

Turkey and Europe: Integration or Alienation?

Aug 4, 1998



Brief Analysis

The December 1997 European Union (EU) summit in Luxembourg accepted the membership candidacies of ten Eastern and Central European countries and Cyprus. Contrary to Turkish expectations, however, Turkey was not accepted as a "candidate." This disappointing result -- known in Turkey as "the Luxembourg shock" -- was the result of various factors, including pressure from Greece and Germany. The EU cited Turkey's domestic problems (human rights, democratization, the Kurdish issue) and foreign problems (relations with Greece and the Cyprus issue) as obstacles. The June 1988 EU summit in Cardiff (United Kingdom) -- again to Turkey's surprise -- left the Luxembourg decision regarding Turkey's candidacy basically intact.

The EU's "discriminatory approach" provoked disappointment and resentment in Turkey, causing many Turks to lose their enthusiasm for EU membership. Even the Foreign Ministry began to say that EU membership is "not an obsession" for Turkey -- an inappropriate formulation, since backers of EU membership simply see it as a matter of national interest. The shock that Turkey suffered has given ammunition to Turkish opponents of EU membership, the "anti-marketeters." Domestic criticism of Turkey's EU aspirations arises from both the religious right and the secular left, both of which say that the EU sees Turkey as alien. This anti-EU viewpoint is gaining influence, helping convince the government to stick to its post-Luxembourg policy of "no dialogue" with the EU.

> Indeed, there is a developing view in some Turkish intellectual circles that Turkey can be European without being in the EU. After all -- this reasoning goes -- several European states are not EU members, and some, such as Norway, have actually rejected membership. With this approach, Turkey could still maintain its lucrative economic ties with the EU, which accounts for half of all Turkish trade, and its customs union with the EU.

Several aspects of the EU's attitude upset Turks: First, and most important, is that it denies Turkey's "European vision" -- the longstanding Atatürkist idea that Turkey must Westernize and that modernization equals Europeanization. Second, the EU's foreign policy demands on Turkey -- settlement of the Cyprus dispute and problems with Greece -- are unprecedented. Spain, for example, did not have to settle its Gibraltar problem with the U.K. as a precondition for membership. Third, there is a sense that religion, i.e., Turkey's Muslim majority, is one of the reasons for the EU's discriminatory approach. Fourth, despite Turkey's human rights shortcomings, alienation from the EU will actually make matters worse, encouraging fundamentalists and other anti-Westerners. Fifth, Turkey's customs union agreement with the EU should have assured a more sympathetic hearing for their membership bid. Turkey is the only state ever to have entered a custom union with the EU without first becoming a EU member. Sixth, the EU's decision to open membership talks with the Greek Cypriot-controlled government of Cyprus was taken without regard for Turkish sensitivities and before the Cyprus problem even is solved. Adding to the resentment is the fact that the EU will open its membership talks with Cyprus in November, roughly at the same time that the controversial Russian S-300 missiles reportedly will arrive in Greek Cypriot-controlled Cyprus.

> Despite these problems, Turkey must seek to improve its ties with the EU. If the current trend of "distancing" continues, Turkey will become even more alienated, politically and psychologically, from Europe. Turkey's new

interests in Central Asia, the Balkans, the Black Sea, and the Middle East mark foreign policy gains but are no substitute for ties with the EU. The government should reverse its policy of "no dialogue" with the EU; not talking makes no sense. For the sake of their own interests, Turkey and the EU must develop new arrangements to bolster their ties, even if Turkey is not immediately rewarded with the title EU "candidate" or "member."

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To take its place in the European Union, Turkey must undertake reforms in the direction of greater democratization, greater human rights, and a more inclusive political system. To succeed, Turkey must believe in these reforms, rather than simply implement them as a set of conditions foisted upon it by Europe. There are two important asymmetries that affect EU-Turkish relations. The first is that Turkey places far more importance on its relations with the EU than the EU does on its relations with Turkey. To be sure, Turkey is very important for the EU, economically and strategically. It is also important to the EU because of its influence on the Cyprus problem, because of the large number of Turkish citizens who reside in EU states (particularly Germany but also several others), and because of state policies that affect Kurdish and democratization issues. This last consideration is not merely a Turkish domestic issue, since Europe is affected by resulting outflows of migrants and asylum-seekers.

The EU, however, dominates Turkish thinking in a way that Turkey simply cannot dominate that of the EU. For Turkey, particularly its Atatürkist, secular elite, relations with Europe are a matter of identity -- almost an existential concern -- and an important basis of the secular elite's role in the Turkish political system. It is thus not surprising that Turkey is "obsessed" with EU membership (which it is, notwithstanding its protestations to the contrary). Nevertheless, there has always been a lack of discussion and debate in Turkey about what the EU actually is and what it would mean to be a member, particularly regarding limitations on national sovereignty.

> The second asymmetry is found in Greek-Turkish relations. Greece exploits its position inside the EU to harass Turkey, and there is no countervailing force in the EU to defend Turkish interests. Turkey has some powerful friends in the EU -- such as France, Italy, and the U.K. -- but support of Turkey is not one of their national priorities within the EU.

These two asymmetries mask two important truths. First, major EU governments, such as Germany, Britain, and Italy, have repeatedly tried to boost Turkey's relations with Europe and minimize negative fallout from some internal Turkish developments. These efforts include lobbying a reluctant European Parliament to approve the customs union agreement with Turkey in 1995; the favorable position (just short of full membership) accorded Turkey within the Western European Union (WEU), the EU's emerging security element; and restrictions on the Kurdish separatist PKK and its front-groups, imposed despite criticism by human rights groups, leftist politicians, and trade unions. Second, the asymmetries mask the close substantive relations that do indeed exist between the EU and Turkey, particularly in the economic realm.

For its part, Turkey often has adopted counterproductive positions. For example, its December 1997 suspension of political dialogue with the EU undermined its prospects for gains during the first half of 1998, when the pro-Turkish U.K. held the EU presidency. Earlier this year Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz accused Germany of pursuing a policy of "lebensraum" in its championing of Central and East European states in the EU; Yılmaz thereby alienated the two upcoming EU presidencies, Austria (second half of 1998) and Germany (first half of 1999). Also, in response to EU policy toward Cyprus, Ankara called for closer "integration" of Turkey and northern (Turkish) Cyprus, a circumstance that might goad an otherwise reluctant EU to grant membership to a divided Cyprus represented only by Greek Cypriots.

> Turkey won't become an EU member, if at all, for at least twenty years. In the meantime, both sides must work harder to manage relations. For its part, the EU's European Commission has developed a "European Strategy for

Turkey," which amounts to a "pre-accession strategy," or candidacy for EU membership, in all but name. Turkey, however, must work harder to implement the internal political reforms required for EU membership. Moreover, if Turkey's objective is good relations with the EU, Turkish leaders must lead public opinion and resist the temptation to indulge in opportunistic rhetoric that ultimately complicates Turkish-EU relations.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Sulay Ozturk.

Policy #329

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