



What does Turkey have to do with Brexit?

No [the British government] doesn't [have a veto]. We are not going to be able to have a say ... I do not think that the EU is going to keep Turkey out. I think it is going to join.

Penny Mordaunt, armed forces minister, [speaking on](#) the BBC's Andrew Marr show on May 22.

The claim that Turkey is on the verge of joining the EU and Britain can do nothing about is a particularly egregious example of scaremongering by the Brexit campaign. However, it is just one of many exaggerated arguments made on both sides of the debate – Nigel Farage, for example, has argued that the European Arrest Warrant leaves British citizens liable to extradition without any evidence, whilst Remainers have suggested that Britain leaving the EU could precipitate the latter's collapse and even lead to war.

Of course, Turkey is not about to [join the EU](#). The spectre of Turkish membership has long been used to rally eurosceptic sentiment. In 2005, it was a factor [in the rejection](#) of the EU's draft Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands. Turkey was nowhere near joining the EU then and it's probably further away now.

Putting that to one side, Penny Mordaunt's comments raise the question of whether existing EU member states are able to veto new states joining. The answer is yes. Accession of a candidate state must be approved unanimously by the [Council of the EU](#), which is made up of representatives from each member state, and ratified by all national parliaments. This gives each member state a veto over the process. So even if Turkey were to fulfil all of the eligibility criteria (it's not even close), and even if all other member states favoured accession (they don't), the UK would still be able to veto.

Who can actually join?

Since the Single European Act of 1987, the EU (then the European Economic Community) has been moving away from unanimity in law making. [Qualified majority voting](#) in the Council of the EU is now the norm in most areas regarding the common market and some areas of justice and home affairs. Under this system, a measure is passed if it is approved by at least 55% of member states (16 out of 28) representing at least 65% of the EU's population.

But there are a number of sensitive policy areas in which unanimity is still the rule. Accession of new member states is one such area.

Originally, the criteria for EEC membership were rather minimal. Article 237 of the [1957 Rome Treaty](#) simply stated that "any European state may apply to become a member of the community". Even then, existing members had a veto over prospective members.

France [twice vetoed](#) Britain's membership ambitions (in 1963 and 1967) because French President Charles de Gaulle feared that Britain would be a Trojan horse for American influence in Europe and was also wary of Britain's potentially liberalising influence on protectionist policies. It was only after de Gaulle left office that Britain restarted the accession process, eventually joining in 1973.

Veto and delays

The end of communism in Europe opened up, for the first time, the very real possibility of mass expansion of the EEC/EU. This meant a new accession procedure was needed. The [1993 Copenhagen Criteria](#) added detailed requirements in the areas of democracy, human rights, economic capacity and ability to take on the legal obligations of membership.

Croatia is the most recent country to complete the process. Its accession treaty was signed by the 27 existing member states in December 2011, and subsequently ratified by each national parliament, enabling the country to join in July 2013. Also at the [December 2011 council meeting](#), EU leaders decided to postpone Serbia's candidature, a small reminder that member states have many opportunities to delay or derail expansion if they so wish.

This brings us back to Turkey. The unpopularity of its prospective membership among Europeans partly explains why its candidature has progressed so slowly. The rest of the explanation lies in Turkey's failure to meet the eligibility criteria. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the council will be in a position to approve Turkish membership anytime soon. But, if it is, Britain will have a veto.

Why talk about Turkey then?

Why then, is the question of EU enlargement – and above all the potential for Turkey to join - so potent in the referendum debate? The answer is because it combines some of the key concerns of those who support Brexit: fear of unlimited immigration and loss of control of national borders, and a total lack of trust for both British and European elites. The latter point is illustrated by the widespread belief that a deal for Turkish membership has already been done in return for President Erdogan's help in dealing with the refugee crisis. Such convictions are particularly problematic for the Remain campaign, as they cannot be countered by explaining to people the facts of the accession process. Indeed, lack of trust in the political class is a much deeper problem that will persist regardless of the result of the referendum.

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