

Turkey's Fading European Dream

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Dec 11, 1997

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Brief Analysis

For the past three decades, Turkey's political establishment has equated success in its quest for full acceptance as a Western state with admission to the European Union (EU)-a goal likely to be dealt a severe, if not crippling, blow at an historic EU summit that starts tomorrow. The EU's implicit rejection of Turkey-and its more favored treatment of applicants with a Christian majority-would likely boost Turkey's anti-Western, primarily Islamist forces and, over time, undermine its pro-Western foreign-policy orientation.

Summit outlook. The December 12-13 EU summit will make historic decisions about enlarging EU ranks to include mainly the former communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Like NATO expansion, EU enlargement is intended to "lock in" democratic, free-market development for former foes. As long ago as 1993, the EU declared that all Central and East European states "that so desire shall become members of the Union," once achieving requisite economic and political standards.

This weekend, the EU will likely offer two tracks for the eleven Christian-majority applicant states: immediate "accession talks" leading to membership in about five years for the more advanced applicants, and a "re-inforced pre-accession strategy," including economic aid and mentoring, for the less advanced.

For Turkey, however, most EU members seem to favor no more than a more privileged economic relationship (in addition to that already enjoyed under a 1996 customs union agreement) and membership in a vaguely-conceived "European Conference." This arrangement would re-inforce Turkey's current status as the EU's most privileged non-member, but offer the Turks no hope of eventual membership. Turkey has served notice that it would view this approach as a dressed-up rejection. Greece will probably veto even this plan, however. Athens, which has put a hold on hundreds of millions of dollars guaranteed Turkey under terms of the customs union and other agreements, generally opposes any progress in EU-Turkish relations until Turkey makes concessions on Cyprus and Greek-Turkish issues or unless such progress can be traded off to advance the cause of Cypriot membership in the EU. (As the result one such deal, and much to Ankara's chagrin, ethnically Greek Cyprus-probably without participation by the Turkish Cypriot minority-will join advanced Central and East European states in EU accession talks early next year.)

What does Turkey want? The Turkish establishment seeks EU membership to boost its economic and political standards and international prestige; to undermine home-grown Islamists, who favor integration with the Islamic

world, oppose EU membership, and mock Turkey's pro-Westerners as "imitators"; and, particularly, to affirm its "Westernness."

Most Turks, including the prime minister, concede Ankara is not ready for full EU membership. Politically and economically, Turkey falls well short of EU norms. Instead, what the Turks want from the EU is

- acknowledgment that the door is open to future membership and
- equal treatment with at least some of the other applicant states.

For Ankara, anything less than that will be seen as a betrayal. Turkey bases its right to an "open door" and equal treatment on a 1964 "association agreement" with the EU and subsequent affirmations of that agreement (as recently as this year) that foresaw eventual membership, though without the detailed road-map to membership being offered to the current Eastern and Central European candidates (and Cyprus). In addition, Turkey feels its moral claim to eventual membership are boosted by four Cold War decades of service to Western Europe as the anchor of NATO's southern flank. Turks find hypocritical EU assertions that political and economic shortcomings disqualify it from mere consideration as a member, since once politically wobbly states Spain, Portugal, and Greece-like the current crop of Central and East European candidates -were offered membership precisely to boost their democratic development. Moreover, Turkey bristles at the notion that its shortcomings are greater than those of such politically and economically underdeveloped states as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, whose EU candidate status will be affirmed at the summit. In effect, the Turks want long-term hope and near-term fairness. Unless the EU is swayed at the eleventh hour by U.S. and Turkish lobbying, however, they are likely to receive neither.

EU considerations. Like all EU decisions, the decision on enlargement requires unanimity of all 15 EU members, giving each member veto power. Although it should seemingly be easy for the EU to affirm Turkey's mere eligibility for membership-particularly, since Turkey almost certainly wouldn't achieve the standards of actual membership for years, if not decades-several key EU states want to send Ankara a message that membership is not in the cards, now or ever. Germany leads that list, with Greece close behind. With most Germans uneasy about the presence of roughly two million Turkish "guest-workers," dependents, and descendants, Chancellor Kohl sees the issue of Turkey's EU membership through a domestic political lens. Greece, as noted, is motivated by its bilateral rivalry with Turkey. Some European are more sympathetic to the Turkish case. But many others favor the notion that the EU should be a "civilizational project"-meaning, Christian only. Others are put off more by the combination of Turkey's religion, culture, and size-only one EU state, Germany, has a larger population-than by Turkey's religion alone. These latter groups agree that Turkey should not be given any hope of membership and are more than happy to hide behind the more visible positions of Germany and Greece.

Consequences for Turkey and the West. The Turkish public would see the expected EU exclusion of Turkey as proof that the EU sees itself as a "Christian club" that will never accept Turks. The Turkish establishment fears-probably with good reason-that failure of its EU bid will embolden and swell the ranks of Turkey's Islamists and other anti-Westerners, as large numbers of Turks despair of acceptance by the West. Over time, and perhaps not too much time, strategically-crucial Turkey could drift out of the sphere of Western and U.S. interests. Already, Turks' exasperation with signs of rejection from the West in recent years has helped fuel Islamist gains at the polls. Some Turks hopefully project that close ties with the US and Israel can provide all the "Western support" Turkey needs, but those two friends-one very distant and one very small-do not offer the "civilizational pull" of neighboring Western Europe.

It is to be hoped that an Ankara spurned by the EU would continue down the path of democratic, secular development -as well as alignment with the West, the US, and Israel-for the greater good those policies can bring its own people. Prodding and increased support from Washington will be important to keeping Turkey on that path. In a country where growing numbers see themselves as non-European and favor Islamism, trying to be "European

without Europe" may be too difficult a task for the beleaguered Turkish establishment to sustain on its own.

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