

Turkish Customs Union with Europe:

What's at Stake

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Brief Analysis

As the United States and its Western allies prepare to invest treasure and troops in Bosnia in order to support stability in the Balkans, European Parliamentarians in Strasbourg have the opportunity to support regional stability merely by raising their hands to vote in favor of a customs union agreement with Turkey. By strengthening ties with Turkey, Europe can take a stand against Islamic fundamentalism and show support for a secular, pro-Western regime whose policies have an impact on crises in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the former Soviet Union. Moreover, it can prove it defines "Western-ness" by values, not religion. Yesterday's endorsement of customs union by caucuses of the Euro-Parliament's three largest blocs gives hope that the whole parliament will do just that in the formal plenary vote December 13.

Background

First envisioned in Turkey's 1963 association agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC, now European Union, or EU), the customs union agreement was drafted earlier this year and approved by European Union foreign ministers in March. If ratified, it will go into effect January 1.

The stakes in the ratification vote are so high that the U.S. administration -- although not strictly involved in what is formally an issue between Turkey and the EU -- has staged a high-profile lobbying effort on Turkey's behalf. Israeli diplomats, as well as Prime Minister Peres, have also actively backed Turkey's bid in talks with Europeans. While the terms of the customs union agreement are economic, giving Turkey perhaps the closest economic relationship with the EU of any non-member state, its most important implications are political:

1) Turkish elections and fundamentalism.

The Turkish government correctly claims that a negative vote on customs union will help the fundamentalist Refah (Welfare) party in Turkish national elections December 24. Refah, which achieved unprecedented success in nationwide local elections in March 1994 (19 percent of the vote and key mayoralities in Ankara, Istanbul, and elsewhere), has led in most opinion polls conducted over the past year. In fact, Refah appears to stand a reasonable chance of winning a plurality in the elections, although it is unlikely to win a parliamentary majority or to be able to lure other parties into coalition.

Refah's long suit has been voter dissatisfaction with inflation and the economy (for which Refah offers virtually no meaningful alternative policies), the perceived corruption of mainstream secular parties, and growing religious consciousness among Turks. But it is also the only party in Turkey that opposes customs union, arguing that Turkey instead should take the lead in forming an "Islamic common market." In making its anti-Western case, Refah always emphasizes that the prejudiced West doesn't want Muslims in its ranks. Thus, a "no" vote on customs union -- or even a vote to defer the decision -- would be seen by many Turks as the latest in a string of rejections by the West and as powerful proof that Refah is right. Refah is widely expected to do well in the elections under any circumstances but it is not expected to achieve a parliamentary majority; a negative vote on ratification would likely swell Refah's already considerable support.

2) Anchor to the West

For many Turks, entry into customs union with the EU would mark an important step toward long-sought Western integration. Ratification would mean European acknowledgment of Turkey's long-standing contributions to Western security and, more important, of its right to belong to a Western family of nations not defined by their Christianity. Tightening Turkey's association with the West is crucial. Ankara has been a force for stability and moderation, and often a vital source of support to U.S. and Western policy initiatives, in all the turbulent regions -- the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, the Black Sea -- that surround it. On the other hand, rejection could mean a loosening of loyalty to the West by Turkey, with its 1987 application for full EU membership already long dormant and its bid for full membership in the Western European Union (WEU) security organization also stymied. As a statement of Western support for Turkey, ratification of customs union also would send a powerful message to Turkey's terrorism-supporting neighbors. And it would boost Turkey's economy, making it a more convincing role model for other Islamic states, in Central Asia and elsewhere, that would consider Ankara's secular, democratic, free market approach.

One additional note: If the Euro-Parliament votes not to ratify, many Turks will see Greece as culpable since Greek Euro-Parliamentarians are among those leading the charge to delay ratification. Such a result would exacerbate Greek-Turkish tensions, always potentially explosive, and complicate reported U.S. diplomatic plans to tackle the ever-thorny Cyprus problem early next year.

3) Message to Muslims

The case Refah makes to Turkish voters resonates regionally. The West in general, and Europe in particular, has been roundly criticized in the Islamic world in recent years for failure to take action to stop the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims. Whether or not anti-Islamic prejudice was an element in Europe's handling of the crisis in the former Yugoslavia, the Islamic world widely perceived it so. Rejection of Turkey's customs union bid would be seen similarly as anti-Islamic prejudice.

4) Human rights

Even before the customs union was signed in March, the Euro-Parliament made clear that approval would depend on human rights reform. Turkey has undertaken significant reform, if not as much as some Euro-Parliamentarians (and some Turks) had wanted. Turkey has passed constitutional amendments that widen political participation and altered its anti-terrorism law in a manner that has eased restrictions on freedom of expression and led to early releases for most of the over 100 prisoners convicted under that law. It is clear that these reforms -- mainly the result of formidable legislative leadership by Prime Minister Ciller -- represented the most that the political traffic would bear in Turkey, embattled as it is with the terrorist-insurgent PKK.

There are other, less publicized signs that pluralism is gaining in Turkey: for the first time, an avowedly pro-Kurdish rights party is contesting a national election; the Alevi community, a sizable minority that adheres to a heterodox

version of Islam, has been formally recognized by the government and is fielding independent, but avowedly pro-Alevi, candidates in the election; and a Kurdish cultural foundation has been given permission to operate in Istanbul. All of these developments mark significant steps away from the traditional orthodoxy that deemed all Muslim citizens ethnically Turkish and religiously Sunni.

Euro-Parliamentarians can take satisfaction in having encouraged some of these reforms. It would be misguided on their part, however, to think that withholding ratification of customs union now would encourage more reform. Rather, it would merely punish the reformers, who would suffer at the polls. Closer association with Europe, not further delay in ratification, is what is likely to encourage more human rights reform. That is the message from the most reform-minded of Turkey's political parties, Cem Boyner's newly-formed New Democracy Movement, and from most reform-minded Turkish intellectuals.

Indeed, that is the approach the European Community took in admitting fledgling democracies Greece, Portugal, and Spain to full membership in the 1970s. If Euro-Parliamentarians are concerned about democracy, secularism, relations between the Western and Islamic worlds, and stability in the chaotic areas of Eurasia, then they can follow that same model in deciding the fate of customs union with Turkey

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