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## A VERY SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP. Why Turkey's EU accession process will continue

### European Stability Initiative

The widespread sense among observers that the Turkish EU accession process might be headed for imminent failure has been present from its very outset. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, however, the risk of a "train crash" in the accession talks is minimal. The reason for this is reassuringly self-evident: it is neither in Turkey's interest, nor the EU's, to derail the accession train.

We predict that even ten years from now, unless Turkey will have joined the EU as a full member, the accession process will be ongoing. Today's relationship between Turkey and the EU is like a Catholic marriage: divorce is not an option for either side. The only question then is whether the couple will be happy or not and the only special partnership that is acceptable to Turkey and to the vast majority of EU members is one they have today – an open-ended accession process.

There are only two ways for the current accession talks to end or be suspended: one is for Turkey to give up and walk away from the negotiating table; the other is for the EU member states to decide on a suspension. The first of these scenarios would require a major policy shift inside Turkey, which is very unlikely. Imagining a scenario whereby the opponents of Turkish accession inside the EU succeed in suspending the negotiations is just as difficult – not only because it is not in their interests, but also because it is not in their power. The combined votes of Germany, France, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands and Austria (to name some of the countries where skepticism about Turkey's EU membership has been an important part of the domestic debate) would fall far short of the 255 needed to suspend the negotiating process. Barring a return to the pattern of human rights abuses of the 1990s, a reintroduction of the death penalty or a military takeover in Turkey, the EU cannot unilaterally stop a process to which it has committed itself under the Negotiating Framework. Here, all the cards are in the hands of Turkey's politicians.

There is a perception among many in Turkey that the EU has consistently discriminated against their country. Yet since 1999 Turkey has often been given the benefit of the doubt. In 1999 it was given candidate status despite failing to meet the EU's Human Rights criteria. In 2004, despite only "sufficiently" meeting the Copenhagen political criteria, it was allowed to open accession talks – the only candidate country to be allowed such leeway. It was a policy of positive encouragement, and it worked well and in the European interest.

At the same time, any objective assessment would conclude that Turkey remains some way from meeting the conditions for accession. Turkey's human rights record – though vastly improved over the past decade – remains dismal by European standards. Restrictions on free speech, the number of minors in prison (2,460 as of July 2010) and the situation of women (Turkey ranked 101st out of 110 countries in the UN's 2009 Gender Empowerment Measure and 126th out of 134 in the 2010 Global Gender Gap Index) are all matters of serious concern. The EU is also worried about the security and economic situation in South East Anatolia, by far the poorest region in Europe.

One area where the EU has discriminated against Turkey has been in the field of visa-free travel. This suggests an obvious way to show that EU conditionality vis-à-vis Turkey remains "strict but fair": to offer Ankara a visa roadmap similar to that which has been given to Western Balkan countries. Once the roadmap requirements are met, Turkish citizens should be able to travel to the EU without a visa. Visa-free travel to the EU is a right enjoyed by Central Europeans (since the early 1990s) and by most people living in the Western Balkans (since 2009). The EU already promised it to Turkey under the 1963 Association Agreement. A credible visa liberalization process would provide tangible evidence to ordinary citizens that the EU remains committed to a future integration perspective. It would also be a useful tool to advance the implementation of non-discrimination policies and promote further improvements in Turkey's Human Rights record, bringing down still high rates of asylum requests granted to Turkish citizens in EU member states. Such a reform process would be a win-win proposition for the EU and Turkey and a big shot in the arm for the accession process.