

# Turkey's Anti-European Rhetoric Challenges U.S. Policy

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### Brief Analysis

Last month, two diplomatic rows erupted when French president Nicolas Sarkozy visited Turkey and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Germany. Sarkozy had an unfriendly welcome in Ankara, including a deliberately unflattering photo that showed Erdogan towering over him during a handshake. And during a speech in Dusseldorf, Erdogan accused the German government of "discrimination." Both visits highlighted Ankara's growing problems with key European Union states, signaling trouble for Turkey's EU membership process. Current U.S. policy supports Turkish accession.

## Souring Rhetoric

In recent weeks, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has been launching particularly acidic rhetoric toward the EU. Turkish resentment on this front is nothing new, given that French objections to Turkey's EU candidacy have stalled accession talks since they began in 2005. But the AKP's latest salvos represent a significant shift that seems driven by several key factors. The first is the AKP's apparent desire to make the EU understand the risks of excluding Turkey. Although delivered in inflammatory tones, such rhetoric essentially asks the EU to avoid creating a cultural divide in and around the continent by excluding Muslim Turkey. The following are prominent examples of such statements:

- "We must work together on immigration and integration to stop xenophobia in Europe and prevent its damage to European values." -- *Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, joint press conference in Ankara with Dutch foreign minister Uri Rosenthal, Today's Zaman, February 2, 2011*
- "The EU, founded in order to eliminate the threats of that period to peace, is today under the risk of being overtaken by a racist mentality that cannot internalise its own values and emulates the fascist methods of 1930s...Those who have racist and distorted mentalities have no right to degrade democracy and the philosophy of the European Union." -- *Turkish EU negotiator Egemen Bagis, speech on Holocaust commemoration event in Auschwitz, EurActiv.com, February 3, 2011*
- "Sick, racist minds have no right to stain the European Union, its philosophy and democracy...The remedy for racism in the EU is Turkey's accession." -- *Egemen Bagis, interview with Today's Zaman, February 4, 2011*
- "I think that he (Sarkozy) has an image of Turkey that does not correspond with reality...It's good that he comes so he

can understand the development that Turkey has undergone." -- *Turkish president Abdullah Gul, interview with Le Figaro, January 27, 2011*

- "The growing pessimism in today's Europe is reshaping its political life...Racism and xenophobia represent a major cause of concern in connection with the current economic crisis. They lead governments and political elites to take a tough line on immigration...There is a rise in electoral support for political parties which portray immigration as the main cause of insecurity, unemployment, crime, poverty and social problems...Those pathologies are weakening Europe and decimating its soft power in the world." - - *Abdullah Gul, speech during winter session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, official Turkish presidential website (TCCB), January 25, 2011*
- "And one of the big themes about why Turkey cannot become a member of the European Union is because it is a Christian club. This is in our view very, very dangerous." -- *Turkish finance minister Ali Babacan, speech at Davos Forum, Hurriyet Daily News, January 29, 2011*

## Right-Wing Politics

A second driver of the AKP's anti-EU rhetoric seems to be domestic politics. Traditionally, the right-wing nationalist vote in Turkey has been represented in the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). Today, however, the AKP has shown signs of consolidating right-wing votes under its own aegis. In the run-up to the June 2011 general election, the party seeks to maximize its votes in order to reach 50 percent in the polls. This will afford the AKP enough seats in the parliament to singlehandedly write a new constitution for the country. Toward this end, it is employing rhetoric and policies aimed at nationalists and Islamists in the hope of peeling off voters from the MHP. As part of its appeal to nationalist voters, the AKP is now demanding that the EU treat Turkey fairly:

- "[The EU has] laid out certain principles...and on the basis of those principles, we said, 'All right, we want to become part of your club.' But now in the middle of the soccer game, as the prime minister says in his favorite metaphor, 'You're changing the penalty rules.'" -- *Ibrahim Kalin, chief advisor to Erdogan, interview with the Washington Times, January 30, 2011*
- "Turkey wants a just negotiation process; it wants an end to this nonsensical mentality on the visa issue; it wants concrete cooperation against terrorism; it wants an end to the placing of the Cyprus problem as an obstacle, and it wants its leaders to be invited to EU summits alongside other candidate countries...It's not wrong to voice these demands...Turkey does not deserve this. Asking [that Turks obtain] a visa for the Schengen zone [referring to visa free travel into the EU], where the citizens of Paraguay and Uruguay can go freely, hurts me." -- *Egemen Bagis, speech at Diplomatic Correspondents Association dinner, Hurriyet Daily News, February 1, 2011*

## The End of Accession?

A third driver of Ankara's recent rhetoric is the notion that Turkey might simply abandon the EU membership process. This is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the AKP's anti-EU tone because it may foreshadow a permanent Turkish shift away from Europe:

- "If they come up with a stance against Turkey, that is, if the plug is to be pulled, I leave it to the EU. Do it and then be held accountable for what you have done before history...The Europe of 20 or 30 years from now will ask those who make such a mistake to account for what they did. I don't believe it is possible for Europe to resolve its problems without Turkey's contributions." -- *Egemen Bagis, remarks following talks with European Ombudsman Nikiforos Diamandouros, Today's Zaman, January 29, 2011*
- "Our European friends should realize that Turkey-EU relations are fast approaching a turning point...Turkey is a regional player, an international actor with an expanding range of soft power and a resilient, sizable economy...It's been more than half a century since Turkey first knocked at Europe's door...The Turkey of today is different. We are no more a country that would wait at the EU's door like a docile supplicant...Some claim that Turkey has no real

alternative to Europe...Europe has no real alternative to Turkey. Especially in a global order where the balance of power is shifting, the EU needs Turkey to become an ever stronger, richer, more inclusive, and more secure Union. I hope it will not be too late before our European friends discover this fact." -- *Recep Tayyip Erdogan*, Newsweek, January 17, 2011

- "It's clear that obstacles have been placed in front of us, but the world does not stop at the European Union...The strategic choice we have made in [the EU's] favour does not stop us [from] developing relations that we have established across the world." -- *Abdullah Gul*, interview with Le Figaro, January 27, 2011

## Effect on Public Attitudes

The AKP's inflammatory rhetoric -- both recently and over the years -- has had measurable domestic consequences, especially against the backdrop of continuing Franco-German objections to Turkey's accession. According to the 2010 Transatlantic Trends report prepared by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Turkish public support for joining the EU has sharply declined. In 2004, 73 percent of Turks were in favor of EU membership, but this number has dropped to 38 percent by 2010. Moreover, the number of Turks who support cooperation with EU countries declined from 22 percent in 2009 to 13 percent in 2010, while the number who favored cooperation with Middle Eastern states increased from 10 percent to 20 percent over the same period. Similarly, 2010 data from the Pew Global Attitudes Project shows that 57 percent of Turks view the EU unfavorably and only 28 percent view it favorably, compared to the 58 percent favorable recorded in 2004.

## U.S. Policy

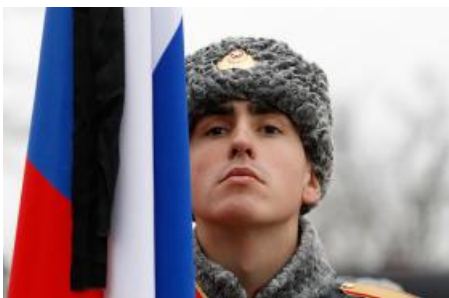
Although Washington has long encouraged Turkey's EU accession, declining Turkish support has set the stage for the AKP to further escalate its rhetoric. Statements such as those highlighted above will inevitably become self-reinforcing, pulling Turkey further away from the EU. Given that accession has served as the main driver of Turkish political liberalization since the late 1990s, the collapse of the EU process would also spell the end of the liberalization process, which has already experienced significant strain under the AKP. Washington should monitor and, when possible, check the AKP's anti-EU rhetoric, especially as it transcends domestic politicking and threatens to fundamentally alter the Turkish public's views on partnership with Europe.

*Soner Cagaptay is director of The Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program. He wishes to thank Simin Araz and Hale Arifagaoglu for their contributions to this article.* ❖

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