

Why Turkey Must Get In

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Articles & Testimony

Twenty-two countries have negotiated for European Union membership in its history, and all were ultimately offered accession. But French President Nicolas Sarkozy has long blocked Turkey's entry into the EU, and his objections are no symbolic snag. France is a key EU country, and Paris's veto has frustrated Turkey's EU hopes. Sarkozy's veto has become a new Maginot Line, the futile and antiquated fortifications France built to defend itself.

Like the Maginot Line, the Sarkozy line can be circumvented if the Turkish government, which once eagerly pursued EU membership, re-embraces the EU. Indeed, the solution starts in Ankara, where enthusiasm for joining the EU has been on the decline since 2005. That year, just as accession talks began, the populist instincts of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) led party leaders to conclude that the reforms necessary to join would erode its popularity. The AKP dropped the reform process. Grassroots anti-European thinking in the party, a legacy of its Islamist pedigree, accelerated this process. This emboldened Sarkozy to say no to Ankara on the grounds that Turkey is failing to become European -- and the more times France vetoes Turkey's membership, the more Turks turn against the EU, thinking that the Union will never grant Ankara membership.

The AKP can break this impasse, and also prove its European credentials, by reforming aggressively and demonstrating that Turkey's march toward liberal democratic European values is on once again. An unyielding Sarkozy would look bad to the point of being cast as racist were Ankara to catch up with the EU.

But what if Turkey's EU accession talks fail to move? Membership talks have slowed to such a grinding halt that the proverbial Turkish-EU accession train recalls a joke about the trains in Brezhnev's Soviet Union: with Russia stagnating, the trains did not move and the scenery did not change, so the people said "choo-choo" to make believe. This is how Turkey's EU accession looks, and, at some point, the Turks will realize that their EU train is not moving forward, and they will disembark. This will be a disaster, ending Turkey's consolidation as a liberal democracy, with dangerous consequences for the West, including France.

If Turkey's EU accession had been stalled in the pre-September 11 world, I would have said that was a real shame. Back then, there was room for Turkey to be outside the EU but still part of Europe and the West. Now, with the EU pushing its boundaries into the Balkans up to Turkey, and with Al Qaeda clamoring that there is a war between the "Muslim world" and the West, there is no longer a gray area in which Turkey can position itself: it must become an EU member and part of the West, or else fold into the Muslim world, as per Al Qaeda's vision. Sarkozy should be alarmed about an alienated Turkey on Europe's eastern borders.

The failure of Turkey's EU accession has an even worse implication for France. If Sarkozy keeps saying no to Ankara despite renewed Turkish efforts at European reform, what kind of a message would he be sending to France's Muslims? France has the largest Muslim population in the EU: 10 percent of the country's population is of Muslim background. So far, this community's integration into France has failed. Yet lately French Muslims are showing stronger signs of joining the French mainstream. They have joined the country's government, and elected Muslim officials are emerging throughout the country. Sarkozy is the chief proponent of this process. He is telling French Muslims that if they adopt European values, they will be welcome in France and in Europe. He recently defended France's ban on the Muslim full facial veil because he said it did not mesh with French ideals. Nevertheless, with his objection to Turkey, Sarkozy is telling the French Muslims something else: "Do not bother to become European; regardless of how hard you try, there is no room for you in France or Europe."

On a recent trip to Paris, I got a 40-minute lecture on Turkey's EU accession from a Parisian whose parents had immigrated to France from Mauritania. He was not only conversant in the historic details of Turkey's EU accession -- "Ankara applied to join the Union in 1963, before my parents came to France," he said -- but he also knew more than I did about the details of the accession talks, including on which of the 120,000 pages of EU legislation France is now blocking Turkey. When I asked him why he followed Turkey's accession with such interest, he said, "This is about whether there is room for me in France." Indeed, the Sarkozy line is not just bad for Turkey, it is also very bad for France. Sarkozy might as well get rid of it.

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