EU.⁵⁸ Ever since the Conservatives had come to power, Eurosceptic members on the right-wing of the party had pressed the case for a referendum on the issue. Coupled with the growing support for UKIP, Cameron had no choice but to bow to their wishes. In January 2013, he announced that if the Conservatives secured a majority in the next election, he would seek a ‘new settlement’ on Britain’s place in the EU and would then put the question of membership to a popular vote.⁵⁹ In the period that followed, immigration and enlargement became increasingly central to the debate over any new relationship between Britain and the EU. A December 2013 poll, taken shortly before

⁵⁴ ‘How the Tory right turned against EU enlargement’, *The Guardian*, December 21, 2013; ‘Once Tories’ answer to EU fears, enlargement is now their problem’, *The Observer*, December 30, 2013.

⁵⁵ ‘UK no longer advocates for EU enlargement’ *Euractiv*, December 21, 2013. Members of the government now made it ever clearer that there could no longer be an unfettered right of freedom of movement. Some measure would have to be introduced. For instance, one idea was that the freedom of movement from any new member would be limited until the per capita income of the new entrant reached a certain proportion of the EU average per capita income.

⁵⁶ ‘EU Enlargement’, House of Lords Hansard (Daily record of Parliament) Written Answers, Tuesday 17 June 2014. Certainly, within the corridors of the Foreign Office there was still a commitment to enlargement. British official, comment to the author, October 2014.

⁵⁷ James Ker-Lindsay, ‘The United Kingdom’, p.57.

⁵⁸ ‘Goodbye Europe’, *The Economist*, December 12, 2012; ‘Cameron to threaten EU with British exit’, *The Times*, August 25, 2014.

⁵⁹ ‘EU speech at Bloomberg’, January 23, 2013. < <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg> > (Last accessed July 14, 2017).

the transitional controls on Bulgarian and Romanian citizens was lifted, showed that British voters identified limits on new arrivals from elsewhere in the Union as the single most important issue that should be tackled in talks with EU.⁶⁰

On May 7, 2015, Britain held a general election. In a major political upset, the Conservatives defied expectations and won an outright victory. Cameron had to deliver on his manifesto promise to hold a vote on continued membership before 2017. Weeks later, the government introduced legislation for a referendum.⁶¹ In the meantime, the government negotiated a series of changes to the terms of British membership of the European Union.⁶² In February, it was announced that the referendum on EU membership would be held on June 23, 2016.⁶³

Turkey as an issue in the referendum campaign

Although the official referendum campaign would not officially start until April 15, 2016, the two sides set out their positions as soon as the date of the vote was announced. For the Remain campaign, attention would be focused on the economic benefits of staying in the European Union. In contrast, the Leave campaign sought to emphasise the argument that leaving the EU was about sovereignty – encapsulated in the slogan ‘take back control’ – and immigration. Despite research showing that EU citizens in Britain were making an important contribution to the British economy and paying more in taxes than they were receiving in benefits,⁶⁴ repeated claims were made that schools, hospitals and the country’s transport networks were unable to cope with so many new

⁶⁰ ‘EU referendum: the red lines for swing voters’, *YouGov*, December 18, 2013.

⁶¹ Full title: ‘An Act to make provision for the holding of a referendum in the United Kingdom and Gibraltar on whether the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Union’, <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/36/contents/enacted/data.htm>> (Last accessed, July 14, 2017)

⁶² European Council meeting (February 18 and 19, 2016), Conclusions.

⁶³ ‘EU referendum: Cameron sets June date for UK vote’, BBC News, February 20, 2016.

⁶⁴ Dustmann and Frattini, ‘The Fiscal Effects of Immigration to the UK’.

arrivals.⁶⁵ Others cast their views in more overtly xenophobic terms. Immigrants from the EU were portrayed as a threat to British values and culture. What would make all this particularly significant in the context of Turkey's EU membership was that these arguments were also taking place at a time of rising anti-Muslim sentiment in the country. A series of high profile terrorist attacks in France and Belgium a few months earlier had led to a worrying rise in anti-Islamic sentiment in the country. Figures released by the police in December 2015 showed that attacks on Muslim targets had tripled following the Paris attacks.⁶⁶

It was against this general backdrop of growing concerns about immigration from the EU and a rise in anti-Islamic sentiment that Turkey first entered the referendum debate in an unexpectedly direct way. By convention, each major party is occasionally allocated time on the BBC, the public broadcast service, to make what is known as a party political broadcast.⁶⁷ On February 2, over two months before the official start of the campaign, UKIP had its turn. Rather than repeat its long-held claims that the EU was holding the United Kingdom back from trade with the rest of the world, or that membership was an attack on British sovereignty and democracy, it devoted its entire three-and-a-half-minute broadcast to the danger posed by Turkish membership of the European Union.⁶⁸ Emphasising the country's size and its Muslim heritage, UKIP insisted that Turkey was just five years away from membership. The message was clear. Britain had to leave the EU before Turkey joined. Unsurprisingly, the broadcast

⁶⁵ 'Public Services and Infrastructure | Key Topics', Migration Watch, May 2016. < <https://www.migrationwatchuk.org/key-topics/public-services-infrastructure> > (Last accessed, July 14, 2017); 'School places shortage fuelled by EU Open Borders', UKIP, April 18, 2016; 'Migration costs the NHS far more than we ever knew', UKIP, April 18, 2016.

⁶⁶ 'Anti-Muslim prejudice 'is moving to the mainstream'', *The Guardian*, December 5, 2015.

⁶⁷ 'Party Political Broadcasting', BBC Trust, < http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/party_political_broadcasts.html > (Last Accessed, July 14, 2016).

⁶⁸ 'Cameron Wants Turkey to Join the EU', Party Political Broadcast, UKIP, 3 February 2016. < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnrFddSJWsk> > (Last accessed, July 14, 2017).

attracted significant criticism.⁶⁹ Importantly, though, the broadcast watchdog (Ofcom) rejected accusations of racism.⁷⁰ From then onwards, Turkey's prospective membership of the European Union became a mainstay of UKIP's Brexit campaign.⁷¹

Although UKIP was a crucial protagonist in the overall campaign to leave the EU, it would not lead the efforts to secure Brexit. Instead, three main groups fought to run the campaign: Vote Leave, Grassroots Out (which was supported by UKIP) and Leave.EU (which was, confusingly, supported by UKIP's leader, Nigel Farage). On April 13, two days before campaigning officially began, the Electoral Commission designated Vote Leave as the official leave campaign.⁷² This was significant. Comprised mainly of members of the Conservative Party – including prominent cabinet ministers, who had been given special exemption by the prime minister to campaign against the government on Brexit⁷³ – it initially avoided focusing on immigration, and therefore on Turkey. Instead, it concentrated on making the economic case for Brexit. It emphasised the possibility of a free-trading Britain open to business with the wider world. The problem was that it was already becoming obvious that the official Remain campaign – named 'Britain Stronger in Europe' or, more simply, 'Stronger In' – was winning the economic argument. As well as official British Government reports arguing that the

⁶⁹ 'Liberal Democrats refer UKIP to the BBC Trust and Ofcom', Liberal Democrats, 4 February 2016 < <http://www.libdems.org.uk/liberal-democrats-refer-ukip-to-the-bbc-trust-and-ofcom> > (Last accessed, July 14, 2017); 'Ofcom considers investigation into Ukip broadcast after 31 complaints', *The Guardian*, February 5, 2016.

⁷⁰ 'Ukip broadcast cleared after complaints of racism and Islamophobia', *The Guardian*, February 22, 2016.

⁷¹ See, inter alia, 'Vote remain for political union with Turkey, vote leave if you believe in Britain says Nigel Farage', UKIP, March 9, 2016; 'Turkey IN means Britain OUT of the EU', UKIP, March 8, 2016; 'Turkey visa deal – a huge error of judgement says Farage', UKIP, May 4, 2016; 'UKIP Deputy Chairman William Dartmouth calls on the PM to be honest with the British people over Turkey potentially joining the EU', UKIP, May 23, 2016; 'Ford used European loans to relocate British jobs to Turkey with more potentially to go at Dagenham', UKIP, June 20, 2016.

⁷² 'Electoral Commission designates 'Vote Leave Ltd' and 'The In Campaign Ltd' as lead campaigners at EU Referendum', Electoral Commission, April 13, 2016. < <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a-journalist/electoral-commission-media-centre/news-releases-referendums/electoral-commission-designates-vote-leave-ltd-and-the-in-campaign-ltd-as-lead-campaigners-at-eu-referendum> > (Last accessed, July 14, 2017)

⁷³ 'David Cameron confirms ministers can campaign for 'Brexit'', *The Guardian*, January 5, 2016.

country would suffer outside the EU,⁷⁴ various other international bodies, such as the IMF and the OECD, expected Brexit to have a negative effect on the British economy.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, various international leaders, including Barack Obama,⁷⁶ and senior figures from Australia, New Zealand and Canada – the crucial ‘Old Commonwealth’ partners of the UK – expressed support for continued British membership of the EU.⁷⁷

Within days of the official start of the campaign, Vote Leave had lost the economic debate.⁷⁸ It now saw no choice but to turn its attention to immigration.⁷⁹ At this point, Turkey again came to the forefront of the debate. On May 20, Vote Leave published a report highlighting the intolerable strain Turkish membership of the EU would put on the National Health Service.⁸⁰ Over the next few days, the campaign kept up its attacks on Turkey. Appearing on a prominent political programme, Penny Mordaunt, the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, and a prominent Leave campaigner, even argued that that Turkey posed a security threat to the European Union, and by extension Britain; even though it was a NATO member. More significantly, she insisted – wholly incorrectly – that the British Government did not have a veto over Turkey’s membership.⁸¹ Speaking hours later, on another talk show, Cameron refuted Mordaunt’s claims. He stressed that Britain, alongside every other EU member, could

⁷⁴ ‘HM Treasury Analysis: The Long-Term Economic Impact of EU Membership and the Alternatives’, HM Treasury, April 18, 2016 < <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hm-treasury-analysis-the-long-term-economic-impact-of-eu-membership-and-the-alternatives> > (Last accessed, July 14, 2017).

⁷⁵ ‘The Economic Consequences of Brexit’, *OECD Insights*, April 27, 2016; ‘IMF says Brexit ‘Pretty Bad to Very, Very Bad’’, *BBC News*, May 13, 2016.

⁷⁶ ‘Obama gives powerful warning against Brexit’, *Financial Times*, April 22, 2016.

⁷⁷ ‘Why Australia wants Britain to stay in the EU’, *The Telegraph*, February 12, 2016; ‘UK stronger in EU, says New Zealand PM’, *BBC News*, April 1, 2016; ‘Canada urges Britain to stay in the EU’, *The Guardian*, May 20, 2016.

⁷⁸ ‘By winning the economic argument, the Remain campaign believes it will win the EU referendum’, *New Statesman*, April 21, 2016.

⁷⁹ ‘EU referendum: Vote Leave focuses on immigration’, *BBC News*, May 25, 2016. Moore and Ramsay, *UK Media Coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum Campaign*, p.68.

⁸⁰ ‘Paving the Road from Ankara’: The EU, Immigration and the NHS’, Vote Leave, May 20, 2016. < http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/_paving_the_road_from_ankara_the_eu_immigration_and_the_nhs > (Last accessed, 3 June 2016)

⁸¹ ‘EU referendum: Row over Turkey’s membership bid escalates’, *BBC News*, May 22, 2016.

block the accession of new members.⁸² However, he then went even further and took the opportunity to play down the possibility of Turkey's membership, insisting that it would be, 'literally decades before this even had a prospect of happening.' Indeed, at the current rate of progress, Turkey would not be ready to join the bloc 'until the year 3000'.⁸³ Undeterred, Vote Leave kept up the pressure. On May 23, it unveiled a controversial campaign poster showing a British passport against a red background, with the caption: 'Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU'.⁸⁴ This immediately led to accusations that the campaign was now pursuing an openly racist agenda aimed at vilifying Turks.⁸⁵

What made Vote Leave's attempt to target Turkey especially significant was that a number of its leading supporters had previously been very positively disposed towards Turkey.⁸⁶ Indeed, many key members of the campaign were part of the Conservative Friends of Turkey – a body that explicitly stated that one of its objectives was to lobby for Turkish EU membership.⁸⁷ Perhaps the most prominent member of this group was

⁸² 'Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union. The European Parliament and national Parliaments shall be notified of this application. The applicant State shall address its application to the Council, which shall act unanimously after consulting the Commission and after receiving the assent of the European Parliament, which shall act by an absolute majority of its component members. The conditions of admission and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the Union is founded, which such admission entails, shall be the subject of an agreement between the Member States and the applicant State. This agreement shall be submitted for ratification by all the contracting States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements. The conditions of eligibility agreed upon by the European Council shall be taken into account.'

⁸³ 'Turkey unlikely to join EU 'until the year 3000', says Cameron', *Financial Times*, May 22, 2016. Oliver, *Unleashing Demons*, pp.240-241.

⁸⁴ The poster can be found at < <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/21/vote-leave-prejudice-turkey-eu-security-threat#img-2> > (Last accessed, July 15, 2017)

⁸⁵ 'Vote Leave embroiled in race row over Turkey security threat claims', *The Guardian*, May 22, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/21/vote-leave-prejudice-turkey-eu-security-threat> > (Last accessed, 3 June 2016); Philip Stevens, 'The Brexiters' Ugly Campaign to Vilify Turks', *Financial Times*, June 9, 2016.

⁸⁶ 'Revealed: MPs Who Cite Turkey as Reason to Leave the EU Earlier Wanted in Inside the EU', Political Scrapbook, May 25, 2016. < <https://politicalscrapbook.net/2016/05/exposed-key-tory-mps-who-want-to-leave-eu-now-because-of-turkey-earlier-wanted-it-inside-the-eu/> > (Last accessed, 3 June 2016)

⁸⁷ Conservative Friends of Turkey < <http://www.cfot.org.uk/about-us/> >. Key Leave supporters listed as founder members of the Conservative Friends of Turkey included Douglas Carswell MP (who had since defected to UKIP), Daniel Hannan MEP, Daniel Kawczynski MP, Boris Johnson. < <http://www.cfot.org.uk/founder-members/> > (Last accessed, July 14, 2017).

Boris Johnson, who had been Mayor of London until May 2016, and had emerged as the figurehead in the Leave campaign. As someone with Turkish ancestry – he is the great-grandson of Ali Kemal, who had served as Interior Minister in the Ottoman Government⁸⁸ – he had always been a particularly strong supporter of Turkey’s EU membership and had previously called for greater respect and tolerance for Turkey.⁸⁹ Like others, he also avoided playing the Turkish EU card at the start.⁹⁰ However, as the campaign wore on he too changed his position. In a co-signed letter to the prime minister, he called on Cameron to guarantee that Turkey would never join the EU and that Britain would promise to veto it.⁹¹

As the campaign continued, the question of Turkey’s EU accession remained a central issue. During the first televised debate, Cameron was put on the spot by a young woman who asked how the UK could support Turkish membership, given that it ‘financed ISIS’. Again, he emphasised that according to the current pace of negotiations, it would not be ready to join until the year 3000.⁹² The next day, Vote Leave tweeted a picture of new EU offices and asked: ‘If Turkey isn’t joining the EU, why are there seats and interpreter booths built for them in the new EU building?’⁹³ The message was deceptive. MEPs had in fact recently recommended that Turkish become an official language of the European Union at the request of the Cypriot Government, which had suggested the measure as a goodwill gesture towards Turkish Cypriots in the context

⁸⁸ For a brief overview of Ali Kemal, see Norman Stone, ‘My Dream for Turkey, by Boris’s Great Grandfather’, *The Spectator*, April 23, 2008.

⁸⁹ Boris Johnson, ‘Why are we so afraid of Turkey?’, *The Spectator*, February 26, 2007

⁹⁰ When the matter came during a television interview he stated: ‘Frankly, I don’t mind whether Turkey joins the EU, provided the UK leaves the EU.’ Andrew Marr Show, BBC 1, June 5, 2016. Owen Bennet, ‘Boris Johnson: UK Population Will Hit 80 Million If We Stay in the EU’, Huffington Post, June 5, 2016.

⁹¹ ‘Boris Johnson and Michael Gove demand David Cameron veto Turkey’s membership of the EU’, *Daily Telegraph*, June 16m 2016. In an act that many called hypocritical, just months later, after he was appointed foreign secretary, Johnson visited Ankara and promised to support Turkey’s EU bid. ‘Boris Johnson accused of ‘Olympian hypocrisy’ for backing Turkey EU bid’, *iNews*, September 27, 2016.

⁹² ‘Feeling the heat, Prime Minister? Cameron sweats as he gets a mauling from voters over immigration, Project Fear and ‘waffling’ during first referendum TV debate’, *Daily Mail*, June 2, 2016.

⁹³ Tweet by @vote_leave, June 3, 2016 https://twitter.com/vote_leave/status/738666282288066560 (Last accessed, July 14, 2017)

of ongoing reunification efforts.⁹⁴ It also released another controversial leaflet. Showing Turkey on a map alongside the other candidates for EU membership, and listing their populations, it also highlighted that Turkey's neighbours included Iraq and Syria. The message was clear. Turkish membership would bring with it Middle East instability.⁹⁵

In the face of this unrelenting emphasis on Turkish membership, speculation mounted that Cameron was preparing to announce that Turkey would only be able to join the EU if the British people approved of its membership in a referendum.⁹⁶ Certainly, there were those who felt that he should do so as this would undermine the Leave campaign, perhaps fatally.⁹⁷ However, others urged caution, arguing that it would only add credibility to the claims that Turkey would join.⁹⁸ Speaking before the House of Commons at his weekly Prime Minister's Question, on 8 June, Cameron did not mention the matter. Nor was any such commitment made at any point during the rest of the campaign.

As the campaign entered its final stretch, the focus on Turkey continued. On June 12, the penultimate Sunday of the campaign, *The Sunday Times*, an influential newspaper advocating Brexit, published a report suggesting that British diplomats had been 'secretly' discussing the possibility of granting visa free travel to up to one million Turkish citizens, and that these plans were being kept under wraps until after the EU referendum.⁹⁹ The Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, Philip Hammond and

⁹⁴ European Parliament, '2015 Report on Turkey: European Parliament resolution of 14 April 2016 on the 2015 report on Turkey (2015/2898(RSP))', para.51.

⁹⁵ 'EU referendum: Brexit campaign accused of 'fanning flames of division' with controversial map', *The Independent*, June 6, 2016.

⁹⁶ 'Could a referendum on Turkey's EU membership sink Brexit?', *Financial Times*, June 7, 2016.

⁹⁷ Senior opposition parliamentarian, comments to the author, June 2016.

⁹⁸ 'Could a referendum on Turkey's EU membership sink Brexit?', *Financial Times*, June 7, 2016.

⁹⁹ 'Leaked UK plan to open doors for 1m Turks', *The Sunday Times*, June 12, 2016. According to the report, visa-free travel would be offered to Turkish citizens holding a 'special passport'; a passport given to serving and retired Turkish MPs and civil servants, and their families. The documents were prepared by the Deputy Head of Mission at the British Embassy in Ankara, and the suggestion in

Theresa May, the two most senior figures who would have been involved with any such plan, and who had both come out in support of Remain, immediately denied the story. They put it down to a ‘selective leak’.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, Vote Leave quickly seized on the ‘revelation’. Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Justice, claimed that the report was evidence that the British Government was ‘actively working towards Turkey joining the EU and Turkish citizens being able to travel throughout the EU.’¹⁰¹ At the same time, Priti Patel, another member of the government campaigning for Brexit, drew attention to a report by Migration Watch, an anti-immigration think tank, suggesting that Turkish EU membership would mean that an extra 100,000 people a year would come to Britain, thus taking annual immigration to 460,000.¹⁰² Once again, Cameron strongly repudiated all these claims: ‘There is no prospect of Turkey joining the EU in decades. You cannot find an expert on this subject – you’ve been quoting lots of experts – you cannot find one, because it’s not going to happen.’¹⁰³

Up until this point, Turkey, like many other EU members and candidate countries, had steered clear of becoming involved in the referendum debate. However, the increasingly strong tone taken by the sides now forced it to respond. Mevlüt Çavasoğlu, the Turkish Foreign Minister, argued that it was not ‘right’ that Turkish membership had become a central issue in the campaign. His country had never been a ‘burden’ on the EU.¹⁰⁴ Others in Turkey were far more scathing. Speaking on the BBC, İlnur Çevik, President Erdoğan’s chief adviser, said that his country had been ‘flabbergasted’ by Britain’s stand. Noting that the Turkish Government had thought that the prime minister

question was just one idea of many. It did not reflect formal policy at the Foreign Office, let alone amount to actual planning.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Turkey visa move suggested by UK diplomat, papers show’, *BBC News*, June 12, 2016.

¹⁰¹ ‘Gove says government ‘working towards’ Turkey joining EU’, *BBC News*, June 12, 2016.

¹⁰² ‘Tory Cabinet member Priti Patel says 100,000 extra migrants will come to the UK when Turkey joins the EU’, *The Telegraph*, June 12, 2016. Migration Watch, ‘The Outlook for Migration to the UK’.

¹⁰³ Transcript, ‘Andrew Marr Show, 12th June, 2016, I/V David Cameron, MP’, <

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/12061602.pdf> > (Last accessed 24 October 2016.). For an example of expert commentary on the issue, see Kortweg, ‘Storm in a Turkish Tea Cup’.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Turkey should not be an issue in EU referendum, says foreign minister’, *The Guardian*, June 22, 2016.

was its ‘chief supporter’ in its quest for EU membership, he said that Turkey now felt ‘taken in’ by his stance. As he explained, ‘the way [Cameron is] putting it, “they were never going to get in anyway, we just said we’ll go along with them”, that kind of attitude is deeply hurting the Turks...it is very insincere.’ As for the claims that millions of Turkish citizens would try to enter the UK after accession, he repudiated these by asking, ‘why should we be flooding Britain? There’s no reason. Whatever exists in Britain also exists in Turkey. We’re not going to go there just because you produce Cadbury’s chocolate and Maltesers.’¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, on the day before the referendum, President Erdoğan even waded into the debate, albeit indirectly. Launching a scathing attack on the way in which the EU was treating Turkey, and accusing it of not wanting a ‘Muslim-majority country’, he even suggested that Turkey might consider holding its own referendum on whether to continue EU accession talks.¹⁰⁶

Despite all this, the Leave campaign kept up the message about Turkey’s membership, and Britain’s support for it, to the very end. The day before the referendum, *The Daily Mail*, a leading Eurosceptic newspaper, claimed that the Government was ‘lying’ to the British public over Turkey’s membership of the EU and that plans had been drawn up to reopen Turkish membership talks in the week immediately after the referendum. It also seized on the comments made by Çevik that Britain had been at the forefront of efforts to see Turkey join the Union. As Ian Duncan Smith, another prominent member of the Leave Campaign, and a former leader of the Conservative party, put it:

David Cameron has repeatedly claimed that Turkey is not going to join the EU, despite it being Government policy. Now the Turkish government has confirmed that he is the “chief supporter” of their bid to join the EU...I’m afraid

¹⁰⁵ ‘Turkey Entry to EU: Newsnight Ilnur Çevik Interview’, BBC Newsnight, 21 June 2016. < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjNnpWy-vXI> > (Last accessed, 24 October 2016.)

¹⁰⁶ ‘Turkey could hold UK-style referendum on stalled EU bid: Erdoğan’, *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 23, 2016.

there is no conclusion you can draw from this except that David Cameron is colluding with the EU and lying to the British people. Families are suffering the consequences of uncontrolled migration.¹⁰⁷

On June 23, Britain voted to leave the European Union.

Conclusion

There were many factors that appeared to play a part in the decision by the United Kingdom to vote to leave the European Union. What exactly drove the final decision will inevitably be a point of dispute amongst analysts and scholars in the years ahead. However, a poll of 12,369 people carried out on the day of the vote, indicated that immigration, incorporating freedom of movement, appears to have been the deciding factor for one third of those who voted to leave the EU.¹⁰⁸ Given that Turkey was cited considerable more than any other country in articles about immigration during the 10 weeks of the referendum campaign, and that ‘the most negative depictions of non-UK nationals were of Turks and Albanians’,¹⁰⁹ it therefore seems almost inevitable that the question of Turkish membership of the European Union influenced, to some degree or another, the decision of Britain to vote to leave the EU.

Although few may have expected the topic of Turkish membership to have gained such a prominent position in the campaign, in retrospect it should not have been so surprising. After all, it tied into two key themes that had emerged prior to the vote.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Nailed, the four big EU lies: Talks with Turkey will start in days, Brexit WON’T spark trade war say Germans, Brussels will NOT reform on open borders and deportation of jobless EU migrants a myth’, *Daily Mail*, June 22, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Lord Ashcroft, ‘How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why’, Lord Ashcroft Polls, 24 June 2016. < <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/> > (Last Accessed, 28 March 2017).

¹⁰⁹ Moore and Ramsay, *UK Media Coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum Campaign*, p.99 & p.94. Turkey was cited in a total of 461 articles, as compared to Poland (254), Albania (171), Romania (148), Bulgaria (93) and Hungary (28).

Firstly, it was directly linked with the wider issue of freedom of movement and immigration. Secondly, and more controversially, it played into the anti-Islamic and xenophobic views of a section of British society. Turkey was also presented as a source of instability, most notably by drawing attention to its proximity to Syria and Iraq.

What is perhaps surprising is the way in which the Leave campaign was willing to make assertions about Turkey's membership prospects that it knew were wholly unfounded. While Turkey was a nominal candidate for European Union membership, it was already clear that its hopes of joining the EU in anything other than the long-term had long since disappeared. Across the European Union, popular and political support for Turkish membership had declined significantly. There were few, if any, European leaders and policy makers who viewed Turkish membership as a realistic prospect, and fewer still who were willing to openly advocate membership in anything other than the long-term. Likewise, within Turkey there appeared to be far less of an appetite for membership than had once been the case. More to the point, President Erdoğan appeared to have understood that EU demands for more democratic accountability posed a challenge to his personal rule and that of his party. Although, the refugee crisis has seen the opening of further accession chapters, this was largely understood to be a cosmetic concession by the EU to allow Erdoğan to maintain the pretence that Turkey was still a viable candidate to bolster his domestic standing. All things considered, the Leave campaign's claims that Turkey was on the cusp of EU membership, and could join as early as 2020, was patently false.

As for the claim that Britain remained a staunch supporter of Turkish membership of the European Union, this is a rather more complicated claim to deconstruct. While it is notionally correct that the British Government remained a supporter of Turkish membership, this claim must be put in context of the waning British support for EU

enlargement more generally and the EU's position on Turkey. In truth, the widening over deepening stance that had guided British policy for many decades had, by the time of the referendum, given way to strong misgivings over the potential rise in immigration following any further expansion. Meanwhile, it was also clear to London that Turkey had no chance of ever joining the Union. As Craig Oliver, David Cameron's Director of Communications, noted in his account of the campaign, the prime minister knew that Turkey would 'never' join the EU, not least of all because France had promised a referendum on the matter.¹¹⁰ All this would appear to suggest that British policy of supporting Turkey's membership was more for show than a reflection of genuine determination to see Turkey in the EU.

If this was the case, then why did Cameron not seize the opportunity to put the matter to rest and announce that Britain would not allow Turkey to join without a referendum? One could argue that such a move would have been futile. Many would have written it off as an insincere and cynical political stunt to win over Leave voters. It may even have done more harm than good to the Remain campaign as there was the risk that it would have lent credence to the Leave campaign's arguments that Turkish membership was a genuine prospect. For his part, Oliver argues that Cameron did not take the step for 'diplomatic reasons'.¹¹¹ In truth, such a move would have been highly damaging to bilateral British-Turkish relations. Although the United Kingdom may not have been as strongly in favour of enlargement as it had been in the past, Britain and Turkey nevertheless maintain strong ties. These would have been put under extreme strain, if not jeopardised altogether, had Britain turned so strongly against Turkish membership. Sadly, the irony is that, even without this step, the vociferous way in which David Cameron was forced to downplay Turkey's prospects of EU membership so strongly,

¹¹⁰ Oliver, *Unleashing Demons*, pp.133-134, p.242.

¹¹¹ Oliver, *Unleashing Demons*, p.134.

while avoiding closing the option off altogether, meant that bilateral relations were damaged anyway. Moreover, after everything he had said during the campaign, had Remain won, and the UK did not start the process of leaving the EU, it seems almost certain that Cameron would have had no choice but to take a more negative approach towards Turkey's EU accession in the future.

At a more general level, Turkey's emergence as a central issue in the Brexit referendum was an important insight into the way in which, given the right circumstances, the potent mix of immigration, enlargement and freedom of movement could fuel nationalism and xenophobia to such devastating effect. While it remains to be seen whether this combination of issues will gain prominence in other member states in the same way it did in Britain in 2016, there can be no doubt that the question of Turkey's EU accession – as misrepresented as it was – played a part in bringing about the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union.

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